



Protecting Children and Young People

CHILDREN AND ORGANISED SPORT

Kate Alexander and Anne Stafford

PROTECTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

SERIES EDITORS

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PROTECTING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Children and Organised Sport

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Glossary

In conducting our research, we did not define our language except in cases where the words might be unfamiliar. Therefore, research participants' own understanding of terms such as 'once or twice', 'regularly', or 'most of your childhood', determined the answers they gave. However, there are a few terms used throughout the text that require explanation.

MAIN AND SECOND SPORT

Respondents were asked to give their main sport from a predefined list. They were subsequently asked if they participated in more than one sport and, if they did, were asked to give the sport they considered to be their second sport. They were given guidance to choose the sports they 'would consider to be the most influential in your life, either positively or negatively'.

ORGANISED SPORT

Organised sport was defined in the study as sport that is voluntary, takes place outside school hours and includes an element of training or instruction by an adult. Respondents to the survey were given this definition in the questionnaire. They were given further guidance not to include PE lessons and informally arranged sport such as 'kick-about' with friends. They were asked to include extra-curricular sport at school: for example, playing in the school team or being part of a club, based at school but taking place outside ordinary PE lessons.

TOP SEVEN SPORTS

When considering young people's experience of sport in the following chapters, some analysis will be presented by main and second sport and in most instances this will be limited to the top seven sports reported in the survey. This includes all sports reported by

more than 10% of respondents (swimming, netball, football, dance, hockey and athletics). To these we have added rugby which, although reported by just 8% of participants as a whole, was played by a quarter of boys as either their main or second sport. This made it the second most popular sport among boys, after football.

TYPES OF HARM

In our research, we defined emotional harm, sexual harassment, sexual harm and physical harm through sets of behaviours, shown below. In reporting our results, respondents experiencing any of these types of harm are those who said they had experienced at least one of these behaviours either ‘once or twice’ or ‘regularly’, in either their main or second sport. Within the text, we also make reference to definitions of these types of harm from the literature.

Emotional harm

The set of behaviours defining emotional harm are:

- being embarrassed or humiliated;
- being bullied about something;
- being teased about something;
- being criticised about your looks/weight;
- being criticised about your performance;
- being shouted or sworn at;
- being called names;
- being ignored in a way that made you feel bad;
- being criticised/threatened for not wanting to train/compete;
- having lies or rumours spread about you;
- having your things damaged/stolen to humiliate/threaten you;
- being threatened with being thrown out of the club;
- being threatened with being hit but not actually being hit.

Sexual harassment

The set of behaviours defining sexual harassment are:

- being subject to sexist jokes;
- being whistled or leered at;
- having sexual comments made about your appearance, etc.;
- having your space invaded;
- physical contact that made you uncomfortable;

- being touched in instruction in a way that made you uncomfortable;
- having a massage or rub that made you uncomfortable;
- excessive phone calls at home that made you uncomfortable;
- being sent letters/cards/emails/texts with a sexual content;
- invitations to be alone with someone;
- excessive compliments or criticism about your appearance;
- excessive compliments or criticism about your performance;
- inconsistent treatment (sometimes singled out, sometimes ignored).

Sexual harm

The set of behaviours defining sexual harm are:

- being forced to kiss someone;
- having someone expose themselves to you;
- being touched sexually against your will;
- someone trying to have sex with you against your will;
- being forced to have penetrative sex (oral, vaginal or anal).

Physical harm

The set of behaviours defining physical harm are:

- being forced to train when injured/ exhausted;
- being shoved;
- being shaken;
- being thrown about;
- being knocked down;
- having something thrown at you;
- being forcefully restrained;
- being hit with an open hand;
- being hit with a fist;
- being hit with an implement;
- being choked (grabbed around neck);
- being beaten up.

Introduction

RESEARCHING CHILD ABUSE AND MALTREATMENT

The first major study into the extent of maltreatment in the general population took place in 1999 and gathered information from young adults aged eighteen to twenty-four about their childhood experiences, including their experiences of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect (Cawson *et al.*, 2000). This National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) report was the first and, until the publication of a recently completed new prevalence study, remains the only comprehensive study in the UK of child maltreatment. The prevalence study provided reliable baseline information about the extent and nature of child maltreatment and abuse.

