

*Review*

## **Child Protection in Sport: Reflections on Thirty Years of Science and Activism**

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the responses of state and third sector agencies to the emergence of child abuse in sport since the mid-1980s. As with other social institutions such as the church, health and education, sport has both initiated its own child protection interventions and also responded to wider social and political influences. Sport has exemplified many of the changes identified in the brief for this special issue, such as the widening of definitional focus, increasing geographic scope and broadening of concerns to encompass health and welfare. The child protection agenda in sport was initially driven by sexual abuse scandals and has since embraced a range of additional harms to children, such as physical and psychological abuse, neglect and damaging hazing (initiation) rituals. Whereas in the 1990s, only a few sport organisations acknowledged or addressed child abuse and protection (notably, UK, Canada and Australia), there has since been rapid growth in interest in the issue internationally, with many agencies now taking an active role in prevention work. These agencies adopt different foci related to their overall mission and may be characterised broadly as sport-specific (focussing on abuse prevention in sport), children’s rights organisations (focussing on child protection around sport events) and humanitarian organisations (focussing on child development and protection through sport). This article examines how these differences in organisational focus lead to very different child protection approaches and “solutions”. It critiques the scientific approaches used thus far to inform activism and policy changes and ends by considering future challenges for athlete safeguarding and welfare.

**Keywords:** sport; child abuse and protection; athlete welfare; human rights

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## 1. Introduction

As with other social institutions, such as the church, health and education, sport has both initiated its own child protection interventions and also responded to wider social and political influences. The parameters of the debate about maltreatment in sport were originally narrowly focussed on sexual abuse [1,2]. However, as research enquiry into abuses of athletes has grown [3], the attention of sport managers and policy makers has gradually widened to include other types of non-accidental harm [4]. In addition, the geographic scope of child protection in sport has broadened away from its origins in “developed” nations, such as UK, Canada and Australia, to encompass children’s rights work in emerging nations and sport development contexts [3]. The discursive emphasis on child protection in sport has also shifted over the years, from one concerned with individual perpetrators and victims to a wider interest in athlete health and welfare, human rights and integrity in sport [5]. This article suggests that sport qualifies as a social institution that shares many of the risk and protective features of other social institutions. It then examines in more detail the changes outlined above and considers how these have shaped the reputation of sport as an example of institutional child protection. Next, the article discusses globalisation and the competing interests in child protection of various international stakeholder groups. The article then critiques the scientific approaches used thus far to inform activism and policy changes in this field before concluding with some possible future challenges for child protection in sport.

## 2. Institutional Child Protection: The Place of Sport

Sport is defined here as a social or cultural institution or organisation rather than one confined to bricks and mortar and, thus, falls under the terms of institutional child abuse and protection addressed by such authors as Wolfe *et al.* and Gallagher [6–8]. To that extent, it is similar to other social institutions, such as religion (with its churches or mosques, for example) or education (with schools and colleges) in potentiating abuses of power relations. Additionally, just as organised religion and education have had to implement child protection, sport has also had to come to terms with abuse and abusers in its ranks and with ways of preventing and responding to such problems [9–11].

Studies in a range of countries have demonstrated that sport can provide a context in which abuse and non-accidental harm can take place, whether perpetrated by authority figures, such as coaches, or peer athletes, and at all competitive stages, from college to the elite level [12–14]. Studies have been conducted on sexual abuse and harassment in the USA, Australia, Canada and Denmark [15–19]. Summarising studies from ten European countries, Fasting reported sexual harassment prevalence in sport of 14%–73% and sexual abuse prevalence in sport of 2%–22% [20]. In the first prevalence study on young people’s experiences of organised youth sport within UK, Alexander *et al.* administered retrospective questionnaires to over 6000 young people [21]. Although sport was viewed as positive for many young people, many had also suffered negative encounters. Participants reported experiencing emotional harm (75%), sexual harassment (29%), physical harm (24%), self-harm (10%)

