

Use of electronic communication

There is growing concern being expressed about what is and what is not permissible in the area of communication between adults and children and young people in sport. Understandably, with the rapid development of mobile phones, text messaging, e-mail and other forms of electronic communication, these methods of communicating have become a feature of the sporting landscape.

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the current position of the CPSU in relation to this issue and provide guidance to all those involved in working with young people in sport. It also provides guidance for children and young people that we hope will be promoted by sports bodies.

A number of sports have experience of cases where coaches in particular have misused text messaging and other forms of electronic communication, and the bodies concerned have sought advice and information from the CPSU. There is evidence of the use of mobile phones and other electronic communication for grooming or other purposes by coaches and others in positions of trust in relation to children throughout sport. There have also been incidents of young athletes becoming very distressed as a result of bullying by coaches or others who have contacted them without parental knowledge on their mobiles. For this reason we would strongly support the adoption of good practice guidance that acknowledges the potential risks and additional vulnerability of children and young people, and advises against the use of mobile phones and other forms of electronic communication for the purposes outlined below.

Firstly, we would have concerns about the use of mobile phones by coaches during training or at competitions, for the purposes of either making or receiving calls. We would consider this to be both unsafe and inappropriate conduct. Our view is that the primary responsibility of the coach must be the supervision and safety of children and young people that they coach and the provision of a structured, quality coaching experience. Anything which compromises the coach's ability to maintain a safe environment and give their full attention to the supervision and coaching of children should be actively discouraged.

Many facility providers also have clear guidance on restricting the use of mobile phones based on the concerns that have been identified about their potential misuse (for example, as part of a facility photography policy). Coaches using mobile phones may be breaching guidance and undermining the ability of a facility to enforce their restrictions.

There are situations when access to a mobile phone will make a positive contribution to the safety and welfare of children and young people, particularly when an emergency occurs. Therefore we are not proposing any form of blanket ban on the use of mobile phones by coaches.

Contacting children and young people by phone, text or e-mail should never be undertaken without parental knowledge or consent. Ideally contact by coaches would be primarily on a face to face basis. Additional communication relating to events, training and other information should be directed to the child or young person's parents or legal guardian.

It is our view that coaches should not be e-mailing children and young people directly as individuals, but may do so as part of a disclosed list (having received prior permission to disclose in group e-mail) where they are disseminating information in relation to training or competitions. We also encourage the use by clubs of disclosed lists for sending club information via a designated and suitably trained adult (because of their position this person should also have been subject to appropriate selection and vetting processes). Group e-mails should also give individuals the opportunity to have their contact details removed from the list by including a statement such as: "If you wish to be removed from this e-mail list please contact the administrator".

