

How to prevent bullying in sports and recreation

The people responsible for sports and recreational activities can use these instructions to prevent bullying in group activities. These steps should be revisited regularly, such as at the start of the season, and again if there is any bullying in the group.

1. Revise the rules of the group

It is advisable to set clear behavioural rules together with the group at the start of each season. When going through what kind of behaviour is expected, instructors should also explain what kind of behaviour is unacceptable. It is important to remind the group that bullying will not be tolerated.

Set the behavioural rules for an activity or a group together with the participants. Make sure that the rules prohibit all kinds of bullying. Note that rules can be positive, such as “we will include everyone”, “we will encourage everyone”, “we will treat everyone with respect”. When setting rules, consider how they will be enforced.

- “How can we ask someone to join in?”
- “What kind of encouragement is good?”
- “How can we support one other?”

2. Provide participants with information about bullying

Discuss bullying with the entire group. Talk about what bullying is, explain the impacts of bullying, and remind participants how they can intervene in bullying.

What is bullying?

Bullying can be direct or indirect and take place online or in face-to-face situations. Bullying is harmful conduct that can occur either as a one-time incident or as repeated behaviour.

In bullying, one participant often becomes the victim of the bullying and is unable to defend themselves against the bully. Bullying is strongly associated with an imbalance of power. The bullied person has no way of putting a stop to the bullying. The prevalence of inappropriate behaviour was also reflected in the School Health Promotion Study: 34% of lower secondary school students had experienced discrimination during their leisure time, with a corresponding figure of 16.5% for students in upper secondary education. Twenty per cent of lower secondary school students had experienced insults directed towards their parents, and that number was approximately 17% for upper secondary school students. Around twenty per cent of young people had experienced inappropriate sexual advances.

Bullying that impacts an activity can also take place outside of the activity. Bullying and inappropriate behaviour that takes place in school, online, or otherwise during leisure time affects participants' wellbeing and interpersonal relationships. This can make participation challenging or impossible for some young people, or they may suddenly stop participating in the activity.

Bullying can be

- Verbal: intimidation, threats, insults, continuous teasing
- physical: hitting, kicking, slapping or other physical violence
- social: exclusion, spreading rumours, humiliation
- damage to property: vandalising, breaking or hiding tools and equipment

Bullying also often takes place online and on mobile phones. Examples of bullying that takes place online or on mobile phones include

- sending mocking, threatening or shocking messages
- hacking accounts, stealing or scamming virtual property from other people
- quoting and sharing social media content without permission, editing and sharing other people's pictures Please note that it is also inappropriate to record or photograph someone without their permission.
- pages made specifically to bully someone or sharing links to such websites and their pages
- impersonating someone else using their name or username

Impact on the victims of bullying

Physical impact

- Various somatic symptoms, such as stomach ache, dizziness, fatigue, headache, muscle pain
- Being bullied in childhood is a particularly harmful experience that can affect the victim's health well into adulthood.
- Research has shown that the body responds to social and physical pain in the same way. If a person experiences continuous bullying, their body produces the stress hormone cortisol, which has harmful effects on circulation, digestion, and the immune system.

Emotional impact

- Bullying negatively affects the victim's self-image and self-confidence.
- Bullying causes hopelessness: "Maybe what the bully says and does is true, and I deserve it."
- Short-term impact
 - Anger, depression, distress, panic, withdrawal from normal activities, insomnia, continuous fatigue and an increased need for sleep, suicidal thoughts
- Long-term impact
 - Difficulty trusting others, a desire for revenge, feelings of hatred, low self-esteem, difficulties in relationships, self-destructive thoughts, avoidance of social situations

3. Emphasise participants' methods of intervening in any bullying that they observe

Bystanders play a big role in whether bullying continues or ends. That's why it's important to discuss bullying with the whole group, preferably before any bullying occurs.

Research shows that in up to 60% of cases, bullying stops when group members intervene. It's important to give children and young people concrete examples of what they can do. For each example, explain which adult they can tell about bullying.