and sexual harm (3%). Despite these findings, there remains a lack of data on the prevalence of abuse in sport. Synthesising this body of research is made complicated because different definitions and conceptualisations of abuse have been utilized in the different studies in terms of whether reports of 'harassment' are also included and whether 'harm' rather than 'abuse' has been adopted. The lack of a standardised definition and associated measure of abuse in sport means that confident conclusions cannot yet be drawn regarding prevalence. Notwithstanding these reservations, it can be concluded that incidents of abuse do happen in sport, and hence, the issue merits consideration. Furthermore, it was reported that a total of 652 reported safeguarding cases, covering referrals for a range of issues from bullying to harassment to abuse, had been managed within organised sport in the UK throughout 2011 [22]. These data reinforce the reality that sport is by no means a problem-free environment.

Notwithstanding its origins in ancient civilisations, modern sport is generally acknowledged to have been codified around the time of the Industrial Revolution [23]. It has served a number of different social purposes, from education (through callisthenics, physical training, then physical education), to health, to leisure, to economic and social productivity. Sport, as it is known today, exists at different levels of intensity, from the elite/international or Olympic standard down to recreational and leisure involvement. Such is the cultural power of sport now that major international sport agencies have become a focus for social policy attention. Contrary to the adage that 'sport and politics should not mix', prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s, sport has become a central but contested element of the political portfolio of both the 'developed' and 'developing' nations [24–26]. In the UK, for example, sport is not a statutory service, so it does not command the same attention in debates about service delivery and budgeting as do education, health, and so on. However, it has become highly valued culturally, especially since the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games. Borrowing from Townsend's notion of the Fifth Social Service (social work), it has even been suggested that sport might now be regarded as the Sixth Social Service [27,28].

Along with the commercial and cultural growth of organised sport have come demands for sport to adopt the same standards of equity and diversity expected of other major social institutions, such as education and health [24]. Notwithstanding struggles and reversals, race, gender and sexuality, disability and other social inclusion themes have gradually become mainstreamed within most sport organisations [29–32]. Child protection and safeguarding are arguably the latest of these themes that are beginning to make their mark on both policy and practice in sport [33].

### **3. Changes in the Child Protection Agenda since the 1980s**

The institution of sport was, at one time, a cultural and political island, defined as separate and free from the rest of society, with a kind of Cinderella status [34]. The historic institutional blindness of sport to child abuses led to an almost complete absence of prevention measures. By the 1980s, there were many reported cases of sexual, physical and emotional abuse in sport, but very few were publicised and virtually no studies had been conducted [2]. At the start of the 1990s, some scientific studies were beginning to emerge in the research literature, and a few pioneers began to develop child protection policies and training programmes and interventions [35–37].

Child abuse and exploitation in sport gradually emerged as a theme of interest in the centres of sporting power, and this led to changes, such as policy discussions and public statements by

politicians [38–40]. By the new millennium, some progress had been made in persuading the power brokers in sport that something should be done about child protection, and the 2000s saw major growth in science, activism and prevention policy development. In 2000, the Bratislava Conference of Ministers of Sport described the issue as “... a new and sensitive subject” that had “... long been hidden under the table”, and a delegate commented at a 2001 CDDS conference of 26 European countries “I feel sorry for you English ... We don’t have this problem in Belarus”. By 2012, however, the European Commission had funded a collaborative review of research and policy initiatives covering: Belgium, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, Spain and UK [41].

Although initially driven by sexual abuse scandals, the child protection ‘movement’ in sport has since embraced a range of additional harms to children, such as physical and psychological abuse, neglect and damaging hazing (initiation) rituals. The definitional focus of the child protection movement has thus widened considerably in concert with the growing evidence base for these harms [42]. At the same time, the geographic scope of the issues has broadened to encompass the Global South, the Far East and other corners of the sporting landscape [43,44].

