

Safeguarding Deaf and Disabled Children in Sport: Anna's story scenario

Introduction

This scenario provides sports clubs and organisations with some guidance regarding how to effectively include deaf and disabled young people. Advice for clubs and organisations regarding their responsibilities to enable all children (including deaf and disabled children) to take part in their activities, and the steps that can be put in place to enable this to happen. It also outlines why disabled young people are more vulnerable to abuse than many of their peers and provides discussion points for your organisation to think about.

Scenario: Anna's story

Anna is an 11 year old girl with learning disabilities/intellectual impairment (Down's Syndrome) and is deaf¹. Her mother brought her along to join a summer sports camp at a local leisure facility. The manager is very enthusiastic about including Anna in their activities and is confident his staff will be able to do this effectively. Anna's mother gives some brief advice about how to ensure her daughter understands instructions. The coach seems less convinced, and points out her lack of experience with children 'like Anna', but her concerns are not addressed.

Initially Anna seems to do well, but it is soon evident that the staff are struggling to include her in activities in a meaningful way. Some of the other children are resentful when the coach makes allowances for Anna and gives her what they interpret as special treatment during activities. Eventually the frustrated coach's patience snaps and she uses inappropriate, 'jokey' language in front of the other children. A group of girls pick up on this and we see Anna subjected to a range of bullying behaviours, including excluding her, hiding her belongings and stealing her money.

Anna describes some of her experiences. Eventually Anna tells her mother who makes a complaint to the sports camp manager. He reviews what has occurred and acknowledges a number of failures to meet Anna's needs appropriately which are then addressed. These include establishing appropriate inclusion and anti-bullying policies, supporting staff with guidance and training, and checking that the staff ratios are appropriate for all children to be safe and enjoy the sports camp.

Crucially a meeting takes place with Anna's mother and key sports camp staff to agree and implement a package of support that will address the previous concerns and allow Anna to return. Despite some reservations this is agreed, and Anna's experience improves significantly. We are left with a happy child fully included in the general activities.

¹ Many Deaf people do not define themselves as disabled. and may not have experience of 'hearing' as a usual activity. For this reason they will describe themselves as belonging to a particular cultural group with its own language (BSL) – often referred to as the Deaf community. This is one of the reasons that the term 'deaf and disabled' is used. In many documents the term D/deaf person is used to include all groups of deaf people. In this document we will simply refer use the terms 'deaf' or 'deafness' to include anyone with any level of hearing impairment.





Context

Including deaf and disabled children

Sports and activity providers have a responsibility to ensure that they take steps to include and safeguard deaf and disabled children. This may start at the level of an organizational or club equity, inclusion or equality statement or policy, but requires consideration and implementation of the practical steps needed to ensure all children are appropriately and effectively included and staff are similarly appropriately supported and informed.

Disabled children and abuse

Many disabled children experience abuse – usually at the hands of someone they know well and who may be in a position of authority and trust. This may be physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or neglect. There is substantial evidence that disabled children are more vulnerable to abuse than many of their peers².

They also experience higher levels of bullying from their peers. There are a number of reasons for this, including:

- the increased likelihood of social isolation
- the myth that disabled children do not experience certain types of abuse -which encourages an environment in which abuse can be hidden, or dismissed if uncovered
- communication needs that reduce their opportunity to disclose concerns
- being viewed as safer targets for abusers
- disabled children may be less likely to be listened to or heard
- physical or behavioural indicators may wrongly be attributed to the child's disability/impairment, rather than to their experience of abuse.

Responsibilities of clubs and organisations

Clubs should take steps to enable all children (including deaf and disabled children) to take part in their activities. Staff and volunteers need to be supported to make the necessary adjustments. At the outset they should meet the individual young person and their parents or carers in order to:

- understand their particular needs (for example their levels of communication, understanding or mobility)
- agree how the young person will be supported
- recognize additional vulnerability, and
- ensure that arrangements are made address both inclusion and safeguarding requirements.

² Jones et al, 2012 *Prevalence and risk of violence against children with disabilities.*



Discussion points

What was the likely impact on Anna of these experiences?

Anna appeared quiet and anxious about the situation at the outset, but she was apparently not asked about how she felt about attending the sessions. Neither was it clear that the way in which the coach tried to talk to Anna was appropriate or effective – either in terms of her hearing, or her understanding of what was being asked of her.

