

PHYSICAL CONTACT IN SPORT

This resource offers guidelines for how physical contact in sport can take place appropriately and safely. There may be circumstances in a sports context when it is appropriate for direct physical contact. Individuals have the right to say what level of contact they are comfortable with.

WHEN IS PHYSICAL CONTACT APPROPRIATE IN SPORT?

Physical contact in sport should take place only when necessary to:

- Develop sports skills or techniques
- Treat an injury
- Prevent an injury or accident from occurring
- Meet the requirements of the sport
- Comfort someone who is distressed or to celebrate their success.

WHAT ARE GOOD PRINCIPLES TO FOLLOW?

- Physical contact should take place in the interests of and for the benefit of the athlete.
- Explain the nature and reason for the physical contact to the athlete
- Unless the situation is an emergency, seek permission, for example to aid the demonstration of a specific sports technique.
- Provide an induction for new members and their parents/carers (for children and young people) that covers guidance about any physical contact that will be required as part of that activity.
- Encourage athletes to voice concerns they have if any physical contact makes them feel uncomfortable or threatened.
- Contact must not involve touching genital areas, buttocks, breasts or any other part of the body that might cause distress or embarrassment.
- Physical contact should always take place in an open or public environment and not take place in secret or out of sight of others.
- Well intentioned gestures such as putting a hand on the shoulder or arm, can, if repeated regularly, lead to the possibility of questions being raised by observers. As a general principle, adults in positions of responsibility should not make gratuitous or unnecessary physical contact with athletes.

WHAT ABOUT ATHLETES WHO NEED SPECIFIC ASSISTANCE DUE TO DISABILITY OR INJURY?

In the case of a young person with a disability, specific support or assistance may be required. The following guidelines should be followed:

- Parents/carers or their delegated care providers must undertake all intimate or personal care tasks. This is not an appropriate role for coaches and others involved in leading activities.
- Treat athletes with dignity and respect when they are lifted or manually supported
- Relevant health and safety guidelines must be followed to ensure the safety of the athlete and those assisting.
- It is recommended that those assisting receive appropriate training in order to minimise the risk of injury both to themselves and the athlete.

WHAT ABOUT PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT?

Any form of physical punishment of children by anyone other than their parent/carer is unlawful, as is any form of physical response to misbehaviour unless it is by way of physical intervention to prevent a young person from:

- harming themselves
- harming others
- damaging property

It is particularly important that adults understand this to protect the children in their care, their own position, and the overall reputation of the organisation in which they are involved.

WHAT ABOUT DIRECT CONTACT IN COACHING?

Some sport or physical activities are more likely to require coaches to come into physical contact with athletes from time to time in the course of their duties. Coaches should be aware of the limits within which such contact should properly take place, and of the possibility of such contact being misinterpreted. Even in sports where there is a need to support or touch an athlete, over-handling must be avoided.

IS IT OK TO COMFORT AN ATHLETE OR CELEBRATE SUCCESS?

There may be occasions where a distressed young person needs comfort and reassurance which may include physical comforting such as a caring parent would give. A young person may also want to mark a success or achievement with a hug or other gesture. Adults should use their discretion in such cases to ensure that what is (and what is seen by others present) normal and natural does not become unnecessary and unjustified contact, particularly with the same young person over a period of time. Contact that an adult may feel is appropriate may be unwanted or uncomfortable to a young person.

Discretion should also be used with adults to ensure that contact is necessary and justified.

WHERE DO SPECIFIC SPORTS SCIENCE AND MEDICAL ROLES FIT IN?

There may be some roles within sport or physical activities where physical contact is commonplace and/or a requirement of the role, particularly sports science or medicine. These tasks should only be undertaken by properly trained or qualified practitioners. This guidance does not seek to replace the specific guidance and codes of practice developed for those professionals and reference should be made to the appropriate body for that discipline.