Parton argues that approaches to child protection in the UK have shifted with ideological and political trends over the past forty years or so [45]. Over this time, government guidance has grown in detail and in prescriptiveness and the focus of concern has widened, from baby battering, to non-accidental injury, to child abuse, to the safeguarding and promotion of child welfare [45]. Each shift in approach has been related to the political ideology and priorities of the party in power. In 2001, Brackenridge outlined eight different potential frameworks for policy on sexual exploitation in sport (Table 1) ([2], p. 191).

**Table 1.** Frameworks for policy on sexual exploitation in sport.

<b>Policy approach</b>	<b>Description</b>
Child protection	Narrowly focussed on prevention and recognition of types of child abuse (sexual, physical, emotional and neglect) and on referral
Duty of care	Focussed on children and emphasising legal duties <i>in loco parentis</i>
Child welfare	Focussed on children, but emphasising broader concerns, including social, environmental and educational opportunities, peer group relations and ensuring that the child thrives overall
Anti-harassment	Focussed on athlete protection from sexual harassment and bullying, with particular controls on authority figures
Athlete welfare	Wider concerns for the overall health and well-being of athletes that encompass freedom from exploitation and the development of athlete autonomy
Equity/equal opportunities	Focussed on compliance with national equal opportunities law and employment standards. Often underpins liberal aspirations for qual/fair treatment
Quality assurance	Risk management systems that embed sexual safety within the overall operation of the organisation; regularly monitored and evaluated
Ethics/human rights	Broadly focussed on moral standards and guidelines within the context of international law

At that time, very few countries, UK included, had actually developed prevention policies of any kind in the context of sport. Looking back over the intervening thirteen years, it is possible to trace

how these frameworks, and others, have been adopted or adapted by national and international sport agencies. In the UK, for example, the focus has shifted beyond simply child protection and abuse prevention, largely addressed through mass education and training programmes for coaches, sport scientists and other stakeholders [46], to the imposition of mandatory safeguarding standards for all national sport governing bodies [47], to the inclusion of children's rights and broader conceptions of athlete welfare [5].

#### **4. Child Protection and Globalisation in Sport**

Since organised sport is a feature of the global economy [48], inevitably, child protection in sport is a part of the associated global flows in sport, whether in events management, scientific enquiry or policy development. In the mid-1990s, only a few sport organisations acknowledged or addressed child abuse and protection, notably in UK, Canada and Australia. Since then, the welfare and protection of the child athlete has assumed growing significance, as the scale of international sport has expanded. Child rights have, at last, begun to impinge on sport in ways that were previously unthinkable [42]. Rights advocates, for example, have now found a voice in some of the world's most important sporting organisations, from the International Olympic Committee down to national governing bodies [49,50]. This has happened both as a result of research work within sport (see Section 2 above) and pressure from outside sport (such as, for example, the New Labour government requirements for business modernisation and for compliance with best practice in social inclusion) ([24], pp. 8–46; [51]). Sport has been traditionally resistant to incursions from equity and rights advocates and has had a tense relationship with groups pressing for a better deal for women, blacks and minorities, LGBTQ and disabled athletes. In some parts of the world, it is dangerous for anyone who challenges the status quo in sport [52,53]. At the same time, it is important to recognise that significant advances have been made and that models of good practice are available in some countries that can perhaps stimulate positive social change elsewhere. Such models include policies and programmes for: Member Protection (overseen by the Australian Sports Commission) [54], Safe Sport (overseen by the U.S. Olympic Committee) [55], Respect In Sport (originally introduced via the Red Cross in Canada) [56], athlete safety (promoted by Safe4Athletes, an NGO in the USA) [57] and race and gender equity (overseen by UK Sport) [58].

Article 19 of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child asserts that all children have the right to be protected from violence, calling on States Parties to take all appropriate measures for the protection of children, including while in the care of others. Frequently, sport is used as a mechanism for repairing broken communities after human conflicts or natural disasters. Leading proponents include: Right To Play [59]; the British Council through their Dreams and Teams programme [60]; and International Inspiration, an offshoot of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games legacy [61]. However, sport itself is by no means neutral when it comes to the safety and welfare of the child. In 2007, this issue was recognised as a gap in the provisions of UNICEF who subsequently developed a strategy for enhancing child protective measures in sport [42]. These measures included: strengthening child protection systems around and within sport organisations; increasing awareness and strengthening the protective role of parents, teachers, coaches and other caregivers, as well as the media; developing and implementing standards for the protection and well-being of child athletes; implementing sport for

development and other international programmes and initiatives; and improving data collection and research to develop an evidence base.

