

Delivery of sport at a distance: Child wellbeing and protection considerations in the return of children and young people to sport

As we gradually start to move out of lockdown, supporting children and young people to reintegrate back into sport will be an area that governing bodies and clubs have been planning. It is essential that this incorporates and gives proper attention to child wellbeing and protection considerations.

1. Re-connecting with each other

Experiences of lockdown will have varied significantly for children and young people. Many families may not have had access to a garden or a safe space to enable children and young people to continue exercising. There may have been limited access to devices and online facilities to connect with friends or even to do schoolwork. Parents and carers may have been unable to offer the support they normally would due to other competing priorities during this time. Rather than home being a safe and secure environment, for some children it may have been chaotic and stressful. Some families entered lockdown with already complex needs and the pressure of living in this new way will have made those needs even more challenging.



We need to acknowledge that individual experience may influence the readiness for children to get back into sport. Some may be excited and motivated to pick up where they left off but for others, the return to sport might be a more difficult transition and it may take longer for them to adjust. For some children or young people with a disability, too, they may return to sport later due to the need to self-isolate for longer or when they do return, they may need to take extra precautions.

In April and May 2020, The Children's Parliament conducted a national survey seeking the views of children and young people during lockdown. 3,968 children and young people aged 8 to 14 years old completed the survey. The findings illustrate the variations in how some children and young people have been experiencing lockdown. The results of the survey can be found here and there is a further survey underway for the month of June: [Children's Parliament: How are you doing? Results April/May 2020](#)

Coaches will have a key role in providing a welcoming and safe space for all children and young people when they return to sport. They will be influential in supporting and promoting children's wellbeing during this time and taking the individual needs of each child into consideration.

Coaches will have the additional role of supervising a new set of rules regarding social distancing measures so will need to ensure this is done in a positive manner. An emphasis on fun and enjoyment from the outset will be critical here. The sport should be a place where children and young people can come and really connect with others and feel able to relax and enjoy themselves, rather than be put under pressure about personal bests, making the team or future competitions.

The first session where children and young people come together could be used to let them talk about their experiences of lockdown and what their worries might be in coming back into sport.

This 12-year-old Children's Parliament member is talking about the return to school; however, the sentiment could equally be applied to sport:

"They should ask us how we feel about returning, make sure we feel ok about it".

In Summary

- Focus on creating a fun and enjoyable atmosphere which allows children and young people to reconnect
- Explore how children feel about returning to sport, considering the individual experiences that different children will have had during lockdown
- Be clear about how the sport will be delivered and why

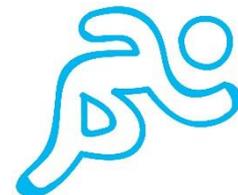
2. Managing risk

Given the changes to how sport will be implemented to allow for social distancing measures, a risk assessment of the activities planned within the environment in which they will take place will need to be completed. This will have to take account of, not only the physical restrictions required, but also any subsequent child wellbeing and protection issues that could arise.

For example, with the easing of restrictions, and two different households being able to meet in the first instance, it opens the possibility for one to one coaching to take place. This should not be taken as an opportunity to depart from good practice guidelines, which adults should continue to follow. Where a coach is providing a training session on a one to one basis, this should be arranged using appropriate communication channels and in line with the club or governing body social media and communication policy. The coaching should always be done in an open environment, in view of others.

Where possible, parents or carers should be present. Clear information about the training session, start and finish times should be provided, and the coach's code of conduct shared. Children should be given an accessible version of the code of conduct too, in order to help them understand what to expect and what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable practice.

Very clear information should also be shared about what to do if they have a worry or a concern and who to speak to.



Governing bodies will have to assess the risks around one to one coaching and disseminate information on the policy decision made in this area.

In Summary

- Conduct a safeguarding risk assessment when delivering sport in a revised format
- Widely share Codes of Conduct for coaches, parents/carers and children and young people so that everyone understands the expectations of them
- Widely share Social Media and communication policies to ensure positive behaviours and practice while social distancing measures in place
- Make the Responding to Concerns Procedure widely available so that coaches, parents/carers and children and young people know who to contact with any concerns

3. Enthusiasm / interest

For some children and young people, their interest in the sport may have waned during the extended break. This may mean they are disengaged or disinterested when they return, or they may choose not to return at all.

The Children's Parliament national survey of 8 to 14-year olds found that in April, 62% of children responded yes when asked if exercise made them feel good at the moment. In May this had reduced to 57%.

Clubs will need to think about ways to garner that interest again and re-engage with those who were club members before lockdown. As highlighted earlier, sharing of information about what the new set up will be and having an emphasis on fun, enjoyment and re-connecting will be important.

