

Safeguarding Children in Leisure Facilities

Dr Vicky Lovett, Swansea University
V.E.Lovett@swansea.ac.uk

Summary of child development ages 8-11years for the purposes of safeguarding children in sport/leisure facilities – Feb 2015.

This document is prepared in relation to LSCBs decision to raise the age of unsupervised children in sport/leisure facilities from 8 to 10 years of age.

In terms of child development, there is no simple answer as to whether children should be left unsupervised at age 10 rather than 8 years of age. I have highlighted what I consider the most robust changes in several areas of development that are important to the discussion.

In brief, we would expect to see changes in this period in the areas of cognition (albeit linear, rather than stage in nature), and moral and social development.

Cognitive Development

Cognition underpins a child's ability to problem solve, inhibit inappropriate behaviours, follow rules and plan and work towards goals. We see general increases in cognitive abilities between 8- 10 years of age, with an increase in metacognition (the ability to know about thinking), and self-concept, attention span, and the ability to inhibit (avoid) distractions. We also see a change in thinking, as a child starts to be able to think abstractly and move away from concrete thinking to solve problems (Piaget, 1962).

Specifically by age 10 we see a number of changes that culminate in

- Better communication with people they don't know. It has been found that 9-10 year olds will adjust their communication/language so they can be understood by an unfamiliar listener (Sonnenschein, 1988).
- Being better able to inhibit their impulsive behaviour and self-regulate their emotions. There is a decrease in impulsivity from age 10.
- A key factor for children under 10 is the continuing development of face recognition abilities; children under 10 years of age are not yet apt at recognising faces and this has implications for safeguarding. If children were to come into contact on an ad hoc basis with strangers they may not necessarily be aware of whether they recognise them (and can be misled into believing they recognise them based on clothing/hats etc., Carey and Diamond, 1977) making them potentially vulnerable.
- Children are able to start to reason by analogy - solving new problems based on past experiences (Steinberg & Rifkin, 1979).
- Memory increases between 8 -10 years of age, with ten year olds being able to use more complex strategies to organize and retrieve information. There is an argument that these increases reduce suggestibility (the ability to be misled). One study by Roebers and Schneider (2000) suggests that 10-years-olds are less susceptible than 8-year-olds to misleading information when it relates to information that wasn't central to the event.

There is no major milestone that can be highlighted as marking a significant change in cognitive development in the 8-10 age range.

Moral Development

In contrast to cognitive development, we see a significant milestone in moral development by the age of 10. Prior to the age of 10 children see rules as being 'put in place' by authority figures (adults, police, teachers, parents etc). These rules are unalterable and should not be broken no matter the situation (Piaget, 1932). Their main fear for breaking these rules relates to the punishment and personal consequences for doing so. This implies that children prior to 10 could be manipulated by fear of punishment, but also by anyone they view as an authority figure (This can be explained by changes in concrete thinking and suggestibility, see above section).

Starting at age 10 children begin to understand that rules are more guidelines that have been socially agreed and that right and wrong is not simply black and white. In fact, at this age they start to understand that rules are in place to help the group, and to stop potential harm happening to others. This is particularly important in a sports environment. From age 10 children are aware that the rules of a game can be changed with mutual consent from the group. They also evaluate whether an action is moral/appropriate based on the intention of the individual and not the consequence or outcome (which happens prior to 10 years of age). Therefore there is a big shift in how we interpret others behaviours and what we believe is right and wrong at 10 years of age. This is a big jump in reasoning and judgement.

N.B. Related to this, UK law states once a child is 10 years of age they can be convicted of a criminal offence, as they are considered to have an awareness of right from wrong.

Social Development

There are several changes that occur around 10 years of age in social development. However, how they relate to a sports setting is not completely clear, though this information may be important for staff to be aware of when dealing with groups of unsupervised children in a sporting facility.

Around 10 years of age children are starting to seek more independence. There is a shift in being influenced by family to looking for peer support. However this also means that 10 year olds experience more peer pressure, making them more vulnerable to threats from others. Those individuals with better self-esteem are better able to resist peer pressure (negative) and make wise decisions. Of note here, children are more likely to copy behaviours (negative and positive) of slightly older, same-sex individuals. This may be something staff should be aware of. Of relevance is the prevalence of bullying at this age, and the idea that children are aware that other children can be a threat. However the research is unclear. Some reports state that bullying decreases between age 7 -12 years, whereas others report increases from age 11-16 years (Gillibrand, Lam & O'Donnell, 2011). The main concern is that children know whom to contact in the facility to report a problem.

Something that may be of relevance to a sporting environment is the understanding of fairness and group dynamics. In early childhood (approx. 8 years old) there is little appreciation that sometimes there is a need to distribute time/resources non-equitably. This can lead to negative social behaviour when this occurs (throwing away resources/anti-social behaviour). However, by middle childhood (approx. age 10) children become aware of the need to distribute resources dependent on need or hard-work (Thomson & Jones, 2005). We also see by age 9 that children become more sensitive to the needs of others, and more aware of the equalities amongst people (Bigelow, 1977).

Physical Development

Because of the age being discussed it is poignant to point out that due to puberty occurring earlier and earlier, it is likely that it will be difficult for staff at leisure facilities to guess a child's age at this time, especially young or teenage girls who now start puberty on average at 10/11 years old (but can be earlier) leading to changes in physical appearance. So many female children might seem older than they are. Boys and girls develop differently at this age, boys often don't experience puberty until 12/13 years of age and therefore can appear younger than they are.

Additional Note for discussion:

The above information gives the average ages that children experience these milestones or changes. When assessing whether an individual child could be left unsupervised it is still important to look at whether the individual child has reached these milestones. The above is based on the average population. Non-typically developing children, such as those with special needs would not be expected to reach these milestones/changes at the same age as typically developing children.

With all this in mind, for children to be considered safe entering sports/leisure facilities on their own, it would be good to see that the child:

- Understand fairness, and can assess morality based on intentions rather than consequences/outcome.
- Is able to self-regulate their behaviour and emotions.
- Is aware that other children could pose a threat not just strangers/adults.
- Knows whom to contact if there is a problem, and are able to communicate effectively with strangers.