Future developments in this field are likely to explore how the different research and policy interests in sport and international development might coalesce. One especially relevant initiative in this regard is the launch of a set of *International Standards for Safeguarding and Protecting Children in Sport* that were first publicised by UNICEF's Child Protection through the Sport Working Group at the 2012 Beyond Sport Summit in London [62]. This work on piloting international safeguarding standards in sport compliments ongoing work being done by UNICEF and others in development and humanitarian environments, attempting to make sport a safer place for children. A project funded by the Child Abuse Programme of Oak Foundation in 2013, for example, focused particularly on the two major sporting events taking place in Brazil: the 2014 FIFA football (soccer) World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympic Games [63]. Oak's rationale was to build collaborations with agencies, such as the IOC and FIFA, in order to advance its aspirations as a major international advocate for child protection. Further, their aim to have child protection mandated as an element of event bidding processes by these two powerful world bodies was intended to provide a strong example for other sport organisations to follow.

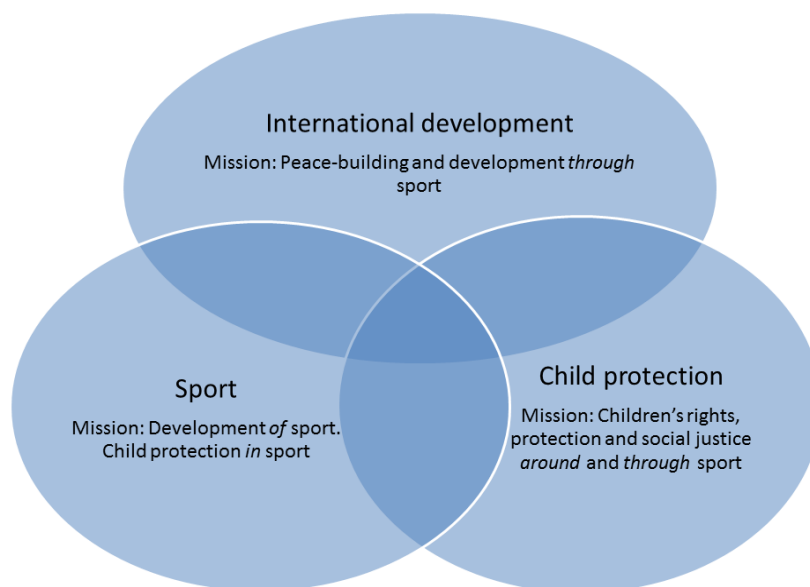
## 5. Mapping Organisational Missions for Athlete Protection and Safeguarding

In their review of factors related to institutional abuse, Wolfe and his colleagues emphasised how important organisational mission was and how this could influence willingness to disclose abuse, commitment to abusive authority figures, and so on [6]. It is therefore important to try to understand how the various missions of those involved in safeguarding children in sport might affect the efficacy of their work and where the boundaries might lie between them. By doing this, gaps, overlaps and contradictions might emerge that can inform future prevention practices.

Each of the major stakeholder groups associated with children and sport has different interests related to their different missions (see Figure 1). Arguably, the sport agencies, including the IOC and the international federations of sport, such as FIFA, have a mission based on performance enhancement and commercial success, *i.e.*, the development of sport [28,64–68]. Within this core business, child protection, where it is recognised, subserves performance objectives.

The child protection agencies, including UNICEF [69] and Save the Children [70], have missions based on children's rights, protection and social justice. Many of these organisations have adopted sport programmes, because they see sport as a useful vehicle for achieving these objectives. They are entirely focussed on the child and his or her welfare and, thus, not interested in sport performance outcomes.

