

# Australian Sports Commission Factsheet

## Bullying

Every person in sport, in every role, has the right to participate in an environment that is fun, safe and healthy, and to be treated with respect, dignity and fairness.

Bullying denies participants these rights and can result in feelings of disgrace, embarrassment, shame or intimidation. Bullying can also affect an individual's athletic performance, level of enjoyment, work or school life, academic achievement and physical and mental health.

Research has shown that one in six Australian students are bullied every week, and are three times more likely to develop depressive illnesses. In May 2007, a teenager who was bullied while at primary school was awarded over 1 million dollars compensation.

Bullying can occur both on and off the sports pitch and can involve athletes, parents, coaches, spectators or umpires. It is prohibited by most sporting organisations under their Code of Conduct and can result in penalties and punishments being applied. Some forms of bullying constitute assault, harassment or discrimination under federal and state legislation and are therefore illegal.

### What is bullying

Bullying is deliberately hurting a specific person either physically, verbally, psychologically or socially. It involves a power imbalance where one person has power or strength (e.g. physical, mental, social or financial) over another. It can be carried out by one person or several people who are either actively or passively involved. In a sports context bullying can take many forms, for example:

- a parent telling their child that they are incompetent, hopeless, useless, etc.;
- a coach alienating an athlete (adult or child);
- several people ganging-up on an individual team member;
- spectators verbally abusing players from the opposition;
- an athlete calling a referee names and using put-downs;
- a parent intimidating a young coach .

Bullying can be a 'one-off' incident, but usually involves repeated actions or incidences. It can occur everywhere: at home, school, work, playgrounds, while participating in sport, when using public transport or walking to or from home. An individual may bully their victim face to face or use technology such as a mobile phone or computer.

## **Types of bullying**

Bullies may use one or several types of bullying to hurt their victim.

**Physical** - pushing, shoving, punching, hitting, kicking, taking away a person's belongings (this may also constitute assault).

**Verbal** - name calling, banter, threatening, teasing, intimidating, yelling abuse, using put-downs.

**Psychological** - ganging up, preventing a person from going somewhere, taking a person's possessions, sending hostile or nasty emails or text messages.

**Socially** - excluding, alienating, ignoring, spreading rumours.

Bullying behaviour is damaging to all involved: the bully, victim, family members, those that witness the behaviour and the sporting organisation involved. Athletes, parents, coaches, administrators and sporting organisations all have an ethical (and possibly a legal) responsibility to take action to prevent bullying occurring in sport and manage it, should it occur.

## **The effects of bullying - why certain people bully and are bullied?**

People that bully may:

- pick a victim randomly, or carefully choose their victim;
- find that they get what they want by bullying (power, acceptance, admiration);
- have been bullied themselves;
- be arrogant, aggressive or impulsive;
- enjoy having power over others;
- enjoy doing it and not care that they cause their victim distress;
- believe that some people deserve to be bullied;
- have been influenced by aggressive 'models' (at home, in real life or in television or the movies);
- see their behaviour as justified or 'pay-back' for some treatment they have received.

Any person can be bullied. Sometimes people who are popular, smarter, attractive or possess obvious sporting ability are victims of bullying. People can also be subject to bullying if they:

- have not had experience standing up for themselves against bullies;
- lack assertiveness, resilience and the social skills required to protect themselves against bullies;
- struggle academically or in terms of sporting ability;
- appear stressed, anxious or easily hurt or upset;
- look different or are different;
- have a disability or illness;
- lack confidence or are shy;
- have been overprotected at home.

## **Signs a person is being bullied**

A person, especially a child, may not always ask for support when being bullied. They may feel afraid, ashamed or embarrassed and that the person they tell will think they are weak. Victims of bullying may think that they deserve to be bullied or are 'dobbing' by telling someone what is happening to them.

The following are signs that a person may be being bullied.

- Finds excuses for not wanting to attend training or games (e.g. feeling sick, has an injury, has too much work to do) or talking about hating their sport;
- wants to be driven to training or matches instead of walking;
- regularly the last one picked for team or group activities;
- alienated from social or shared activities;
- has bruising or other injuries;
- becomes uncharacteristically nervous, worried, shy or withdrawn;
- clothing or personal possessions are missing or are damaged;
- repeatedly 'loses' money or possessions;
- suddenly prone to lashing out at people either physically or verbally.

