



Factsheet 19 Handling complaints, conflict & concerns

Some tips

If you are the person in your club who is responsible for dealing with complaints, you will need to be clear about:

- your club's policies and procedures for dealing with complaints
- the parameters of your specific role, for example, do you take complaints, are you expected to investigate or mediate, are you expected to do everything?
- the extent of your authority, for example to whom to you report and to whom do you make recommendations?
- the advice and support that might be available from your governing body, state association, department of sport and recreation, or state/territory anti-discrimination or child protection agency.

Tip 1: Try and sort out problems before they escalate

If possible and if appropriate, it is a good idea to sort out complaints informally, that is, to 'nip the problem in the bud'. This approach is best when the emphasis needs to be on finding a solution rather than trying to find out who was at fault or who should be blamed. For example, explaining the club's selection process and giving feedback to a parent about why their child did not make a team may help avert a bigger issue down the track.

There are times when this approach does not resolve the problem or it emerges that the problem is more serious than first thought, for example, complaints about child abuse or sexual harassment are serious breaches of your club's Member protection policy and codes of conduct. For these complaints a more formal approach is required.

You should let the person complaining know that they can lodge a formal complaint to the club or refer the matter to an outside body such as a governing body, state association, police, or state/territory anti-discrimination or child protection agency.

Tip 2: Be aware of the basic principles of complaint handling

Do:

- treat all matters seriously
- act promptly
- treat people fairly
- stay impartial
- listen carefully
- be confidential
- only speak to others on a 'need to know' basis

- keep those involved in the complaint informed
- keep secure and confidential records

Do not:

- ignore the behaviour and hope it goes away
- leave the person making the complaint in a dangerous situation
- take the complaint if you have a conflict of interest
- involve people unnecessarily in the complaint
- prejudge the situation or take sides
- treat people detrimentally or victimise them because they have made a complaint or are the subject of a complaint

Tip 3: Prepare for meeting with those involved in a complaint

Try to meet with the person making a complaint as soon as possible, preferably with 24 hours.

Try and put yourself in the shoes of those involved in a complaint so that you are prepared for their emotions and less likely to feel defensive. It is helpful to understand that the person making the complaint may be:

- in distress
- angry
- concerned that they will get a reputation as a trouble maker
- afraid of victimisation or retaliation
- uncomfortable about discussing their concerns
- convinced that nothing will change as a result of meeting with you

It's unlikely that a child will come directly to you to make a complaint. However, if one does, keep in mind that children very often feel anxious and embarrassed about sexual abuse and bullying. Be a good listener and take what the child says seriously.

Remember to:

- react calmly
- listen carefully
- tell the child that they have done the right thing by telling you
- tell them they are not to blame
- tell them steps will be taken to protect their safety

The person who is the subject of the complaint may:

- react with shock
- be angry

- threaten to resign or leave the club in protest
- fear that a complaint will impact on their reputation and standing within the club and community
- threaten legal action

Think about:

- what you are going to say and how you are going to say it
- how the issue relates to or contravenes your club's policies and codes of conduct
- how you are going to deal with the denial, anger, distress or threats
- how you will proceed to resolve the issue in the context of the club's procedures

Tip 4: Know what you can and cannot do

When people make a complaint, they have varying expectations about what will and won't happen.

Below are some common situations that clubs might face when dealing with a complaint.

They want help but do not want to name the person:

- If they will not name the person, explain that there is little that you can do.
- Explore their reluctance; they may be afraid of victimisation or other repercussions.
- Check if they would feel more comfortable talking with someone else in the club, such as a Member Protection Information Officer.
- Explain that they can go to an appropriate outside body such as their governing body, state association, department of sport and recreation, or state/territory anti-discrimination or child protection agency at any time.
- Check if they require any other support or assistance.
- If the matter does not appear to be serious, explain that you will ensure that the Member Protection policy and codes of conduct are reinforced.
- If the matter is serious, for example, suspected child abuse, physical or sexual abuse, seek advice from the appropriate authority.
- Monitor and review the situation.

They insist on immediate disciplinary measures:

- Explain that both the person making a complaint and the person being complained about have a right to a fair hearing. This means that each person gets to tell their side of the story and that the club's complaint resolution procedures will be followed.
- Give both parties a copy of the club's complaint resolution procedures.
- Explain to the person making the complaint that they can contact the sport's state association or another outside body such as the department of sport and recreation, or state/territory anti-discrimination or child protection agency at any time if they are not satisfied with the process.
- Sometimes issues may be so serious that the first priority is to ensure the safety of members; this is particularly so if they are children.

- During any investigation you may need to consider moving the person being complained about to another position within the club that does not involve contact with children or young people, or provide extra personnel to support an/or supervise them while undertaking their role.
- The person being complained about also needs to be protected from any victimisation; remember the principle of 'innocent until proven guilty'.