The international development agencies, including government development ministries and the UN peacekeeping operations, have missions based on peace-building and post-disaster development [71,72]. Again, their objectives are usefully met through an array of sport programmes. The term commonly adopted to describe this approach is "sport for development" or S4D. An S4D project is defined as any initiative, project, programme, multi-stakeholder initiative, campaign or other activity that uses sport as a tool to reach development or humanitarian objectives [73]. By definition, therefore, the humanitarian objectives of S4D programmes trump the sport development ones.

**Figure 1.** Conceptual map of organisational missions.

Because of these differences in mission, political tensions can arise when any one organisational group attempts to pressure another to deviate from or augment its mission. For example, where a sport federation engages in humanitarian schemes without observing cultural sensitivities it may cut across the values and principles of local agencies and/or humanitarian groups. Equally, if a development body attempts to influence the regulation of sport it may receive short shrift from sport managers who deem this as encroaching on their expertise and concerns.

Potential 'mission tensions' can arise within collaborative S4D programmes, depending on which organisation is the main 'sponsor'. Where the lead agency is from a sport background, then child protection interests may well be absent or minimal. For example, it is possible for football organisations to use S4D programmes as thinly-veiled opportunities to recruit and develop sporting talent in so-called 'football farms' in South Africa [74]. Where the lead agency in an S4D project comes from a development or child protection background, however, such as UNICEF or the NSPCC, it is much more likely that child protection interests will be both recognised and promoted systemically.

Remedies to these tensions include cross-sector partnerships (corporate/government/NGO), inter-agency collaborations and open dialogue and negotiation between the different vested interests. There are encouraging signs that such mechanisms are beginning to help embed child protection and safeguarding in the international sport delivery system. Examples include the interagency steering group responsible for the International Safeguarding Standards project [75] and a multi-disciplinary forum on 'Harnessing the Power of Sport to Address Gender-Based Violence' organised by the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group [76].

## 6. Social Science, Activism and Power Relations

Good science provides the evidence that informs good policy, yet scientific enquiry is also subject to the vagaries of social construction, political pressure and epistemological fashions [77]. Parton notes that 'child welfare only becomes an issue when women's voices are being heard strongly' ([45], p. 14). Similarly, child protection emerged as an area of social scientific enquiry within sport science through

feminist and pro-feminist interests in the early to mid-1980s [78]. At that time, women's sport was struggling to be accepted as a legitimate concern by mainstream feminism, which defined it as a cultural institution made by and for men. Feminists sought to disrupt the gender order of the day, which, to them, logically eschewed sport. Women's sport advocates also struggled for acceptance among the male power elites who controlled almost all positions of authority [79]. Child abuse in sport became used as a mechanism to draw attention to and, eventually, to prompt policy responses by the major sporting bodies. As described elsewhere ([2], Ch. 9) the pattern of official response to child abuse in sport was usually a prolonged period of denial, followed by one or more celebrated cases in the media exposing high profile coach abusers and/or high profile athlete victims, followed by moral panic [80,81], followed by consolidated efforts to develop and implement codes of practice, education and training, registration and vetting and other prevention schemes—what Critcher would describe as 'moral regulation' [82]. In UK, this included the carrot and stick approach of mandating safeguarding standards among the governing bodies of sport as a condition of annual funding.

Many of the earliest research studies of sexual abuse and harassment in sport focussed on the interpersonal dynamics: who did what to whom, when, how and why [83]? Relationships between the coach, athlete and parent were thus the main object of research [17,19,84–86]. This narrow focus on the subject defined sexual abuse as a consequence of interpersonal and relational dynamics, thus situating sport as a kind of surrogate family. This type of research drew extensively on the psychopathology literature, such as that on sex offender profiling and typologies. This particular stream of sport science work had important consequences for activism and prevention which became equally narrowly focussed on interventions to change individual behaviours and led to a proliferation of interventions, such as: policy statements, codes of practice for coaches, parents and officials, coach education workshops, prohibitions on driving, being alone with or even touching young athletes and preoccupation with vetting procedures and criminal record checks. Arguably, this drew attention away from the socio-cultural drivers of sex abuse in sport: capitalist obsession with performance quantification and winning, reinforcement of gender and authority hierarches that privileged the status quo and the global spread of neo-colonialism through major sporting events [23].

