

Sexually Harmful Behaviour by Young People in Sport

Introduction

Sports organisations have been working hard to introduce safeguarding procedures to ensure the welfare of their youth members remain paramount. Much of the initial work by NGB's was in response to potential poor practice or high profile sexual abuse cases by sports leaders. Over the years many NGB's have embedded safeguarding procedures within their organisations to reduce the risks and create a culture of safety. Sports organisations have recognised their wider role in society of promoting the welfare of children and young people.

Following a number of cases of abuse not by adults but by other young people the CPSU have developed the following briefing to raise awareness of the risk and how to respond to sexually harmful behaviour (SHB) by young people. It is essential that **any concerning sexual behaviour on the part of a child or young person should be responded to in line with an organisation's safeguarding policies, which means referral out to social services or Police. The information in this briefing is only provided to assist sports bodies understand more about SHB; it is not intended to encourage sports organisations to intervene in any other way that reporting it.**

Principle

Work by statutory organisations with children and young people who display behaviour that is sexually concerning or harmful is a primary means of child protection. By helping children and young people change their behaviour other children and young people are protected. Before they start any intervention it is important to ensure the safety of children and young people who may be at risk. Children and young people referred to specialist services are likely to be children in need themselves and this work needs to be part of an overall child protection strategy.

Definition “ Young people (under 18) who engage in any form of sexual activity with another individual, that they have powers over by virtue of age, emotional maturity, gender, physical strength, intellect and where the victim in this relationship has suffered a betrayal of trust”

Palmer 1995

Language used

The terms *Sexually Abusive Behaviour by young People* and *Juvenile Sexual Offenders* are also used to describe young people with these behaviours but *Sexually Harmful Behaviour* is widely accepted by statutory agencies and services working directly as the preferred term to avoid labelling/stigma, to acknowledge developmental issues and the potential for change. *Abuser* assumes awareness of the action and an understanding that it was wrong. *Offender* refers to only a small number of young people who are convicted and does not include children under 10.

The Nature of Sexually Harmful Behaviour

Children and young people have been found to engage in a wide range of sexually harmful behaviours both contact (touching, masturbation, penetration) and non-contact (exhibitionism, obscene communication, voyeurism) behaviours. The overwhelming majority of all sexual abuse does not reach the criminal justice system.

Background

It is estimated that children and young people are responsible for about 1/3 of all sexual abuse against children (Grubin 1998, The Research Team 1990); this may be an under estimate due to low rates of reporting and even lower prosecution rates. Any effort to prevent child sexual abuse must address the



problem of young people who display SHB. Over the last 10-15 years a significant amount has been learnt about SHB by children and young people but responses to the problem are still variable. Services are patchy, inconsistent, lack adequate resources and do not have a coordinated strategic approach. Veneziano & Veneziano (2002) found that of all adult sex offenders approximately half had committed their first offence as a juvenile with subsequent escalation in frequency and severity.

Characteristics of Young People presenting with SHB

- 92 % male
- Social skills deficits
- Lack of sexual knowledge
- High levels of social anxiety Righthand & Welch (2001) Veneziano & Veneziano (2002)

For some, the combination of low social competence, low self-esteem, emotional loneliness and feelings of sexual inadequacy can lead to problems in forming healthy relationships and resolving this through abusive interactions with children. Due to the range within this group of children and young people, it is vital that statutory organisations undertake individual assessments to tailor intervention to specific need. Studies across North America and UK suggest that young people displaying SHB have experienced many adversities in their lives and are not fundamentally different from other young people in trouble and in need. Many young people do not continue their sexually harmful behaviour into adulthood, but without intervention, may develop alternative antisocial behaviours as they mature.

Understanding Younger Children

If a child's healthy sexual development is disturbed or disrupted either through abuse or living in a sexualised environment it may cause them to develop sexually problematic behaviours for example;

- Through sexual abuse children's bodies become sexualised and they may experience sexual feelings; this traumatic sexualisation can lead to children or young people reacting to situations in a sexualised way
- Living in a highly sexualised environment with few boundaries where a child is exposed to sexual behaviour beyond their natural development
- They may have experienced violent, chaotic family backgrounds with little warmth or empathy where sex is routinely paired with aggression or confused with affection
- The younger the child presenting with serious sexual behaviours the more likely they have been abused or been exposed to sexual activity.

