

LTA Guidelines for those Working with Children in Tennis

In the recent past the LTA, in common with several other National Governing Bodies of Sport, has been concerned with an increase in reported cases of child abuse. As a result a number of initiatives and procedures have been developed which set out and develop the Policy and Code of Practice of the organisation on the issue with respect to different groups of people.

One of these initiatives is to give information and guidelines to all those who work with children in tennis. Many may consider that only tennis coaches need help and advice. However, it is important that tournament organisers, club and county officials, development officers, volunteers and many others who meet children through tennis have clear guide-lines and information to help them and – more importantly, the children whom they meet through tennis. Every candidate on a Coach Education Award course is given specific advice on coaching behaviour and child protection. The LTA Coach Licensing Scheme promotes the highest professional standards and coaches have agreed to a Code of Ethics and understood the importance of the Child Protection advice given to them.

However, all adults who work with children in tennis or who appoint others to do so, should be aware of:

- The Children Act 1989
- The Protection of Children Act 1999
- The Human Rights Act 1998
- The Importance of their own behaviour

The LTA has issued these guidelines in order to:

- Increase awareness of the different forms of abuse, (including bullying) which exist
- Outline the responsibilities which everyone has to protect children
- Outline a code of conduct and good practice for those working with children

The Lawn Tennis Association gives awareness training to all staff to sign documentation acknowledging that they have received training and understand the LTA Child Protection policy and how it applies to their role within the organisation.

In addition, specific information and procedures are given to the counties and the clubs.

The Club Strategy asks all clubs to have a Child Protection policy in place and shortly will require all affiliated clubs to do so.

What Is Child Abuse ?

The Children Act 1989 defines children as those under the age of 18 and is concerned with the protection of children from any form of abuse. Abuse is illegal. In our culture it is unacceptable and many adults find their reactions to knowledge of it is very strong.

Many probably only think of sexual abuse as abuse, but in fact there are four recognised forms of child abuse – **physical, emotional, neglect and sexual**.

Physical abuse has occurred when the child suffers some form of physical injury which is not the result of an accident. An example of this could be recurrent bruising and on parts of the body where accidental injury would be unlikely. The injury could be bone breaks, burns or scalds. It may be difficult for the child to explain and the injuries may not have been treated. Some signs of physical abuse may be visible, but injuries may be covered by clothing. They may only be noticed, for example, if the child removes clothing during exercise. Conversely, concern may arise from the reluctance of a youngster to remove clothing when warm. In sport, activities which lead to physical injury (possibly during Physical Conditioning programmes) could constitute abuse.

Emotional abuse is the result of a child receiving little affection, but could also arise when the child is continually made to feel inadequate by remarks made by parents or other adults. It may be difficult to recognise unless the child is known over a period of time. Emotional abuse may be characterised by a change in behaviour which may be abrupt or gradual and eventually by an inability to grow and thrive. Speech may be affected and the child may develop nervous behaviour. In tennis the indicators are that the child loses interest in playing or avoids situations such as matches because they fear the verbal abuse which may follow.

Neglect can be indicated by a child failing to attain the development expected for the age. Neglect is long term and so it is important to watch out for both physical and behavioural signs. If a child is badly cared for, they may lack friends because of their appearance and they may arrive late for coaching sessions, with no sign of parental or adult support.

Sexual abuse occurs when a child is involved in sexual behaviour against their will and with adults who are using their relationship with the child for their own sexual preferences. These preferences may be physical interference of a sexual nature – it is important to realise that any sexual interference which involves contact with the child is abuse, if unwanted. However, sexual abuse may take the form of involving the young person in pornographic material such as magazines or videos.

The child will often be threatened not to reveal what is happening. They often feel responsible and ashamed and may find it difficult to relate what has happened to them, because they are embarrassed or worried about the outcome. As a result, in many instances the information is not given until months or years later. The indicators of sexual abuse may be physical in terms of pain and discomfort and/or behavioural. The child may seem very sexually aware for their age or be afraid of a particular adult.