In common with many other disabled young people, Anna may well have experienced bullying before – in school perhaps, or in the wider community. Bullying damages self esteem and lowers confidence, and her experiences at the sessions (involving both the adult in charge and some of the other young people) will have reinforced these negative feelings. In this situation Anna was experiencing escalating bullying behaviour from a small group of girls which may well have resulted in more serious behaviour, like physical assaults, had it not been reported.

A potentially positive experience was transformed into an unhappy one, and it is no surprise that in these circumstances she will have wanted to stop attending. She may have been put off joining any other sports or social clubs for fear of a repetition of her experiences here.

What could have been done, or done better, to avoid the situation developing?

The manager's commitment to including Anna in the activities was very positive. However this wasn't matched by a commitment to identify, prepare for and address the additional support needs of Anna and the coaching staff. Indications that the coach had some reservations, based on a lack of experience in managing disabled children, were apparently ignored.

Whilst being inclusive is not something which needs significantly more effort or knowledge - sometimes the fundamental principle of placing the child/children/young person at the centre of the decision making, and generation of the activities is under-estimated, or not genuinely present. Good inclusive coaching is participant centred, and process- (rather than output-) driven.

Initially there should have been a much fuller discussion and agreement with Anna and her mother about:

- what Anna wants from, and how she feels about coming to, the sessions
- Anna's impairments (both Down's Syndrome and deafness) and the implications of these in the activity context:
 - how well Anna hears, particularly in a large group in a noisy gym setting, and how she can be best supported to 'hear' communication
 - what the most effective way to communicate instructions and information to and with Anna
 - how Anna expresses herself, and how to identify when she is confused, or upset
 - the importance of routine to Anna and how changes can best be introduced
- ensuring there are opportunities to review Anna's involvement in sessions with her and her mother on a regular basis to identify and respond to any issues that may arise before they escalate. This is important to any new member of a session, not just disabled children/young people
- clarify what Anna and her mother can do if Anna is concerned or unhappy.

As part of the overall assessment of Anna's needs, consideration should have been given to whether there was a need for extra staffing, supervision or a buddy system – this could involve additional coaching staff, a volunteer, the young person's parent/carer or someone else brought in to support Anna's involvement in the activity. Supervision needed to include the activity sessions, the changing areas and free time.

Although there was a brief discussion with Anna's mother, this was not sufficient to explore Anna's feelings or to provide the coach with information about managing and supporting Anna. Part of her mother's motivation involved the lack of alternative child care for Anna, and this may have discouraged her from sharing information that she felt may have prevented her daughter attending the sessions.



It may have been helpful for the coach to talk to Anna's mum about other similar environments where Anna has been really well included and supported, and whether she could share that contact with the coach so that the coach can be supported/mentored.

It may have been helpful to suggest that Anna's mother attended the first session or two in order to support and reassure Anna, assist and advise the coaches about how they relate to and support her so that any obvious difficulties can be addressed at the outset.

What does a club or organization need to have in place to include and safeguard disabled participants?

An **inclusion policy** that articulates a commitment to both providing opportunities for disabled young people to participate and to providing support to all staff. Inclusion needs to be a managed organisational process – and not one that involves simply taking on disabled participants on ad hoc basis.

A procedure that includes **discussions with disabled young people and their parents/carers** to identify and address issues associated with their inclusion in activities – adaptations (coaching approaches, kit, rules, and so on) and their additional vulnerability to abuse and bullying.

A **safeguarding policy, complaints procedure and code of conduct** that are shared (in appropriate language) with all staff, parents and young people and include guidance on how concerns should be raised. These policies should be applied consistently regardless of whether children are disabled or not. Consideration needs to be given to ensuring how every participant will be helped to understand these key points. A **whistle blowing policy** would have encouraged and supported staff and volunteers to raise concerns they may have about the behaviour of colleagues.

An **anti-bullying policy** – preferably developed with direct input from young people – that promotes positive relationships between children and identifies behaviours that will not be tolerated. It will clarify how concerns can be reported, what action will be taken against those found to be bullying, and how those subjected to bullying will be supported. This should be shared with parents/carers, and all participants required to sign up to abiding by it.

Staff training, guidance and other learning opportunities on safeguarding and on the inclusion of disabled children. Opportunities for staff concerns and learning gaps can be raised and addressed through supervision.

Access to advice and information about particular types of impairments (including specialist websites, sports governing bodies, local groups, special schools, and so on). Local authorities may provide resources or support to help ensure a disabled young person can access social opportunities including sport.

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