You can encourage the young people to participate by discussing appropriate ways of expressing their feelings with them.

Option 1: Confront the bully and tell an adult

Together with the participants, think about what they can say to someone that they see bullying someone else.

- "That's not OK."
- "Do you understand that what you're doing is really hurtful?"
- "It's wrong to treat other people like that."
- "No one should talk to other people like that."
- "Stop. How would you like it if someone treated you like that?"
- "You don't have to be best friends with everyone, but we aren't leaving anyone out."

Option 2: Leave / help the bullying victim to leave, and tell an adult

If directly confronting the bullies feels unsafe, leave. Do not stay and watch or laugh at the bullying.

Tell any other bystanders that you don't accept bullying. Encourage them to leave, too.

- "What you're doing now isn't fair to others and I don't accept your behaviour."

You can also help the bullying victim to leave. Ask the bullying victim if they want to go with you. You can ask other bystanders for their support.

- "Hey, look what they're doing to XX. That's not very nice. Shall we leave and take XX with us?"
- "Hey XX, I want to talk to you. Can you come with me?"

Option 3: Speak with the victim in private and tell an adult

- Offer to speak to an instructor, volunteer, or other adult together with the bullying victim.
- Tell the victim that the bullying isn't their fault and that you think the bullies' actions are wrong.
- Support the victim and invite them along to shared activities and events.

Option 4: Tell a coach or other trusted adult

- It is always the responsibility of an adult to intervene in bullying.
- Encourage young people to tell you if they notice any bullying.
- Explain who they can talk to and who they can tell about bullying.

4. Create an anti-bullying atmosphere

Through their own actions, instructors can create an atmosphere that prevents bullying.

Building trust and showing consideration for participants' feelings

- Rather than control, a relationship built on trust can help instructors to leave a positive impression on children and young people.
- Simple methods to build trust include things like eye contact and active listening. Active listening involves listening to what another person has to say without interrupting. Consideration for young people's opinions and their involvement in activities builds a relationship of trust between the instructor and the participants.
- If a young person begins to withdraw from activities, the instructor should check whether the young person is okay. Here's an example:
 - "I noticed you were upset at today's activities and were quiet. Is there anything you'd like to talk to me about?"
 - "You didn't seem yourself today; are you alright? You can come and talk to me whenever you want."
- It can often be difficult to talk about bullying. If, as an instructor, you feel like something is wrong, it's important to keep asking.

Supporting young people with emotional control

- As an instructor, control your emotions towards young people, other instructors, and adults. You should not speak about anyone in a derogatory, judgemental or stigmatising way.
- It's okay to feel your own emotions and to discuss them. Setting an example is a good way to support other people in controlling their emotions:
 - "It's a shame that XX happened, but we won't let it stop us from trying again!"
- People in instructor roles should help participants to control their emotions, particularly in situations where someone loses their temper.
- Every participant is an individual, and there are differences in how each person handles their emotions. If a young person is quick to lose their temper or cries easily, for example, you can ask their parents/guardians how to best help their child to manage their emotions.
- Experiencing failure in a safe environment supports a young person's development. In an acute situation, the instructor should speak calmly, without disapproval, and without blame. In doing so, you will set a constructive example to participants.
 - "Failure is a natural part of learning, but I understand that it's still upsetting. What would you do differently next time?"
 - "Even though you didn't succeed this time, no harm was done. We can always have another go, or try something different."

- Encourage participants to speak positively about themselves. You can use the examples below to help young people to see their own strengths and to focus on them:
 - “Today went really well! How did you succeed today?”
 - “Today wasn’t the best, but what do you think you did well today?”
- Remember the power of example here. If you continually speak about yourself or other adults in a negative tone, you can create an environment in which it is easier to disparage people than it is to praise them.