In sport and therefore in tennis, many of the patterns for abuse, particularly sexual abuse, are different from those which occur within the family or an institution. There is increasing evidence that the abuser is often a trusted and influential person in the organisation who abuses that position of trust to work alone with children. It is also known that abusers gravitate to situations where little checking takes place. Many abusers are never brought to justice for a great variety of reasons. Finally, abusers are frequently repeat offenders.

Bullying

Young people can also be bullied—usually, but not always, by another young person. This may be physical, verbal or emotional bullying or a combination of these. The person being bullied may be weaker and possibly younger, but the outcome for them will be a very distressing situation.

The LTA is continually developing Codes of Conduct for those who work with children in tennis so that everyone in the sport is aware of good practice. This will alert others when they notice that things are not as they should be.

The Responsibilities for those working with children in tennis

These responsibilities are twofold.

1. To recognise signs of abuse and to take any necessary action to help the child.

Recognising abuse (or bullying) in a child can be very difficult unless there are some signs of physical or behavioural change. However, the possibility of abuse may be suspected from something which the child says, or by something which another person says. It is important to be aware and vigilant, but not to make assumptions.

Sometimes the child may give an indication that they want to talk and then it is important to follow a number of principles.

The child must feel safe and you must be calm and honest

The child is asking for help and it may have taken a great deal of courage to ask for that help. However, you must make it clear that you will need to contact other people who will be able to give the help which is needed.

You must listen to what the child says and not suggest ideas. Use open questions and record what has been said as soon as possible. It is very important to record facts, not opinions.

It is then vital that you contact, in confidence, someone who can help. This may be a senior colleague, but the LTA also has staff responsible for Child Protection issues. Therefore, in the first instance, you should contact the Child Protection Officer at the LTA or failing that, LTA Human Resources staff.

The telephone numbers of the Child Protection Officer are
T 020 7381 7055 (o) / M 0797 1141376 / T 01935 851219 (h)

It is important to realise that you have confidential information and you should not discuss it with anyone other than someone whom you are sure can help. It is NOT sufficient to do nothing and hope that the problem will 'go away'. Child abusers are frequently repeat offenders and so other children are at risk. If the abuse occurred sometime previously, you should still contact one of the people above since they will know what procedures to follow. It is also possible that the LTA already has information, possibly insufficient, on the same person and the information you are giving will be invaluable.

Any information you give – and the fact that you gave it – will always be confidential.

Social Services (and the Police) have duties under the Children Act and if you are advised to make contact with them, or if that contact is made for you, then specific procedures follow which ensure that the child is protected as necessary.

2. To ensure that behaviour when working with children, cannot be called into question.

As a responsible adult you have a duty to protect children from harm. Since abuse takes a number of forms, exists to different degrees and affects children in different ways, you should be very aware of the impact of your own words and actions on young players. Those who, for example, constantly criticise and rebuke players may be guilty of abuse or at the very least be responsible for the youngster deciding not to play tennis. From an ethical and legal viewpoint you have a duty to ensure that your verbal and non verbal communication with all players, but children in particular, is positive. You have a duty to ensure that you have taken all reasonable care to protect children from harm.

Those who use or impose over demanding and inappropriate training and tournament programmes with young players which result in physical damage, should consider very carefully where the ethical and legal boundaries are. You have a duty to prevent physical injury and so should be very objective whether the physical programmes are appropriate to individual players in terms of their age, ability and physical development.

Any behaviour, words or actions which could be construed by others or the child as sexual in nature should be of very serious concern. It is not acceptable, for example, to swear or indulge in sexual innuendo with children or use physical contact which may be misinterpreted.

The LTA also has a Media Policy to ensure that young children cannot be the victims of abuse through the use of photography or the internet. All club officials, referees and coaches need to know and understand this Policy.

If you have any queries regarding information in these guidelines please contact:

Child Protection Officer
The Lawn Tennis Association
Palliser Road, West Kensington
London W14 9EG

Tel **0207 381 7008**
Mobile **07971 141 024**