

# GETTING OUR HEADS TOGETHER



Swim Ireland guidance for well-being in young people

**SWIM  
IRELAND**

*"It is only when the athlete is considered as a  
whole person and their humanness recognised that  
s/he is most likely to thrive and flourish  
within and beyond sport"*

*(Kavanagh, E.J. and Brady, Dr A., 2013)*



## Introduction

Overall, sport is considered to be a positive experience for young people and adults. Involvement in sport can increase self-confidence, self-esteem as well as physical and emotional health and well-being; this benefits young people and adults alike.

Swim Ireland recognises the value sport can have for young people and children. This guidance aims to provide an understanding of how to promote positive mental health and well-being for young people in our sport. We are all well used to promoting good physical health and managing injuries and illness for the benefit of young people to ensure full recovery – the attitude towards managing good mental health should be no different. This document is for all adults involved with young people in our clubs and centres; it is hoped this will encourage a positive attitude towards mental health support and well-being.

Involvement in a sport such as the aquatics helps young people in several ways. As an athlete you learn how to manage your time, balancing the requirement to train, attend school, and be involved with family, friends and other activities. Young people also learn how to deal with successes and failures, understanding that the pathway is not always level. Even in the individual aquatic sports, swimming and diving, an athlete will train with other athletes and will learn to work together as a team, supporting each other as they progress. However some young people have also experienced challenges to their mental health and well-being that can be related to their involvement in sport.



## What do we mean by well-being and mental health?

Everyone has mental health, in the same way that we have physical health. Mental health is our ability to cope with what happens in life, physically, emotionally and socially. For a young person their mental health will affect their involvement and performance in a sport, at any level. We understand the need to be physically well to participate and achieve certain goals, and we need to be mentally well to cope with our sporting outcomes.

### How we define good mental health:

Good mental health and well-being enables you to recognise your capability and to achieve your potential and overall development; it gives you the ability to cope with what happens to you.

Daily life in general affects our well-being, for example if you feel under pressure to complete a project in work or have an exam coming up in school this might have a negative effect; however getting a good grade or praise from someone would have a positive effect on our well-being. Participation in sport can have similar effects as well; therefore for young people involved in sport we need to create an environment that builds their resilience to ensure their participation is a positive experience. Good mental health and well-being is an integral part of the measures in place for the welfare of athletes, this document has specific guidance on how we can help achieve this.

# Supporting the well-being of young people

## The club environment

The environment in a club will have an effect on the well-being of young people taking part in their sport. It is important that:

- The club is a safe and secure part of young people's lives, it is somewhere they will be treated fairly and equally and this environment should be constant
- Young people are consulted and listened to regarding their club, the environment in which they train and compete, and their activities in the club
- The achievements of young people are measured by a range of activities, not competitive success, where all their achievements should be celebrated
- The pool and facilities where young people train and work at their sport are secure and welcoming
- There is a positive attitude towards implementing the codes of conduct; any breach of the code of conduct is dealt with fairly, consistently and clearly

# Supporting the well-being of young people

## People in the club

People working in the club are crucial to creating promoting and recognising the well-being and welfare of all participants. Adult leaders in clubs e.g. committee, coaches, team managers, children's officers etc. have a vital part in creating a positive environment.

People in the club should ensure:

- There is someone young people can talk to in the club; young people often identify with one adult, someone who they trust and know will listen to them. This trusted adult for a young person may well be their coach/teacher in a club environment
- The leaders, especially the CCOs, coaches and teachers, understand the needs of young people to talk and express their views. Often young people just need to voice both their doubts and beliefs without being judged
- Club leaders are open to learning about and promoting good mental health and well-being for everyone
- Everyone in the club supports inclusivity, empowerment and motivation for young people in achieving their potential, at whatever level this may be
- The coaching/teaching programme within the club led by the coach/teacher incorporates working together with their athletes to set achievable goals
- The relationship between young people and any adult in the club, e.g. their coach, CCO, team manager etc. has clear boundaries to allow a young person to enjoy their sport whilst also realising their potential. This can be really important for an athlete and should be supported by other people in their lives outside the sport e.g. parents, school, friends
- Parents respect the programme in the club providing the back up support that is vitally important for young people to be able to participate e.g. being fed, transported, and cheered on whatever the outcome

Just as good mental health is vital for young athletes, the well-being of any adult working with young people and children in the club is also important. Adults can have a huge influence on young people and there will be certain adults who are trusted by a young person more than others. It is important that all adults work together to support not only the young person, but also each other.

