

## Beating the bullies: A crash course for coaches

Published 16/11/15 by [Blake Richardson](#)

Bullying pic



- **Bullying can be verbal, physical, emotional or written.**
- **50% of young people have bullied another person.**
- **It isn't always peer on peer: coaches too can be bullies.**
- **The competitive nature of sport can be ideal for the bully to operate in if the coach does not promote the right environment.**
- **Harassment and teasing are closely associated with aspects of bullying.**

We all talk a good game, don't we? Everyone hates bullies. They are vile cowards; their behaviour is despicable; our hearts go out to the poor victims. But talk is cheap, and such words carry little value.

Sensitivity married with ignorance is a trap many of us fall into.

If you saw a child being bullied by a teammate in one of your coaching sessions, how would you react? You're probably thinking, 'I would know **exactly** what to do in that situation, don't you worry.'

If your advice would simply be to stand up to the aggressor, then think again.

If incidents of bullying are not handled in the appropriate manner, it is like putting a sticking plaster over a broken leg – you won't cure anything. And you could end up making things a whole lot worse.

### **Educate, enlighten, empower**

The [Annual Bullying Survey 2015](#) asked 4800 young people across the country aged between 13 and 20 about their experiences. The study found:

- 50% of young people have bullied another person, 30% of whom do it at least once a week
- 69% of young people have witnessed somebody else being bullied, 43% of whom see it at least once a week
- 43% of young people have been bullied, 44% of whom are bullied at least once a week.

These statistics cannot be ignored. Bullying is widespread, and you need to be on the lookout for the signs as there is a good chance it could rear its ugly head at your club.

This article, in support of National Anti-Bullying Week, is aimed at educating coaches on how to spot bullying and what to do if it occurs, while spelling out how coaches too can inadvertently be guilty of bullying behaviour.

Bullying can be defined as using deliberately hurtful behaviour, usually repeated over a period of time, where it is difficult for those being bullied to defend themselves.


Put another way, it is using superior strength or influence to intimidate someone, typically to force them to do something.

It can be verbal, physical, emotional or written.

And it isn't restricted to peer on peer. If you have ever witnessed a parent of one of your players use intimidating or threatening language or even make consistent sarcastic comments to one child, then the alarm bells should be ringing.

Coaches need to be equipped with sufficient knowledge to empower them with the confidence to challenge either a teammate or parent who turns an enjoyable experience for a child into an unpleasant or frightening one.

Bullying infographic



According to Jane Fylan, UK Athletics' Welfare Officer and England Athletics' Lead Welfare & Safeguarding Officer, signs that coaches should look out for within a sporting environment include:

- reluctance to go to training
- a drop in performance
- unexplained injuries (scratches or bruising)
- avoidance of a particular individual or group
- lost or broken possessions
- damaged clothes
- change of friendship group
- change in attitude or behaviour
- feeling irritable or easily upset
- emotional fluctuations or mood swings
- aggressive behaviour or bullying others
- withdrawn or showing a lack of interest in sessions
- reduced concentration
- low self-esteem
- refusal to talk about what is wrong.

While behaviour that can be termed bullying includes:

- public humiliation
- physical punishment
- being ostracised
- fostering negative rivalries
- unnecessary and unconstructive put-downs
- intimidation or unsuitable fear-mongering
- constant criticism
- name-calling
- sarcasm
- racist or homophobic remarks or threats.

#### Only fools rush in

I know, that's a lot to watch out for. Consider too that the child being bullied will quite often want to keep quiet about their ordeal, through fear, shame or embarrassment, making the signs even harder to spot.

But general surveillance goes hand in hand with your responsibility as a coach, for the competitive nature of sport makes it an ideal environment for the bully to operate in.

It is important, once you have identified a concern, that you don't steam in, all guns blazing. Establish the facts before taking any action.