In developing baseline information about the prevalence of types of child maltreatment, the authors of the prevalence study considered the difficulties besetting work of this kind. Definitions of abuse change over time and vary according to culture. Attempting to obtain single figures representing the proportion of the population who have been abused in various ways can mask differences in individual experiences, and this creates difficulties in dealing with overlapping patterns of abuse; and rates of abuse may differ according to whether they are professionally assessed or self-assessed (Cawson *et al.*, 2000).

Against the background of these acknowledged difficulties, the prevalence study (Cawson *et al.*, 2000) found that a quarter of the sample had experienced at least one type of physical abuse. Most physical abuse was perpetrated by parents or carers but 7% was perpetrated by a professional person. Eleven per cent of the sample had experienced sexual abuse by adults known to them but not related to them; this was the largest category of sexual abuse. Four per cent had

been abused by parents or other family members, and 4% by strangers. The area of emotional or psychological abuse was acknowledged to be the most difficult to measure. Six per cent of the sample was assessed as having been emotionally maltreated; more than half had experienced at least one of the behaviours explored.

The NSPCC prevalence study (Cawson *et al.*, 2000) did not specifically ask young people about negative experiences in a sport setting. However, since then there has been a growing research and policy interest in the treatment of children and young people in sport, particularly in the light of high-profile abuse cases within specific sports. For example, the prosecution and conviction of Paul Hickson, the former Olympic swimming coach for the rape and sexual abuse of teenagers in his elite squad, triggered the NSPCC study *In at the Deep End* (Myers and Barret, 2002). It found that there was a 'significant minority of children and young people suffering sexual, emotional and verbal abuse at the hands of those in respected and powerful positions within the sport', and that in the case of child sexual abuse there can be a process of grooming by coaches who manipulate the respect they have developed over a period of years. Although similar work has been conducted looking at the experience of children in specific sports, no research has looked at the experience of children across sports and in sport at all levels, from recreational to elite-level competition.

This book emerged from a three-year study funded by NSPCC, which aimed to address this gap in knowledge about harm to children in sport and, in the context of their experiences as a whole, to investigate the range of maltreatment and negative experiences they might face while participating in organised sport. The study combined a literature review with a survey of young people aged eighteen to twenty-two; then in-depth interviews with a subset of survey respondents. The survey, which achieved more than 6,000 returns, explored young people's experiences of different types of harm in organised sport when they were children. The interviews gathered more detailed information about these experiences and explored their feelings about this.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides a useful framework within and through which to explore how children should be treated in various contexts (including sport) (United Nations, 1989). The Convention sets out the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children. It is binding on all states that ratify it — currently, this means all members of the United Nations with the exception of the United States and Somalia. It is one of seven human rights treaties that constitute the core of international human rights law, and it came into force in 1990. States that ratify it are subject to international scrutiny through the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The importance of the Convention is that it has moved consideration of the way children are treated in societies across the world from one based on welfare or needs to one based on entitlements (David, 2005). Many of the articles set out in the Convention have resonance for the treatment of children participating in sport. In Article 3, the Convention establishes the principle of ‘the best interests of the child’, which is expected to guide all actions related to the child by public and private bodies in states ratifying the Convention. The specific rights contained are wide ranging and include basic rights such as the right to life and development (Article 6); the right to an identity and to have that identity recognised and protected by the state (Articles 7 and 8); and the right to health and health care (Articles 24 and 25). Also included are rights to protection against maltreatment and exploitation such as abuse, neglect and violence (Article 19); economic exploitation (Article 32); illegal drugs (Article 33); sexual exploitation and abuse, and trafficking and abduction (Article 35); rights to education (Articles 28 and 29) and to rest, leisure, play and a cultural life (Article 31); rights to family life (Articles 9, 10, 18 and 21); and rights to freedom of expression (Articles 13 and 14), association (Article 15) and to have their views taken into account (Article 12). All of the rights contained in the Convention apply to all children regardless of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status (Article 2). There is also the recognition within the

Convention of the ‘evolving capacities of the child’ to exercise his or her own rights (Article 5).

The United Kingdom ratified the Convention in 1991, although it registered some reservations. However, the Convention has not been incorporated into UK law, which means that children and young people cannot take a case to court if they believe that their rights under the Convention have been breached. Nevertheless, the Convention should be referred to in court and all other proceedings affecting children and should always inform interpretations and judgements in Human Rights Act cases brought by children.