## Mental health for young people

Good mental health for young people can be promoted by the adults in their lives by helping young people learn how to cope. In order to provide this support and guidance we must understand what they are facing, both in their everyday lives and particularly within sport.

### How daily life affects young people

Young people are affected by every aspect of their lives so how they cope, their resilience and how they react affects their mental health and overall well-being. Just being involved in education, study, play and social activities has an impact on their well-being. Some specific examples of what impacts on young people's well-being include:

- Achieving a goal is usually a benefit to your mental health; this may be in school, college, friendships, relationships etc.
- Coping with failure, learning to be resilient when an outcome is not expected
- Dealing with the expectations of others, eg. family, friends, coach etc.
- Not understanding their feelings within a relationship and how to cope with rejection
- Worrying about what might happen in the future and what family and friends might think

### How sport involvement affects young people

Participation in sport can create its own stress for young people without being highly structured or involving performance based competition. It is important to match expectations in sport with realistic outcomes. Everyone involved with that young person, i.e. parents, coach and even their friends, need to recognise these outcomes and support the journey to their achievements.

## Being involved in sport has some particular challenges for young people:

- As the level of participation increases and/or an athlete becomes more involved in competitive sport the risk of this involvement affecting their well-being increases. This effect can be positive and negative and will depend on the resilience of the athlete and the support given by other people who the young person regards as important in their sporting environment, i.e. their coach, friends and parent/guardian.
- A young person may well be self-critical of their own performance or achievement and will imagine how this may be viewed by their coach, family and friends. The coach will need to motivate the athlete to match their performance to their agreed expectations.
- A physical injury will delay or alter an athlete's expected achievements; this may mean the young person cannot train with their established group or squad during recovery and they may not be able to return to their former position in a squad. This change in circumstances may also result in the young person not having access to their network of trusted people to seek support. Leaders involved with such a young person need to understand this and make sure there are opportunities for young people to talk.
- The expectation is for athletes to behave according to our codes of conduct especially when representing their team, their club, region, or even their country. As athletes get older they are often regarded as, and expected to be, role models by younger or newer members in the club. This does not come without an impact on the well-being of the older athlete – they require support and guidance to fulfil these expectations. This support is often coach-led as there is also a need to maintain the athlete's motivation to reach their own goals. This support and guidance also needs to come from others who are important to the young person.
- Young people involved in sports can be conscious of their body image and their weight; in aquatic sport there is little opportunity to hide their body or changes to their physique. Despite recognising the benefits of keeping physically fit, any comments or observations by friends or family members and/or their coach to changes in their body can have a negative effect on a young person's mental health.



- Increased involvement in sport can separate young people from certain networks of friends and family, and may interfere with other social groups. Young people may well have separate friendship networks in school/home/other activities and their sport. There may be times a young person is away for a camp or competition that certain friends are not involved with. These separate friendship groups will have an effect on the well-being of the young person and can influence the potential achievements for athletes, especially where a young person feels they need to decide between their friends.
- A lack of recognition of the potential of a young person within a sport, for example by their parent, coach, friendship groups, may affect the well-being of an athlete.

## Barriers to seeking support

Young people are reluctant to seek help or talk about their worries and fears, especially when it is framed as being a 'mental health' issue. Young people also see a certain stigma attached to seeking help – this reluctance comes from their own perceived understanding of mental health and from that of others, i.e. their friends, family and trusted adults. In some instances a young person's reluctance to access help is sustained by previous bad experiences.

Adults should encourage and provide opportunities for young people to talk and to discuss their feelings, worries and fears. Often, just having a trusted adult or friend to talk to is all it needs to give that support. Further help can be sought from the organisations listed on the Signposting Information sheet.

