

Safeguarding Deaf and Disabled Children in Sport: Over protective parents

Introduction

This factsheet provides helpful guidance for sport clubs and organisations to work in partnership with disabled athletes parents and carers, to ensure that the young person can continue to participate fully in the clubs activities and get the most from their experience.

Marco – 15 year old young person with mild cerebral palsy Over-protective parent

Scenario

Marco has attended an athletics club for over a year and does very well there. He is 15 years old and has mild cerebral palsy. Marco's mother is very supportive of his involvement and attends all the activity sessions. She has also accompanied Marco when the club has away fixtures, including some trips requiring an overnight stay.

Concerns raised by the coach with the Club Welfare Officer are about the way in which Marco's mother relates to her son:

- talking to Marco as if he is a younger, less able child
- interfering in sessions
- refusing to let Marco participate in recent away fixtures in her absence despite him having managed well without her on a previous away trip
- her insistence on sharing a room with Marco when she accompanies him on overnight trips



Discussion points

Should the coach and Club Welfare Officer be concerned about Marco's welfare?

There seem to be many indications that Marco's mother is genuinely concerned for her son's welfare, and is supportive and encouraging of his involvement in the club's activities. Many parents simply deliver their children for sports activities and collect them afterwards. Marco's mother's active interest meant she remained for the duration of the sessions. However there were indications that the manner in which this support was sometimes expressed was inappropriate and could have had a negative impact on Marco's



social and emotional development. Whilst these observations do not themselves suggest that he was experiencing or was at risk of abuse, they are concerning enough to have warranted a response from the club in his interests.

In what ways may this behaviour impact on Marco?

The implication in this scenario is that within the sports environment Marco is able to communicate and operate at a more age-appropriate level than his mother's responses seem to indicate. A common misconception is that Cerebral Palsy is always associated with a learning disability/intellectual impairment. Like the rest of the population, young people with Cerebral Palsy have a range of levels of intelligence, with the majority having no learning disability.

It is very important that those working with and supporting any child, but particularly those with a condition or impairment, take time at the outset to assess and understand their individual needs – in terms of engagement in activities, their understanding, and their communication. Principally this involves speaking with the young person as well as their parents/carers. With a condition like Cerebral Palsy which affects muscle control and may therefore affect the young person's speech, it is crucial to establish effective methods for communication.

It is potentially damaging for any young person to be treated and spoken to as a younger, less able child – particularly when this involves their primary carer. The effects can include: low self esteem; an unnecessary level of dependence; reduced ability to form judgments and thus to assess and respond to risks; negative effects on relationships with peers and other adults; an increased perception of 'difference' by peers; and an increased vulnerability to bullying.

All disabled young people should, like other young people their age, have opportunities to develop independence and autonomy, and to benefit from the way in which sport enhances their social development. While any parent's interest in and commitment to their child's sports activities is a positive, it is important that this is expressed appropriately and does not detract from the benefits that children can gain from their participation.

Why may Marco's mother behave like this towards him?

There may be factors unknown to anyone in the club which affect Marco's mother's responses. Some parents of disabled children find it difficult to set aside what can be an overpowering sense of the child's vulnerability based on perceptions of their impairment/condition, and the ways in which they have been 'disabled' by society (in terms of perception, access to opportunity, etc).

It can be hard for some parents to balance the instinct to provide protection and support with the need to allow their child the independence they need to encourage their social and psychological development. This can be the case for any parent, but where there has also been a consistent need to support or provide a voice for your child this can be even more marked for parents of disabled children. Being acutely aware of the ways in which society and many individuals discriminate against, bully, ignore or otherwise mistreat disabled children, it is understandable that some parents find it difficult to trust others with their child's welfare.

What could the coach or Club Welfare Officer do to address these concerns?

It is most important to work in partnership with both Marco and his parents to ensure that he can continue to participate fully in the club activities. Marco should be offered the opportunity to express his views about how he feels things are going at the club, and anything he is not happy about.

It may be helpful for Marco's coach and the Welfare Officer to offer to meet with his parents to review his progress and talk over the current situation. This would include checking out if there are any issues occurring away from the club (for example in school or at home) that would be helpful to share. Reassurance should be given about the club's commitment to support and include him, and that his mother's support is recognised and welcomed.



Rather than confronting perceived 'over-protective' parenting, it is important to acknowledge the understandable concerns for the child's welfare.

- Use the context of a desire to enhance the young person's experience at the club – in both sporting and social terms – to address the concerns identified
- The experiences of the coach most involved with the young person can help embed reassurances about their abilities and progress at the club.
- Provide examples of safeguarding measures that the club have in place to ensure participants well-being.
- Emphasise the importance of giving all participants opportunities to develop independence and autonomy
- Consider the value of a parents' code of conduct which all parents sign up to which emphasises supporting their children, whilst allowing and nurturing independence.

Unless parental behaviour is having a significant impact on the group or more clearly on the disabled child themselves, the young person's continued participation must be the priority - regardless of the success of any attempts to address the concerns raised. Change may not be immediate, but may be evident over time as a result of consistent messages given by those within the club.

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