Child online protection in sports

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Introduction

"A child's love for sports is one of the most pure and beautiful feelings that exists. Since childhood, football has always been my safe haven, and this is exactly what sport practice should feel like for every boy or girl around the world. Whoever loves sports and cares about human life must be ready to stand up for child protection" – Iker Casillas (FIFA World Cup winner and FIFA legend)

Sports organizations play an important role in many children's lives. They provide a social hub where children can play, have fun, meet new friends, develop skills and maintain a healthier lifestyle. This all contributes to the children's happiness, well-being and healthy development. Moreover, children have the right to rest and leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities, such as sport, according to Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. [1]

Many sports organizations have a well-elaborated child protection framework in place to ensure that all children are protected from violence, (sexual) exploitation, abuse and any harmful practices. However, regarding the online risks and potential harm to children in the digital environment, many sports organizations are struggling to integrate child online protection[2] into their existing frameworks. Nonetheless, given their close connections with children, sports organizations are very well placed to be able to provide advice, guidance and support

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[1] Article 31 – Convention on the Rights of the Child

[2] In this Brief, child online protection will be understood as an overarching term to describe the prevention of, and response to, online violence or offline violence facilitated through online means. For further information with regard to terminology, please refer to: Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. For more details on violence against children, including definitions of Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation, please refer to: Disrupting Harm | End Violence (end-violence.org)

concerning both the prevention of, and response to, risks and harm in digital spaces.

Today, sports organizations use digital tools for an array of purposes (e.g. internal and external communication and marketing, the publication of news, rankings, results, profiles, fixtures and events, gaming, and online learning activities). Online materials can expose children to various online risks, such as having personal data shared without their consent and/or misused, having profiles accessed by strangers, and being exposed to online bullying and harmful one-on-one interactions between adults and minors, including grooming and sexual abuse.[3] The role of sports organizations in addressing these issues is pivotal, given the severity of the physical, mental and emotional consequences of online child sexual abuse and exploitation experienced by former and current child athletes. Promoting online safety has therefore become a key aspect of child protection in sports, and an opportunity to better protect and empower children. Through internal online protection policies and procedures, sports organizations can address online risks, tackle violence against children and promote the safe use of digital tools and environments.

The intention of this Brief is to support sports organizations – clubs and associations at both the grassroots and professional levels – to better protect children online. It aims to help:

- Develop a dedicated child online protection strategy and policy, which can be integrated into existing child protection frameworks or guidelines and into child-friendly statements.

- Develop specific procedures and codes of conduct to promote safe online practices for children, young people and staff (e.g. for the use of videoconferencing platforms, social networks and Wi-Fi services).

- Define a protection focal point to receive reports and complaints from victims of online violence and establish mechanisms to respond effectively, linking victims to the appropriate support and referral services.

- Provide capacity building for children, coaches, parents, educators and staff, and support efforts towards the development of their digital skills.

Recommendations

How can you create or update your child online protection framework to include specific features in order to both prevent and respond to online violence against children?

1. **Assess existing policies and identify gaps regarding online protection:**

   • Assess whether online risks are covered by the organization policies and child protection frameworks.

   • Assess whether such policies address the needs of vulnerable groups of children, such as children with physical and/or mental disabilities, and children from ethnic minorities.

   • Assess whether such policies are flexible enough to handle a wide range of situations and be consistent with best practice and international standards.

   • Assess whether various stakeholders (e.g. parents and carers or educators working with sports organizations) are involved in creating, updating and implementing online protection policies. Consult and engage children in the process from the beginning. They can co-create a new framework, as well as revise and audit any relevant existing framework.

   • Define a mechanism on how to involve these stakeholders (e.g. using surveys, meetings and events).

   • If no child protection framework is in place, consider developing a child protection policy which includes specific consideration of online risks and harm in the context of sports, while ensuring that it remains aligned with national and international standards on the protection of children online and in sports.

2. **Allocate sufficient and appropriate human and financial resources to online safety measures**, as well as training and capacity building, to fully engage and equip the organization and its staff.

3. **Develop a statement of organization principles on child online protection** that defines for which purposes, and by which means, the organization keeps children[4] and staff safe online.

4. **Designate and provide external training and support to protection leads and focal points:**

   • Designate one, or more than one, contact person within the organization who is responsible for the online protection of children and staff and define the specific responsibilities of such a role. This could be the same internal person designated for other protection issues.

   • Define how the focal point links victims to appropriate support and referral services (especially trained services that provide advice).

5. **Define age-appropriate behavioural guidelines and rules**, written in a language and style that people of all ages, including children and young people, can understand and relate to. These guidelines and rules should define acceptable and unacceptable behaviour online, set clear guidance on child online protection measures and processes for diverse groups of people (management, coaching, communication and media staff, adult and minor players, members and fans, parents and guardians, etc.) to follow, and provide consent forms for children/guardians concerning the use of images on social media. These guidelines should also:

   • Define the illegal content, risks and harm that should be reported (in the form of a comprehensive and child-friendly list to inform children).