- Begin by asking the child if they are OK and if there is anything they want to speak about.
- Tell them you are here to help, listen carefully, and do not interrupt them as it may stop them from disclosing important details. After reassuring them it is not their fault, explain that you have to let your club welfare officer know.
- When speaking to the child, do not press them for all the details as that will come later down the line. Also, do not promise that you will keep their secret – although only share the information with those who need to know.
- Above all, be approachable. A child will not confide in you if they think you will not care about their plight.
- And remember that, as a sports coach, you are one of the most influential people in a child's life.
- Check what your club or organisation's safeguarding and child protection procedure is. It will certainly require you to log the incident, and remember to sign and date it. There may be a relevant incident report form to fill in.
- Speak to the club welfare officer (or child protection lead/senior colleague), and provide them with a copy before determining an action plan.

#### Walking a tightrope

Coaches can be bullies too, don't forget. It is a fine line that coaches tread.

You may think you are being motivational when you make your players sweat for the cause in training, or drill them on technique and tactics.

But what one player thrives on, another may recoil against. If you lambast someone for failing to follow your instructions, it could leave a lasting emotional scar without you even realising. Indeed, the whole team could be affected by an over-authoritarian coaching style.

Harassment and bullying are dangerous bedfellows so know when to curb your approach, and do not make a habit of teasing players in the mistaken belief you are 'having a laugh' with them.

The following can all be construed as bullying behaviour:

- unrealistic pressure to perform to high expectations
- over-training, where the nature and intensity of training and competition exceed the capacity of the child's growing body
- physical punishments or forfeits for a poor result
- emotional abuse by making them feel worthless, inadequate or unvalued
- making them feel frightened or in danger
- shouting and swearing, threatening or taunting them
- public humiliation
- exposing children to unnecessary heat or cold.

#### Keyboard bullies

In recent years, the debate has raged over cyber-bullying. This isn't simply a buzzword trotted out by the media for dramatic effect.

The adolescent population are addicted to the Internet and its assorted charms. But there is a heavy price to pay for this rapidly evolving digital world that we live in. There is dark side to the Internet, with many children infatuated but also tormented.

And don't for one second think advice on cyber-bullying is purely the domain of parents and teachers. It falls under the remit of sports coaches too.

Inappropriate text messages flying about before or after a game or training (spreading a rumour, gossip, joke or secret), or sharing offensive images or videos of a teammate on social media is, unfortunately, a common occurrence. Anything on a phone, computer or other device that embarrasses, humiliates, threatens or harasses counts as cyber-bullying.

Coaches must also be careful how they use [technology](#) to communicate with club members. Here are some factors to take into consideration:

- Include [parents](#) in emails or text messages sent to children.
- Send group messages.
- Use the club's social networking page or website (one-way communication).
- Avoid circulating your personal social networking details to children you coach.
- Avoid allowing children you coach to become 'friends'.

An informed coach is a good coach. So don't think a dash of common sense will suffice or that you have all the answers. A small amount of reading can go a long way, and if your knowledge helps provide a victim of bullying with the support they need to confront their fears and conquer their persecutors, then it is time well spent.

#### References

This post is based on advice from the [UK Coaching \(formerly Sports Coach UK\) 'Safeguarding and Protecting Children' workshops](#), the supporting workshop resource [Safeguarding and Protecting Children - a Guide for Sports People](#) and the following websites: [www.kidscape.org.uk](http://www.kidscape.org.uk); <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/>

This blog is also available as a podcast on a number

of platforms including iTunes. [Listen here.](#)

#### Next Steps

UK Coaching has developed, in partnership with the NSPCC's Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU), the ["Renewal: Safeguarding and Protecting Children in Sport" eLearning course](#), which includes a **Safe Communication with Digital Kids module** that will increase your confidence when it comes to communicating with children about sports sessions. [Find out more.](#)

**Have you ever had to deal with a bullying situation? What did you do?**

Share your experience by leaving a comment below.

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tags : coaching-children, bullying, bullying-advice