

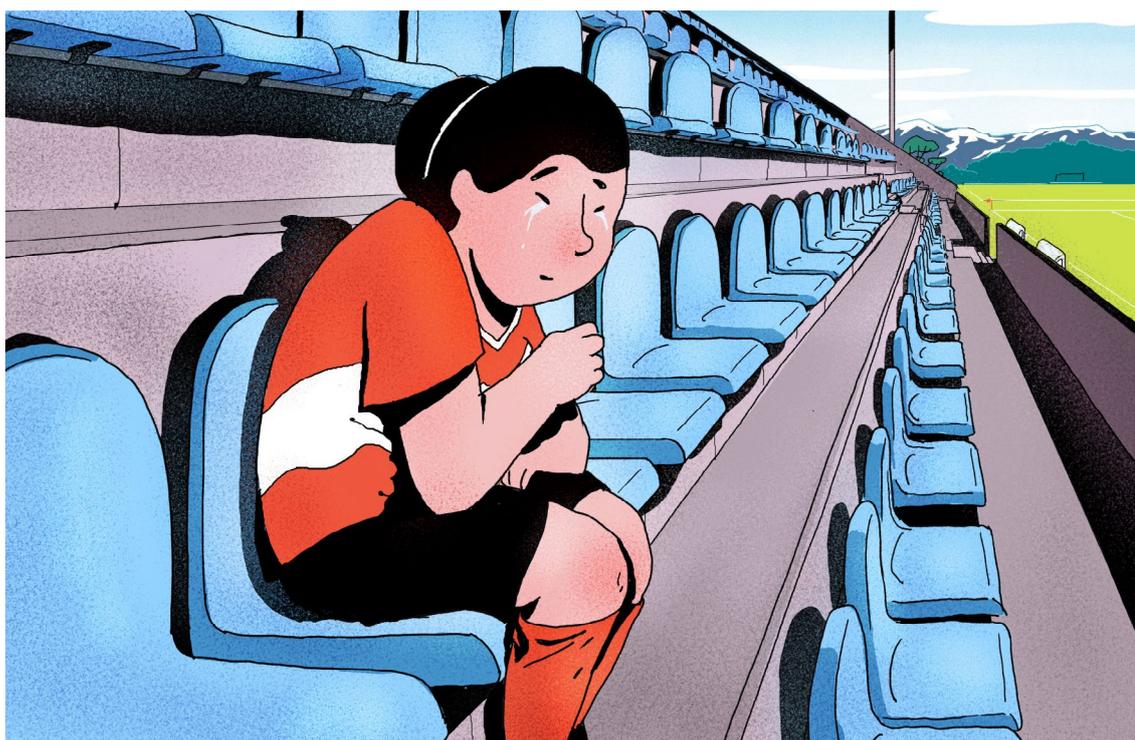


1.2 Info sheet: Abuse in football

Children benefit from sport and physical activity, and football is no exception. Football provides mental and physical benefits. Such benefits include strength, endurance and flexibility, as well as improved self-esteem, problem-solving and leadership. Important values and life skills are learnt through football, such as fair play, teamwork and commitment. Through football, children can make friends, develop a social group, have fun and keep fit. A love of football developed in childhood can lead to lifelong enjoyment of the game.

To achieve any of this, football must be a positive and enjoyable experience for the children and teenagers who play. Abuse and harm can occur anywhere, both within and outside the family and club/organisation. Children may be harmed or abused by professionals, volunteers, carers, family members and other children.

Children can be harmed in many ways, and often experience more than one type of abuse. There are some specific situations and types of harm that are more likely to occur in football. Recognising these situations can help make sure football is a positive experience for all children, regardless of age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, legal status (such as being a refugee or immigrant) or ability.



Injuries

Nearly every sport involves some risk of physical injury. However, the pressure to perform can mean that children are pushed beyond what is reasonable or appropriate for their age and ability, or that they are encouraged to play when injured, causing further damage.

Performance pressure

Winning is an important part of football. However, pushing children to perform can be harmful both psychologically and physically. Sometimes this performance pressure can come from adults, but it can also come from the child or their peers. For children, performance should never be at the expense of enjoyment.

Physical care

Physical abuse is often the most easily recognised form of abuse. Physical abuse can be any kind of hitting, shaking, burning, pinching, biting, choking, throwing, beating or other action that causes physical injury, leaves marks or causes pain.

Certain settings, such as changing rooms, showers and close contact during physiotherapy, make children especially vulnerable. These settings can provide opportunities for individuals who wish to sexually abuse a child. As a rule, children's privacy should be respected. If medical or intimate care or treatment is provided, children should be entitled to have another child or adult of their choice present.

Overnight stays/away trips

Overnight stays, for example in the context of away matches or training camps, can provide opportunities for those who wish to sexually harm children. Enough adults must always be present to ensure proper supervision. At least two adults should always be present when working with children to avoid children going missing or being left in dangerous situations. Another factor to consider is whether transport arrangements are safe, for example, that vehicles are roadworthy.

Close relationships

The relationship between a child and their coach or other support staff, such as physiotherapists and doctors, is important and can be beneficial. Many children develop close and trusting relationships, especially with their coach, who can be a significant person in their life, especially if they don't have good relationships with other adults.



However, these close relationships can also provide an opportunity for children to be harmed. The child may want to please the adult, or the adult may be a person of trust and power whose integrity no one would question.

Keeping children safe in football means that no one is 'above suspicion'. That does not mean everyone is a suspect; it is about ensuring that everyone involved – children, parents and adults – are held to the same standards of behaviour and conduct.

Team culture

Being part of a team, and the sense of belonging that comes with it, can be very beneficial for children's self-esteem and self-worth.

The team culture is key to the child's learning experience. This culture is created by the players but is highly influenced by the coach. For example, if the coach makes it known that everyone is respected and bullying is not tolerated, the team culture is much more likely to be welcoming and positive. Conversely, if the coach shows that they value winning over taking part, players may start to blame and isolate children who they believe are letting the side down.

Additionally, children may think that some players do not 'fit' the team, perhaps due to their background or characteristics.

A hierarchy may develop with older or more powerful children holding influence over other children. This can be positive but can equally be negative and lead to bullying, including 'hazing', which children are expected to tolerate to gain acceptance by the team.