

A young boy is running on a track, wearing a white and blue sports uniform. He has a determined expression and is looking forward. The image is overlaid with a blue gradient. The text "Chapter 1 Principles" is positioned in the upper right area.

Chapter 1
Principles

PRINCIPLES

Children have a lot to gain from sport. Their natural sense of fun and spontaneity can blossom in positive sporting environments. Sport provides an excellent opportunity for children to learn new skills, become more confident and maximise their own unique potential. These benefits will increase through a positive and progressive approach to the involvement of children in sport that places the needs of the child first and winning and competition second. Winning and losing are an important part of sport but they must be kept in a healthy perspective. A child centred approach to children's sport will return many benefits in terms of the health and well being of our future adult population.

The organisation of sport for children should be guided by a set of core values that provide the foundation for all practice:

1.1 IMPORTANCE OF CHILDHOOD

The importance of childhood should be understood and valued by everyone involved in sport. The right to happiness within childhood should be recognised and enhanced at all levels of sport.

1.2 NEEDS OF THE CHILD

All children's sport experiences should be guided by what is best for children. This means that adults should have a basic understanding of the emotional, physical and personal needs of young people. The stages of development and ability of children should guide the types of activity provided within sport.

1.3 INTEGRITY IN RELATIONSHIPS

Adults interacting with children in sport (referred to as Sports Leaders in this Code) are in a position of trust and influence. They should always ensure that children are treated with integrity and respect, and the self-esteem of young people is enhanced. All adult actions in sport should be guided by what is best for the child and carried out in the context of respectful and open relationships. Physical, emotional or sexual abuse and neglect of any kind or threat of such abuse is totally unacceptable within sport, as in society in general.

1.4 FAIR PLAY

All children's sport should be conducted in an atmosphere of fair play. Ireland and the UK have adopted and are committed to the European Code of Sports Ethics which defines fair play as:

much more than playing within the rules. It incorporates the concepts of friendship, respect for others and always playing within the right spirit. Fair play is defined as a way of thinking, not just a way of behaving. It incorporates issues concerned with the elimination of cheating, gamesmanship, doping, violence (both physical and verbal), exploitation, unequal opportunities, excessive commercialisation and corruption.

(European Sports Charter and Code of Ethics. Council of Europe, 1993)

This model of fair play should be incorporated into all sport organisations that have juvenile and child members as participants.

The principles of fair play should always be emphasised, and organisers should give clear guidelines regarding acceptable standards of behaviour. The importance of participation for each child, best effort and enjoyment rather than winning should be stressed.

Children should be encouraged to win in an open and fair way. Behaviour, which constitutes cheating in any form, for example, falling over in football to gain free kicks or penalties, should be discouraged.



1.5 QUALITY ATMOSPHERE AND ETHOS

Children's sport should be conducted in a safe, positive and encouraging atmosphere. Standards of behaviour for leaders and children in sports organisations should be as important as the standards set for sports performance. Standards of excellence should extend to personal conduct.

1.6 COMPETITION

Competition is an essential element of sport and should be encouraged in an age appropriate manner. A child centred ethos will help to ensure that competition and specialisation are kept in their appropriate place. A balanced approach to competition can make a significant contribution to children's development while at the same time providing fun, enjoyment and satisfaction. Through such competition children learn respect for opponents, officials and rules of the sport.

Too often competitive demands are placed on children too early, which results in excessive levels of pressure on them. This is one of a number of factors, which contribute to high levels of dropout from sport. It should always be kept in mind that the welfare of children comes first and competitive standards come second. While under eight is a very different age group to under eighteen the same general principle should apply.

As adults we need to strike a balance between a young person's desire to win and a young person's right to participate, irrespective of ability. Remember that success is not the same as winning and failure is not the same as losing.

1.7 EQUALITY

All children should be valued and treated in an equitable and fair manner regardless of ability, age, gender, religion, social and ethnic background or political persuasion. Children, irrespective of ability or disability should be involved in sports activities in an integrated and inclusive way, whenever possible, thus allowing them to participate to their potential alongside other children. Sports Leaders should be aware of and seek to gain competence in addressing the needs of young people with disabilities or any other additional needs.

1.8 LEGISLATIVE BASIS

While the Code of Ethics is not a legal document it is based on the Child Care Act (IRL) 1991 and the Children (NI) Order 1993, as well as subsequent related legislation, such as Children's Act 2001, Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Act (NI) 2003 and the Protection for Persons Reporting Act (IRL) 1998. Furthermore Ireland is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which acknowledges the right of the child to protection from all harm. Article 31 of the UN Convention on Rights of the Child recognises the "right of the child to engage in play and to have the chance to join in a wide range of activities". In order to promote this charter and in response to consultation with young people the Office of the Minister for Children (IRL) includes in its strategy the objective that "children will have access to play, sport and recreation and cultural activities to enrich their experience of childhood". The Office of the Minister for Children appointed an Ombudsman for Children in 2004, while Northern Ireland appointed the Commissioner for Children and Young People in 2003.

This Code is intended to provide guidelines for those working with young people in sport. It is not a definite legal interpretation of the legislation. While it is not a legal document, failure to comply may have legal implications or consequences.