Why is Intervention Important?

- Protection of actual or potential victims and preventing further abuse – victims' interests are paramount
- Sexual abuse is a crime and cannot be ignored
- If not addressed SHB can escalate rather than simply stop
- SHB is very damaging to victims – even at what may be perceived as a low level
- Higher success rates – reduction in re-offending after treatment
- These are children and young people first – work should not be only *offence focused*
- Young people are still developing, physically, psychologically and their own personality. Therefore there is a real opportunity to divert young people away from SHB. Distorted thinking is less developed/entrenched



- The behaviour is less fixed and ingrained and therefore more potential for change so they can learn to control their sexual behaviour and take responsibility
- Young people tend to have poor sexual knowledge and lack of awareness of seriousness and impact
- Role of family is more critical

Key Research Findings:

- Younger children presenting with harmful sexual behaviours are often extremely vulnerable and likely to have been extensively sexually abused themselves. Sometimes they re-enact abuse they experienced directly and they should be responded to appropriately as victims and sexually reactive children
- Early adolescence particularly onset of puberty appears to be a peak time for developing SHB. Most are male although knowledge is emerging about small numbers of females whose sexual behaviours are harmful.
- Research shows that targeted interventions can be highly effective in reducing risk even for those children and young people at higher risk of re-offending (Riighthand & Welch 2001, Veneziano & Veneziano 2002)

Child Protection Principles

Sexually harmful behaviour by children and young people must be recognised as harmful to both the victim and the child who abuses. A significant proportion of children who abuse may have been abused themselves. While the numbers who engage in this kind of sexually harmful behaviour are relatively small, particular concern remains about the increasingly younger age of the children engaged in it and the number and range of victims which can include adults.

SHB when identified in children must be taken seriously by all organisations. It is not the responsibility of sports organisation's to distinguish between experimental behaviours and exploitative and harmful behaviours, but they should follow their normal reporting procedures and consult their local statutory services for advice. Statutory organisations should consider the following before intervention;

- Consent (including age and level of understanding)
- Equality
- Authority & control
- Cooperation
- Compliance
- Criminal offences

Parents and Carers

The support of young peoples' families is vital to the success of the work. A great deal of progress can be achieved through working with parents and carers. It is a difficult issue for parents and carers to come to terms with and takes time to fully understand.

Initial Responses - responsibilities of all individuals/organisation

Sexual behaviour like any behaviour should be handled calmly and firmly. If you become aware of an incident of SHB

- Stop the behaviour- remove the child or young person away from others and speak to them



- Describe the behaviour accurately to avoid any misunderstanding e.g.
“You pulled John’s pants down, he was embarrassed and upset!”
“You grabbed Anne’s breast, you embarrassed and hurt her! No one should be touched on their private parts without consent”
- Report the incident to the identified lead person e.g. club welfare officer and include both the young person’s and victim’s responses if known
- Record the incident being as specific as possible about what was seen and heard
- Give the record to the identified lead person who must consider the level of concern and may informally consult statutory authorities before a formal referral to social services, contacting parents and Police.

Key Issues:

Any work with young people who have committed sexual offences requires an inter-agency accountable approach to protecting the public while, at the same time, dealing with young people in a consistent way, maximising the opportunity to assist them in challenging and changing their behaviour. Any such approach necessitates:

- A recognition that young people who have committed sexual offences differ significantly from adults who have committed sexual offences
- A multi-agency approach that is systematic, consistent, co-operative and fair
- A multi-agency assessment of the young person which should occur before any management plans are made. If the young person is going to remain in a sports club it is essential the sport involved are included in the management plans
- Management of the young person which begins with a decision about the appropriateness of bringing them within the criminal justice system
- The provision of intervention to minimise the risks posed to past/potential victims whether or not the young person is subject to the criminal justice system

There are positive outcomes for working with Young People at their stage of development and it is important that work is child centred and responds in a holistic way that ensures their needs are met

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