

# Supporting a child who has experienced psychological violence in their hobby – Guidance for parents and guardians

## Has your child told you they have experienced psychological violence in sport?

In the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare's (THL) 'Glossary of Concepts Related to Violence', psychological violence is defined as a form of violence that is manifested as the intentional harming of a person's psychological wellbeing. Psychological violence may involve verbal abuse, humiliation, threats, intimidation, indifference, controlling behaviour, and exclusion. According to a Finnish study (Muhonen & Kokkonen 2023), roughly one in five individuals who experience psychological violence in sport are still left to cope with it alone. The purpose of this guide is to offer practical guidance on supporting a child who has experienced psychological violence.

### 1. Be present and listen

When your child tells you about psychological violence, they are placing their trust in you. You are therefore the right person to support them in this situation. Thank the child for having the courage to speak up.

Give your full attention to the child's concern and take it seriously. Try to create a calm environment, for example by sitting side by side on the sofa or at the child's level. If you cannot give your full attention to your child's concern immediately, show that you have heard them. Where possible, thank the child, reassure them that their concern is important, and let them know you will return to it as soon as you can. Ideally, tell them when you will be able to discuss it.

If you are unable to handle the matter yourself, for example due to limited resources or mental exhaustion, ensure the child is not left alone with their concern. Together, consider which adult your child could safely turn to for support. Contacting this adult together helps ensure the child is not left to manage the situation alone.

It can be helpful to remind yourself that there is no need to rush or worry in this moment. However, if the psychological violence is occurring right now, immediate intervention is required.

## **2. Assess and strengthen your child's sense of safety**

As a parent, the most important thing is to understand how your child is doing now and whether they feel safe. At the same time, try to gain a clear understanding of what your child has experienced: what happened, who was involved, when it happened, whether there was any intervention, and if anyone witnessed the event.

Maintaining normal routines often helps the child feel safe. Together, consider what would make your child feel safe in this situation, and assess whether it is safe for them to attend practice.

## **3. Get support and check in later**

If you or your child need discussion support or help in clarifying the situation, contact the 'You are not alone' service provided by the Family Federation of Finland. If the matter affects your child's well-being or ability to cope, it is also advisable to encourage them to talk about it, for example, with a public health nurse or a school social worker.

After the situation has been addressed, check in after approximately two weeks to see whether things remain calm. Ask your child from time to time how they are experiencing their hobby, how practice has gone, and how they feel when they come home. If the situation continues, do not hesitate to intervene.

## **4. Be present and support your child's safety skills**

It is advisable to discuss with your child what is meant by the right to bodily integrity, how to communicate their own boundaries, and how to respect and defend both their own and others' boundaries. These abilities are often called safety skills. Teaching safety skills at home helps your child learn to identify and set boundaries. As a parent, you also act as a role model for your child, showing that these topics can be discussed at home and that you are supportive and helpful. It is important to say this directly to your child. Take an interest in what your child has already learned and realised about these topics, and explain in an age-appropriate way that recognising and respecting one's boundaries is a lifelong journey. Tips for discussing safety skills and children's rights can be found in our guidance, 'The parent's role in preventing inappropriate behaviour'.

## Need more information?

Please note that this is general guidance. If you feel it does not fully address the situation your child is facing, you can always contact the 'Et ole yksin' service for personalised support. You may also wish to read the following guidance:

- [What to do if your child experiences inappropriate behaviour in sport](#) (pdf)

### Sources:

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Muhonen Jatta, Kokkonen Marja & Stirling Ashley 2024. Athletic identity affects prevalence and disclosure of emotional abuse in Finnish athletes. *Frontiers in sports and active living*, 6, Article 1406949. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2024.1406949>