By 2005, following extensive campaigning by organisations and individuals concerned with children’s welfare and children’s rights, each of the four jurisdictions in the UK had in place a commissioner for children. Their roles and remits differ slightly, but all have a role in promoting the rights enshrined in the Convention and in ensuring children’s views are sought on issues affecting them. An evaluation of the commissioner for Wales in 2008 found that, although awareness of the commissioner’s office among children generally was low, effective work had been done to engage with children and to learn from them.

These developments have contributed to a policy and practice environment in which the experience of children in a range of arenas is increasingly examined through the lens of children’s rights. While not specifically mentioning sport, Article 31 of the Convention confers rights to leisure and play. The Convention also refers to children’s relationships with their states, families and education, all of which may be relevant to their participation in organised sport. Throughout this book, we will return to the framework of children’s rights to evaluate the experience of the young people who took part in our research.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This introduction continues by giving an overview of the participants in our research. In Chapter 1, we discuss the positive and negatives of participating in sport as described by participants in our study. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the types of harm children may face in sport, using existing literature and information from our own study. In Chapter 3, we introduce the notion of the sport

ethic — where pain and injury are accepted as ‘the norms’ in sport. We also describe the process by which young athletes internalise this and adapt to it. We also consider the development of particular sporting cultures at different levels of competition and in different sports. Chapter 4 looks at the role of coaches and other adults as perpetrators of harm, both through coaching practice and by their complicity in harm by peers. Chapter 5 considers the role of team mates and peers as the perpetrators of harm in sport. It also looks at the extent to which children tend to accept maltreatment as normal and are reluctant to see it as harmful; rather they view it as a necessary part of sporting participation, toughening up and growing up. Finally, in Chapter 6, we consider the ways in which those involved in organised sport can ensure that it is a safe, positive and happy experience for children.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The questionnaire survey for our research achieved over 6,000 returns from young people throughout the UK who had been asked to describe their experiences of sport as children — 73% from young women and 27% from young men. While men were under-represented, the absolute number of male respondents was high enough to allow meaningful interpretation and comparison of the findings. Ten per cent of respondents gave their ethnicity as something other than white, broadly in line with the proportion for the population as a whole. Ninety-three per cent gave their sexual orientation as straight. Six per cent of respondents considered themselves to have a disability and 1% participated in disabled sport as children.

By far the most common childhood family structure was a two-parent (or guardian) household (87%). Less than 1% had spent most of their childhood in circumstances other than a one- or two-parent family. Similarly, less than 1% of survey respondents had experienced residential care or foster care at any point in their childhood.

The respondents comprised young people from a slightly higher socio-economic group than the population of young people as a whole. Around one-third of parents had an undergraduate degree or higher — a considerably higher proportion than the 21% reported to the Labour Force Survey of 2008 (Hughes, 2009).

Against this background, Chapter 1 looks at sport participation and uses the testimony of research participants to explore the positives and negatives of taking part in organised sport.

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CHAPTER 1

Positives and negatives of organised sport

Introduction

Sport is often presented in the mainstream literature as universally positive and sometimes as a solution to societal problems, such as obesity and deprivation. In the run-up to the 2012 Olympic Games in London, there has been a focus on the positive aspects of sport participation and the encouragement of children and young people to lead more active lives through sport. However, recent research is beginning to challenge ideological assumptions that sport is wholly positive and beneficial (Coakley, 2007). Over the past twenty-five years, a growing body of work has begun to probe athletes' negative experiences of sport. This has included increasing awareness of physical harm incurred through sport; the excessive pressure and stress that young athletes may experience, particularly at elite level (Coakley, 1992; David, 2005); and the maltreatment of athletes (Stirling, 2009). Competitive youth sport has also been critiqued from a children's rights perspective (David, 2005; Farstad, 2007).

This chapter begins by giving an overview of youth participation in organised sport both from the literature and from our own research. It then considers the positive and negative aspects of taking part in sport. It raises some of the themes we will return to in later chapters and provides a broader context for the discussion of harm in sport that follows.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN ORGANISED SPORT

Sport plays a major part in the lives of many children and young people in the UK. Youth participation in organised sport is correlated with demographic factors, such as age and sex. Participation in extra-curricular physical activity appears to peak around