Strengthening the group’s sense of cohesion

- Give feedback to young people when they follow the rules, treat each other with respect, and promote the group’s wellbeing. Positive feedback builds a relationship of trust and supports the desired operating models:
 - “You worked together fantastically today! We couldn’t have achieved this result without working together.”
 - “You did really well consoling your friend when they made a mistake. That’s what good team players do.”
 - “You encouraged the others really well today!”
 - “It’s nice that you invited X to spend time with you. That makes newcomers feel welcome.”
- Group instructors always bear a responsibility to young people for involving everyone in the group. Instructors often influence the group and their actions encourage others to promote and strengthen the team spirit.
 - “Could you make it your task to ensure that everyone is equally supported and no one is left out of the group? I think you’d be great at it, and the others will follow your example.”
- Nonverbal demonstrations of friendship, such as high fives and encouraging smiles, can be just as positive as words.

Consider groups that are vulnerable to bullying

LGBTQIA+ young people

LGBTQIA+ young people refers to children and young people who belong to a sexual or gender minority. This includes anyone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, trans, or intersex.

- Explore your own prejudices and understanding of LGBTQIA+ young people. Ensure that you do not judge any participants based on your beliefs.
- A good rule of thumb is to assume that there are people who belong to a sexual or gender minority on your team and in your coaching group.
- Clearly communicate that no discrimination or derogatory comments relating to sexual orientation will be tolerated.
 - “We’ve agreed together in the rules that no one will be discriminated against or attacked. This also applies to sexual orientation. We will not tolerate any kind of discriminatory speech, such as homophobic language.”
- Remember to use gender-sensitive language: “you can ask your family, friends and partners/romantic partners to watch a performance.”
- The responsibility for teaching others about gender diversity and sexual minorities must not fall onto LGBTQIA+ youth. They must be able to participate just like anyone else. Do not, therefore, ask someone in your group or team who belongs to a sexual and gender minority to explain everything you don’t know; find out for yourself. [Read more in Seta ry’s Tilaa moninaisuudelle! \(Space for diversity\) guide \(in Finnish, pdf\).](#)

Participants who are underweight/overweight

- Weight-related concerns should always be discussed confidentially between the instructor and the young person. Young people may have concerns about their weight, exercise or diet, or perhaps you as an instructor have concerns about their wellbeing. Do not comment publicly on anyone's weight loss or gain.
- It is also important for the instructor to carefully consider how to discuss a young person's body or, for example, the need to lose weight privately. Provide accurate information; do not emphasise weight issues. Explain the dangers of being underweight and know the symptoms of eating disorders. [You can read more about eating disorders in athletes \(in Finnish\) on the Syömishäiriökeskus website.](#)
- The instructor's own attitude can be read between the lines in the way they speak. It is important to check your attitude towards weight, and whether you comment negatively on your own weight, for example. Instructors set an example, give permission, and influence their community.
- Body image may be a sensitive subject for a young person. Think about the kind of culture around body image that you usually encounter in discussions. Do the discussions involve the need to conform to certain body ideals? Do the participants comment on each other's bodies or on the bodies of those outside of the activities? How do they approach food and eating? And how do you discuss your own body and relationship with your body around young people? Setting a positive example around food and eating, arranging shared meals, and reducing body image-related pressure are all good principles. Talking with young people about how bodies change can reduce the pressure to be a certain way. You can read more (in Finnish) at [Sopivan kokoinen - Nuortennetti](#)

Participants with disabilities

If someone in your group has a disability

- Ask the participant and, if necessary, their parents or guardians for the best way to take the participant's needs into consideration. Remember that the person themselves is the chief expert in questions relating to their own life. Offer opportunities to participate in activities and to design spaces and premises!
- Read and understand the accessibility guidelines and materials for your activities. Are the premises accessible, or are there shortcomings? Where can participants read more about accessibility; do activity materials account for accessibility? Are there aids available, such as induction loops? Can assistants participate in the activity, or can more instructors and volunteers be requested as necessary? Can the young participants support other participants?
- Pay attention to the culture of discussion and intervene in any situation in which a disability is disparaged or dismissed, or used in a derogatory way.
- You can also ask other people for advice and support. Find out what other associations or bodies in Finland organise similar activities, because they can provide you with valuable advice. You can find sports clubs using the Paralympic Committee's [Löydä oma seura \(Find a club\)](#) service. You can also ask the Paralympic Committee or your municipality's adapted physical activity adviser for guidance. Other organisations include [Frontpage - The Finnish Association of the Deaf](#), [The Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired](#) and [The Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities](#).
- If necessary, look for information about a participant's disability, but focus on the person, not the disability.
- Treat participants in your recreational group equally. Demonstrate your trust in them by giving them the opportunity to be a leader, for example.