A second, slightly wider perspective on child abuse in sport defined sport as a workplace and drew from sexual harassment research in employment settings [87,88]. However, this approach also had limited consequences for prevention. Despite examining organisational culture in sport as a component of an abusive environment it led to protective interventions based on human resource solutions, such as recruitment and induction procedures, education and training. These interventions focussed mainly on "getting the right people in sport" (an individual approach) rather than 'getting sport right' (a systems approach). We would argue that systemic organisational elements, such as an ethical climate and measures to achieve transparency, good governance and accountability in sport, are likely to lead to more sustainable prevention and, ultimately, safer sport for all.

Importantly, we acknowledge that no instance of abuse can be divorced from its socio-cultural context: equally, multi- and inter-disciplinary explanations of abuse and abuse prevention would seem desirable. It is our judgement that sociological approaches to these issues have much to add to the current literature and the policies it informs. To this extent, we welcome recent analyses of swimming coaches' perceptions of surveillance, using Foucault, and male athlete subjection to sexual abuse, using Bourdieu [89,90].



## 7. Conclusions and Future Prospects for Institutional Safeguarding and Athlete Welfare

There is clearly no single solution to the problem of child abuse or to its prevention. Some would argue that effectiveness lies in addressing the behavioural parameters of abuse through education, training and support or advocacy to strengthen personal awareness or resistance [91]. Whilst such approaches may be necessary, however, they are not sufficient. No social institution, sport included, can afford to ignore the wider social conditions within which such problems arise.

When challenging apartheid in South Africa, Bishop Desmond Tutu and the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee (SANROC) famously declared “There can be no non-racial sport in a racist society” [92]. In a similar intersectional vein, there can be no safe sport in an unsafe society: expecting sport to be held to a higher standard than the political, social and cultural environment in which it operates is a forlorn hope. As Parton argues, child welfare and protection in any given country is closely related to the overall welfare regime and political and policy context of that country [45]. For this reason, sport administrators need to work closely with specialists in ethics, human rights, public health and child welfare if safety for young athletes is ever to be achieved and maintained [93–96].

Social scientists and activists need to work together to generate and disseminate the knowledge base that underpins safeguarding and athlete welfare in sport. That knowledge base is arguably very thin when compared with the scientific evidence available on doping, exercise physiology and other psycho-physical aspects of sport. However, without strong science the efforts of child protection advocates are likely to be undermined and challenged by those whose vested interests construct and preserve the status quo.

It is tempting to argue that we might be reaching a kind of tipping point in sport where athlete welfare and personal development are becoming central concerns for sport administrators, coaches and other stakeholders. If so, then our obsession with “humans doing” is at last being matched by concern for “human beings” [97]. Then, there could be an equalisation of authority relations in sport that, in itself, reduces the opportunities for non-accidental harms to athletes. This humanitarian shift in sport may remain elusive unless it can be proven to advance the core mission of sport. If that happens, there might be a realisation that welfare enhances, rather than inhibits, performance success. For now, the dominant discourse in sport is still performance success and, to that extent, and if change is to be achieved, human rights advocates will need to find a performance rationale for their cause.

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### Author Contributions

Brackenridge drafted the article with conceptual and empirical inputs from Rhind. Editing was shared.

### Abbreviations

CDDS: Council of Europe Committee for the Development of Sport;

FIFA: Federation of International Football Associations;

IOC: International Olympic Committee;  
 LBGTQ: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer;  
 NGO: non-governmental organisations;  
 NSPCC: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children;  
 scUK: sports coach U.K.;  
 S4D: sport for development;  
 UN: United Nations;  
 UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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