## Recognising the need for support

Young people will not always seek guidance or support if they are feeling low or are struggling with something happening in their life. It can be very useful to understand some signs that might indicate a young person needs help.

There can be a number of reasons why a young person may show these signs, and they are not always as a result of poor mental health. Allowing symptoms to build up without anyone checking-in may lead the young person to feel demotivated and unimportant within their club or team. Poor mental health usually begins in early adolescence; it is only when a young person has sought help later in their life that this has been recognised.

In sport, signs that a young person is having difficulties may be:

- Missing training sessions without explanation
- Lacking in motivation or enthusiasm to reach their goals
- Reluctance to talk about their own training plans
- Overly concerned about their body image: particularly in aquatic sport where young people's body shapes are very evident
- Weight gain/loss: again a particular concern for aquatic sports, especially in high performance athletes
- No inclination to take part in other club activities e.g. social activities, competitions, mentoring younger athletes etc.
- Lack of confidence in their performance
- Expecting to perform or train badly
- Moving clubs or dropping out of the sport without explanation

General signs:

- Changes in behaviour or attitude towards others, especially where behaviour becomes anti-social, (this may not be seen in the club environment – but noticed by their friends)
- Low self-esteem e.g. expecting to fail or feeling not good enough
- Increase in risk-taking activities i.e. taking substances that can affect physical or psychological health

Any of the signs described may occur for a varied number of reasons; it is important to ask the young person about what is happening and about what they feel. Remember to check in with their parent/guardian as well. A young person may simply need to talk with a trusted adult; or may need support or advice about how to sort out an issue that is worrying them. For further help, see the Signposting Information sheet.

## Supporting young people in sport

Leaders working with young people need to understand what factors help young people to cope with issues or problems, both in their daily life and in sport. Things that help are known as protective factors, and include having the support of family and school, a high level of self-esteem and optimism, friendship networks and feelings of being safe. Being involved in sport and the club environment helps improve these protective factors for young people.

### Create the right environment

Clubs should create an environment that actively supports good mental health in the following ways:

- **Induction information for all members, both adults and young people:** This provides an understanding of how the club operates and what everyone can expect on joining or renewing their membership; plus being aware of the opportunities in a club for a young person helps create a positive environment.
- **Monitor drop-outs and incoming movements of athletes:** Where athletes move in to or out of a club this can affect the balance of a team structure or group within the club, often leaving those remaining in the club unsure of what happened or trying to rebalance their own position within the team or squad. The coaching staff play a big part in supporting these readjustments for young people.
- **Communications:** The club should encourage open communications where athletes are encouraged to voice their views and know they will be taken into account; it is important that parents/guardians are given appropriate opportunities to feedback, i.e. club meetings, information nights, meeting coaches etc.
- **Pathways and goals for young people:** The club does not need to be competitive to set goals and pathways, but should provide young people at any level with the motivation to learn new skills and improve the skills they have. Clubs and coaches should encourage a young person to progress, giving confidence and motivation to work towards their goals and to reach their potential.

- **Parent/guardian information:** Parents/guardians play an important role in providing a secure and supportive home environment outside the demands of the sport. This becomes more crucial as a young person begins to focus on competition. It is vital that a parent/guardian manages their own expectations for their child, recognising it is their support that is important. The club also needs the help of parents/guardians for the day to day activities e.g. supervision, admin tasks, competitions etc. A parent/guardian's attitude in being willing help in the club also has a positive effect on their child or children.

## Benefits of being involved in sport

Coaches and teachers can become central in the lives of young people due to the time spent together; athletes also need the expertise and knowledge of the coach or teacher to reach their goals. Any training programme should encourage an athlete to focus on their progress; the style and ethos of the programme can influence and can benefit the mental health and well-being of an athlete.