Neurodiversity

- Remember that the person themselves is the chief expert in questions relating to their own life. Involve young people in decision-making that applies to them, such as in developing the activities and premises or spaces. Young people should not, however, be responsible for educating instructors or acting as experts on the neurodiversity spectrum in general.
- Ask the participant and, if necessary, their parents or guardians how best to support their participation. This can involve e.g. the use of a calm space or tools (sunglasses, headphones, or visual communication aids, etc.) to accommodate sensory sensitivities.
- Support with social interaction. Can the young people involved in the activities take responsibility for including a new participant? Support from the instructor plays a role in inclusion.
- Note that intense eye contact may feel distressing or unpleasant. Consider whether you need to assume or expect this in social situations. The young person may also find touch, such as shaking hands or hugging, challenging.
- Pay attention to the culture of discussion and intervene in any situation in which diversity is disparaged or dismissed, or if terms like “autistic” and “disabled” are used in a derogatory way.
- Support interaction between participants: primarily, all adults should remember that there are many ways to interact.

- Negative feedback from adults on the child's methods of or attempts at interaction can cause a child on the autism spectrum to form the idea that they are bad or wrong. At the same time, the adult may give other children a negative impression of the child on the autism spectrum. In such situations, the child on the autism spectrum often doesn't know what is expected of them in social interaction, or why. It is good to speak with the child and think about the reason why they should change their behaviour and why their current approach has drawbacks, if it has any.
- If necessary, you can ask for expert advice and support from e.g. [Autism Foundation Finland](#) and the [ADHD Association in Finland](#). There are also [some good tips for interaction in the Autismikirjon lapset ja nuoret guide \(in Finnish\)](#). However, remember to acknowledge the young person, listen to them, and allow them to participate.

Sources:

[ADHD Association in Finland. Tietoa ammattilaisille \(Information for professionals, in Finnish\).](#)

[Autism Foundation Finland. Vuorovaikutus \(Interaction, in Finnish\).](#)

[Autism Foundation Finland. Autismikirjon lapset ja nuoret \(Children and young people on the autism spectrum, in Finnish\).](#)

[The Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities](#)

[The Finnish Association of the Deaf](#)

[The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare. Kiusaaminen \(Bullying, in Finnish\).](#)

[The Mannerheim League for Child Welfare. Nettikiusaaminen \(Cyberbullying, in Finnish\).](#)

[The Finnish Federation of the Visually Impaired](#)

[The Finnish Paralympic Committee. Avoimet ovet info bank \(in Finnish\): Kehittämismalli inklusiiviseen seuratoimintaan \(A development model for inclusive activities, in Finnish\).](#)

[The Play by the rules initiative website.](#)

[The Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare \(THL\). Kouluterveyskysely \(School Health Promotion Study questionnaire\) 2006–2025.](#)

[The U.S. Center for SafeSport. 2016. Preventing Bullying: What Great Coaches Need to Know.](#)

[The U.S. Center for SafeSport. 2024. Bullying prevention handbook for coaches of minor athletes. \(pdf\)](#)

[University of Turku. The Kiva Koulu anti-bullying programme.](#)

[Seta ry. 2019. The Tilaa moninaisuudelle! \(Space for diversity\) guide \(pdf\)](#)

[Väestöliitto, the Family Federation of Finland. 2020. Pisarapuuttuminen kiusaamisen ja häirinnän ennaltaehkäisyyn \(Droplet intervention for preventing bullying and harassment\)](#)