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[3]   The CO:RE classification of online risk to children

[4]   It is recommended that the statement initially be based on a standardized definition of a child and on the importance of child rights. United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) – Article 1: Convention on the Rights of the Child

- Define how misconduct and abuse are recognized and dealt with.
- Define how to prevent and respond to harm to children online and how to identify child abuse.
- Develop training on child online protection, including how to report and receive concerns, refer cases to specialized services, and report child sexual abuse material via hotlines[5] and portals.[6]
- Develop training on understanding the online environment, how children protect themselves and others, and how to report concerns. This information should also be made available to parents and carers.
- Develop training on positive digital reputation and media literacy (i.e. behaving appropriately and using respectful language on online platforms).
- Define the minimum age requirements for the digital platforms (e.g. social media, messaging and videoconferencing) used by staff and volunteers.
- Set out rules for collecting and handling personal data and images to ensure that rights and privacy are protected (e.g. the consent of children and guardians and the storage of data).
- Set out rules that forbid the use of Wi-Fi or digital services to access or display any material that may be unsuitable in an environment where children are present. The consequences of violating such rules should be clearly communicated.
- Establish boundaries between the professional and personal lives of the adult coach (e.g. the use of professional accounts and phone numbers for interactions within the professional sphere, in order to protect all parties and allow for supervision at club level).
- Define a clear policy on the use of mobile and smart technology within the club or associated environment that is aimed at adults, children, young people and visitors.

6. **Leverage existing technology tools:**
- Consider the role of device settings, technology tools such as filtering programs, and child protection apps and settings that can help to protect children's identity and well-being. Install filters on the Wi-Fi system to reinforce the policy on inappropriate material.
- Leverage existing mechanisms to detect, block, remove and proactively report illegal content and any abuse, which is classified as criminal activity, against children.
- Ensure regular updates of the organization operating system and security software.

7. **Define a system for reporting and responding to misconduct:**
- Define how complaints and concerns can be reported through standard reporting procedures, allowing for fast and appropriate responses.
- Define anonymous reporting mechanisms that complement protection reporting processes.[7]
- Create child-friendly and age-appropriate reporting templates. Enable other channels and/or links to redirect the people involved to specialized support services.
- Test how swift and effective the reporting process is.
- Establish the monitoring of reports and responses to complaints in order to prevent future abuses. This should be integrated into a clear learning cycle within the organization.
- Communicate procedures to parents, carers and children (in a child-friendly and age-appropriate format) to ensure that all parties are aware of the procedures and mechanisms available.

8. **Establish links to social services and victim support:**
- Establish a system for follow-up and for the reintegration of child victims into the sports organization activities and community.
- Ensure that key staff are both aware of and trained in preventing, identifying and reporting harm online to official support and referral services.
- Establish links to official social services and victim support at a national level, which will provide professional support to the child (e.g. mental health professionals, social workers and law enforcement).

9. **Organize awareness-raising and capacity-building events**:
- Define how different target groups (children, parents, carers, staff, coaches and volunteers) will be made aware of online risks and harm, and of how to prevent or respond to them.
- Define how target groups are trained on media competences and digital literacy, online protection and guidelines to prevent and report abuse.

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5   The INHOPE Association provides a list of hotlines available in over 50 countries, where citizens, both children and adults, can report online child sexual abuse material. Some hotlines also receive reports on other topics, such as hate speech and discrimination. For more information: "We are a global network of 50 member hotlines"

6   Portal to report child sexual abuse material

7   Whisper® – Anonymous Reporting Tool | SWGfL

General note: Ensure that the policies are clearly written, easy to understand, accessible to all members of the organization, including people with disabilities, are equitable and do not disadvantage or stigmatize any groups. They should be written in an age-appropriate and child-friendly format (see Child-friendly version of the report to the General Assembly 2022). Specific provisions should be included to protect vulnerable groups of children and those living with other risks or disadvantages, as they are more exposed to online risks and, consequently, are more likely to experience harm and to be less able to find support. (See ITU child online protection policy brief Keeping children safe in the digital environment: the importance of protection and empowerment.).

Further information:

- Child Protection in Sport Unit, Online safety from NSPCC, Practical tools and templates.
- Electronic communications policy of the MAAPP, Electronic communications policy, 2022.
- End violence against children, Stay safe at home. Stay safe online, 2020: Technical note: COVID-19 and its implications for protecting children online: and Safe Online Resource Pack, 2020.
- ITU, Guidelines on Child Online Protection, 2020.
- UNICEF, Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- UNICEF, International Safeguards for Children in Sport.
- United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner: Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989
- United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner: General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, 2021.
- US Center for SafeSport, Keeping your kids safe online during COVID-19, flyer, 2020.

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