Some of the benefits of being involved in a positive sports programme include:

- **Ownership and sense of responsibility:** Athletes may be given choices regarding their development within the sport i.e. setting goals. This helps a young person feel in control about what they are doing, how they are achieving their goals and measuring these against the effort they put in. This sense of responsibility will develop as an athlete progresses, and will become more important where an athlete chooses to participate at a competitive level. Even at basic skill levels athletes recognise the practice they put in results in positive outcomes. Where athletes are given the opportunity to be involved in decisions about their training and achievements this gives them a sense of control over their actions.
- **Treated as an individual:** Coaching programmes should recognise an athlete as a unique individual; athletes are often grouped or labelled to conform to conventional standards or easily managed programmes. By recognising the athlete as an individual increases their self-esteem and feeling of self-worth. It is also important to ensure that a young person is not simply defined by their last performance. If this did not meet expectations, this can affect how they perceive their ability to achieve.

- **Sense of belonging:** This belonging comes not only from being involved in their training programme but being part of the club as well. The sense of belonging for a young person offers security and continuity i.e. the familiarity of the routine of training and knowing what to expect by understanding their goals and achievements. This “belonging” can be felt as a physical connection, i.e. being in the same pool, or as a connection to those around them, i.e. training with the same coach/team staff etc. This belonging becomes more beneficial to an athlete’s well-being when being part of their team is also valued by the adults around them. Young people can also feel a sense of loss when they cease to be part of this community, for example when moving squads or clubs.
- **Understanding expectations:** Where expectations and achievements are discussed and explained this can help an athlete make sense of their training; this allows a young person to enjoy the present and the daily journey. This ties up matching expectations with realistic outcomes.

*The Action Plan for Clubs, based on these benefits, provides a guide for clubs to show how they can support the well-being of young people.*

## Summary

This guidance has drawn together how being involved in sport can have a positive effect on the mental health of young people, including how to recognise where young people might need support and help. Much of the guidance is already in place in our clubs as best practice. Clubs and adults working with young people should understand how support and best practice can benefit the mental health of those involved in sport, ensuring that our aquatic disciplines become an integral part of young people’s lives.

## Six Point Action Plan for Clubs

The following six points will help clubs check and put in place practices that will provide the environment and encouragement for young people to become better aware of their mental health.

### 1. Club Toolkit

**The club should have in place documents and information for all members.**

Documents should include:

- Club constitution
- Club handbook
- Induction/membership information
- Codes of conduct
- Coaching programme – showing criteria for squad selection, progression and how young people can progress and develop
- Communication plan – includes how young people can voice their views
- Information for parent/guardian about the club, being involved and how to support their child.

### 2. People in the Club

**All adults involved with young people must be properly trained/qualified for their role and/or position.**

Clubs require certain roles to function – these will be detailed in a club constitution and should include committee, coaching and teaching staff, children's officers, team managers, and others to help with supervisory duties or officiating at club activities/competitions. Certain roles e.g. children's officers and coaching/teaching staff are encouraged to attend specific seminars/workshops in understanding young people's mental health. Other information and up-skilling seminars/workshops give support for ensuring the club provides athlete centred programmes.

### 3. Engaging young people

**The club should provide regular opportunities for young people to feedback and engage with the running of their club.**

Young people should be encouraged and given the opportunities to participate in workshops/seminars that support their involvement in sport, i.e. information on eating well, healthy lifestyle, coping with competition, who they can talk to, codes of conduct etc. It is important that clubs follow up and act on the views of young people

### 4. Moving on

**Movements of young people between squads or teams, in to, and out of the club should be monitored.**

Movements of young people requires the children's officer and the coaching staff to work together to minimise the impact on the remaining young people, whilst ensuring the well-being of those who have moved on.

### 5. Signposting

**Make sure young people know who they can talk to if they need; this encourages the concept of trusted adults who young people can turn to for help.**

A trusted adult may be the children's officer, if they are well known by the young person; however it is most likely to be a coach, friend or parent who can then get support and advice from the children's officer. The club should have access to information about support and advice for young people. This is useful information for parents/guardians to be given as well. Organisations and their contact details are listed separately and can be posted on the club notice board.

### 6. Club ethos

**The club need to adopt a positive attitude to supporting the mental health and well-being of young people as well as seeking help for issues.**

Being involved in the aquatic sports is the first step to being a positive influence and support for young people; the environment and those who work with the young people are just as important.



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