Conversely, clubs may also experience an upturn in junior membership, particularly those sports who are the first to be back on-line as children and young people, parents/carers look for opportunities to be active again. This would be a good time for organisations to review their child wellbeing and protection procedures and practices to ensure they are robust and fit for purpose.



In Summary

- Emphasise fun, enjoyment and re-connecting to help to re-engage children and young people
- Make sure child wellbeing and protection policies are up to date in anticipation for the return of children and young people into the sport

4. Physical fitness

Activity levels for children will have varied during the lockdown – some having been quite active, and some having had very little physical activity at all. Also, those who were heavily involved in sport are likely to have experienced some decrease in their fitness level due to the restrictions on daily exercise early in the lockdown.

The Children's Parliament national survey indicates that 73% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed to the statement that they were getting enough exercise. However, this reduced to 67% for the 12 to 14-year-old age group with variations also occurring between genders.

These variations in fitness levels may affect what they are able to achieve physically when they return and subsequently their enjoyment of participating. It is important, therefore, to design initial training sessions with this in mind.

In Summary

- Develop training sessions that take into account the fitness levels of participants, which may have been impacted by lockdown

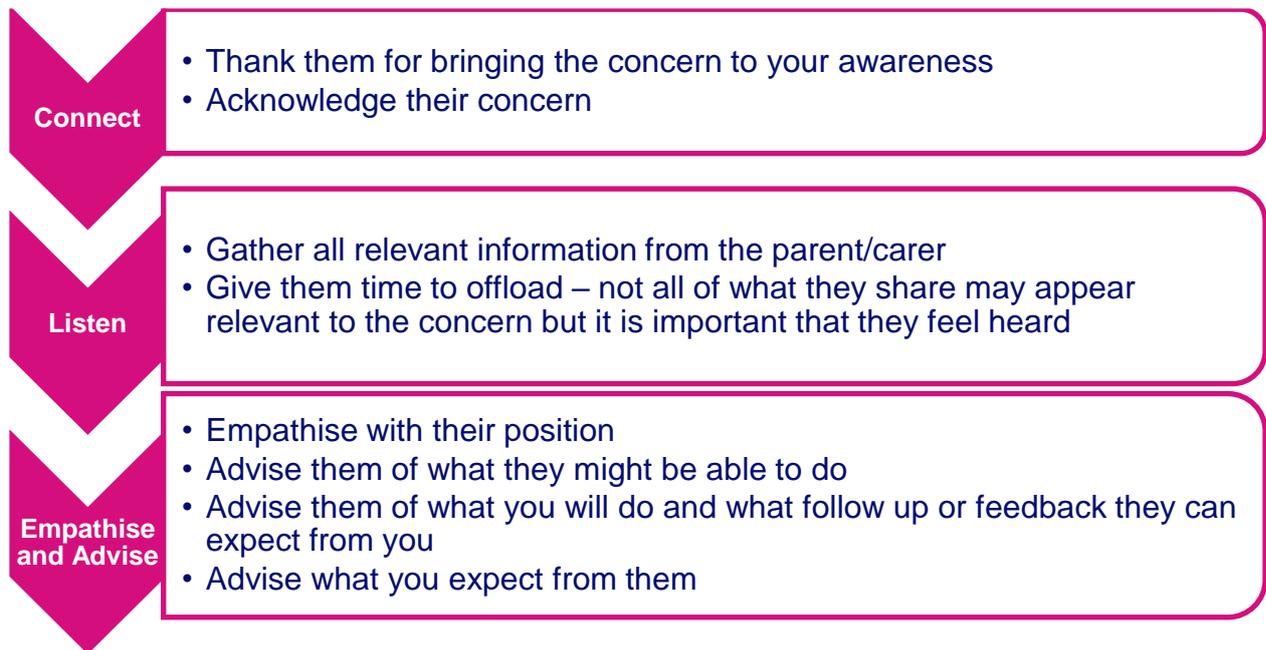
5. Managing expectations

Parents/carers are central in children and young people returning to sport and attitudes may vary. Some may worry that the social distancing measures are not robust enough. Some may have enjoyed the 'break' from transporting children to and from training and events and therefore, there may be a reluctance to return to that. Some may worry that there will be restrictions to spectating, missing out on watching their children participate. All these concerns are legitimate and may increase the potential for friction between parents and coaches.

A key consideration, therefore, is how communication with parents/carers is handled so that their expectations are managed about what the sport now looks like and why.