## **Managing bullying**

Bullying is more likely to occur in environments that are highly competitive and promote a 'win at all cost' mentality. By emphasising other aspects of sport such as enjoyment, team work, sportsmanship and skill development, especially at the junior level, sporting organisations may be able to prevent bullying behaviours.

Sporting organisations should promote their organisation as one that will not allow or tolerate bullying and develop Codes of Conduct and a policy that addresses bullying behaviours, such as a Member Protection Policy. A Member Protection Policy addresses a range of inappropriate behaviours including discrimination, harassment and abuse and provides a complaints process for dealing with incidents. The policy can also provide a complaints handling process so sports can deal with incidents of bullying in a practical manner that is consistent with other inappropriate behaviour.

There are several things that coaches, parents and administrators can do to prevent bullying occurring within their sport and assist both the victim/victims and the bully/bullies.

## **Action to help the victim/victims**

- Take all signs of bullying seriously. Show interest and sympathy with every allegation of bullying and provide support.
- Ensure the victim/s are safe.
- Some forms of bullying constitute assault, harassment or discrimination under federal and state legislation and are therefore illegal. Seek advice from your state department of sport and recreation or human rights or equal opportunity commission if you suspect the behaviour breaches legislation.

- Encourage members to speak out and tell someone – a parent, coach, manager or senior club member– if they are being bullied or if they witness bullying.
- Reassure the victim/s that you will help them. Also advise them that to help them you may need to tell others about the problem (i.e. do not say you will not tell anyone).
- Speak with the bully(ies) and victim/s separately. If children are involved also speak to their parents. Keep records of what was said (i.e. what happened, who was involved, when the incidents occurred, how the matter was handled).
- A Member Protection Information Officer may be able to assist the victim and provide information as to what they can do about the problem.
- Telling the victim/s to ‘ignore’ the bully rarely works. Experts agree that a passive or distressed reaction can encourage the bully(ies) because it is the reaction they are looking for.
- After a period of time, follow-up with the victim/s (and parents if appropriate) to find out if the bullying has stopped.

### **Action towards the bully/bullies**

- Talk with the bullies (but not in the presence of the victim/victims). Explain the situation and try to get the bully/bullies to understand the consequences of their behaviour. If children are involved also speak to their parents. Keep records of what was said (i.e. what happened, who was involved, when the incidents occurred, how the matter was handled).
- The bully may want to apologise to the victim/victims for their behaviour.
- If appropriate, insist on the return of borrowed items and that the bully/bullies compensate the victim.
- If necessary impose sanctions.
- Encourage and support the bully/bullies to change their behaviour.
- Monitor the behaviour of the bully/bullies over a period of time.

### **What can I do if I am being bullied?**

While it may not seem like it, you do have options. There is always something you can do.

What you do will depend on many factors, including the type of bullying that occurred, the support available to you and what approach you want to take to manage the bullying.

Below are suggestions from people that have been bullied and experts in the field. Please note that bullying takes many forms and different approaches need to be considered. What works for one person in a particular situation may not work for another person. Think about the suggestions below and which are most suitable for your particular circumstances.

- Speak out and tell someone – a parent, coach, manager or senior club member – if you are being bullied. Explain to them what is happening and that you want the bullying to stop. Most sporting organisations prohibit bullying and should do something to stop bullying occurring.
- If possible, avoid the bully and being alone with the bully.
- Do not travel to and from training and games alone.

- In some situations ignoring the bully can work, for example if it is a one-off incident and is non-threatening verbal abuse. Remember, however, that ignoring the bully will not always work. Some types of bullying (e.g. physical and psychological) should not be ignored.
- Be aware of how you react when bullied and if necessary modify your reaction. Experts agree that a passive or distressed reaction can encourage the bully(ies) because it is the reaction they are looking for. Try reacting in a calm, assertive manner.
- Consider confronting the bully(ies) and standing up to them. You could say, “What did I do to you?” But do not react by physically hurting them as you will most likely find yourself in trouble.
- A Member Protection Information Officer (MPIO) may be able to assist you and provide information as to what to do about the problem. MPIOs provide support and information to individuals in the sport that may be experiencing harassment, discrimination or being abused or bullied.
- Research bullying on the web or obtain a book by a respected expert that provides strategies for dealing with bullying