Transparency and keeping communication channels open should be standard. Information can be shared through the normal channels of the club – e.g. written information or a video on the website, WhatsApp group or Facebook page. Arranging a parents/carers meeting at the outset may also be a good option – in person or, depending on numbers, online. An avenue for parents/carers, children and young people to be able to ask questions will be critical in helping to lower anxieties.

Where concerns are raised by parent/carers:



In Summary

- Ensure open and transparent communication with parents/carers to manage expectations of how sport will be delivered and encourage positive relationships
- Connect, listen empathise, advise where concerns are raised

6. Mental wellbeing

A significant impact of lockdown has been on the mental wellbeing of the general population. It will have affected everyone, including children and young people, in different ways depending on individual circumstances and experiences. Some may have experienced their own mental health challenges while others may have lived with parents/carers whose mental health has been impacted by the lockdown.



Furthermore, children and young people who suffer from social anxiety may find the transition back into group activity a struggle, and if they do, may require extra support. For some there may be some general anxiety around COVID 19 and social distancing.

It is important that coaches are sensitive to children and young people's mental wellbeing. That they are understanding that individuals will be experiencing the return to sport in different ways and that they are empathetic and supportive of this.

If coaches have concerns regarding the mental wellbeing of a child or young person and require further support, they should follow the appropriate steps in their club's Responding to Concerns procedure.

In Summary

- Be aware of children and young people's general mental wellbeing
- Offer empathy and support to children who are experiencing mental wellbeing or anxiety issues during the transition back to organised sport
- Follow Responding to Concerns procedure where appropriate

7. Financial hardship

With the economic effects from lockdown including furloughing and job losses, many people will have found themselves in difficult circumstances in relation to their finances.

In the Children's Parliament survey of children and young people and their experience of lockdown 18% of respondents said they worried that their parents do not have enough money for their family.

This could impact on a return to sport for some children where their parents/carers can no longer afford organised sport. Are there measures, then, that clubs could take to support children in this situation to allow for affordable opportunities during this time? Are there other avenues for support such as grants that the local authority may offer to help children and young people to attend at a reduced rate? Can governing bodies support clubs and therefore families to get access to support? It is, of course, recognised that clubs themselves must pay facility charges, league and competition entry costs, etc. which will have an impact on this situation.



In Summary

- Be mindful of financial hardship as a barrier to participation and explore opportunities where available to support families

8. Potential for an Increase in Child Wellbeing and Protection Concerns

It is known that the number of referrals about incidents of domestic abuse and child abuse increased during the lockdown period. There will be many children who have heard, seen or experienced some traumatic or difficult events during this time. Coaches will have to be alert to the signs and indicators of possible abuse or stress and be prepared for potential disclosures. As always, coaches should know what to do if they observe something that causes them concern or are approached with a concern and who they should speak to.

Some children may have found the experience of lockdown a positive one, for example those with social anxieties. For others, being separated from friends and social circles will have heightened anxieties during this period. This may manifest itself in distressed behaviour, which is a way of coping, e.g. angry outbursts, excessive drinking, self-harming. It is important that coaches are mindful of the underlying reasons for this type of behaviour and know what to do, how to support the child or young person and how to seek support for themselves from their club or governing body of sport. External organisations can also be a useful source of support, and a list of some are provided below.



In Summary

- Be alert to a potential increase in wellbeing and protection concerns
- Make the Responding to Concerns procedure widely available so that coaches, parents/carers and children and young people know who to contact with any concerns

USEFUL SOURCES OF SUPPORT, ADVICE AND INFORMATION

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| Safeguarding in Sport service (Children 1 st and sportscotland partnership) | Tel: 0141 419 1156 Email: safeguardinginsport@children1st.org.uk www.safeguardinginsport.org.uk |
| ChildLine | Tel: 0800 1111 www.childline.org.uk |
| ParentLine Scotland | Tel: 0800 0282233 www.children1st.org.uk/help-for-families/parentline-scotland |
| Respect Me: Scotland's anti-bullying service | www.respectme.org.uk |
| SAMH: Scottish Association for Mental Health | Tel: 0344 800 0550 Email: info@samh.org.uk https://www.samh.org.uk/information-service |
| Young Minds | www.youngminds.org.uk |
| Papyrus: prevention of young suicide | www.papyrus-uk.org |
| Child Exploitation Online Protection (CEOP) | www.ceop.police.uk |
| Child Protection Committees Scotland | www.celcis.org/our-work/protecting-children/child-protection-committees-scotland |
| For Information about COVID-19 | Scottish Government: www.gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19 NHS: www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19 sportscotland : https://sportscotland.org.uk/covid-19/ |