



SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES AND INSIGHTS



HELLENIC REPUBLIC
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INTRODUCTION

Internationally, the importance of children's participation in leisure activities, including sport, is universally recognised. It is so highly valued that it is enshrined as a fundamental human right in international frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Sport is often viewed as a key avenue for children's physical, social, and emotional development, providing opportunities to build life skills, develop self-confidence, and foster positive relationships with peers and mentors. The benefits are well-documented, from improved physical health to cultivating teamwork and resilience.

However, alongside these advantages, there is a growing awareness that children's experiences in sports are not always positive or benign. While sport is intended to be a safe and nurturing environment, cases of abuse, harm, and maltreatment have surfaced within organised sports contexts. These cases reveal that the very structures meant to support children's development can also expose them to risks, including emotional, physical, and sexual harm. As a result, safeguarding children's rights and well-being in sports has become a critical concern for national and international organisations alike.

To effectively address this issue, it is imperative to understand the existing knowledge in this area. By examining research, best practices, and policy frameworks, we can gain insights into the nature and extent of risks faced by children in sports, identify effective strategies for prevention and intervention, and develop comprehensive policies and procedures to ensure that all children have access to safe and positive sporting experiences.

This comprehensive document provides an in-depth examination of the complex and multifaceted landscape surrounding children's sports rights, shedding light on the harsh realities, persistent challenges, and emerging trends that shape the experiences of children and young people who take part in sports activities.

Through a rigorous literature review, it synthesises the existing body of research on children's sports rights, drawing on a wide range of academic studies, policy reports, and grey literature to provide a nuanced and evidence-based analysis.

The literature review, which spanned multiple disciplines and databases, aimed to identify and critically evaluate the key measures being implemented by sports organisations to safeguard, promote, and integrate children's rights. The review examined the empirical evidence on the effectiveness of various initiatives, including child safeguarding policies, background checks for coaches and staff, and reporting mechanisms for incidents of misconduct. It also explored the theoretical frameworks and conceptual models that underpin our understanding of children's sports rights, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Through a critical analysis of the literature, this document identifies the successes and shortcomings of existing approaches to protecting and promoting children's rights in sports. It highlights the gaps in current knowledge and understanding and identifies areas where further research is needed to inform policy and practice. The document also examines the challenges that sports organisations face in integrating children's rights into their policies and practices, including the need for greater awareness and education among coaches, officials, and parents, the lack of resources and infrastructure in some communities, and the tension between the pursuit of excellence and the protection of children's well-being.

By synthesising the existing literature and identifying the key findings, gaps, and challenges, this document provides a comprehensive and authoritative overview of the current state of knowledge on children's sports rights. It offers a critical reflection on the successes and shortcomings of existing approaches, and provides a roadmap for stakeholders to work together to address the complex challenges facing children's sports rights. Ultimately, the goal of this document is to inform and inspire action, providing a foundation for evidence-based policy and practice that prioritises the safety, well-being, and empowerment of children and young people.

The document's structure is organised into several key sections, beginning with a discussion of the **definition of safeguarding and violence as a universal challenge**. This sets the stage for understanding the broad issues at play. Following this, we examine the **various forms of maltreatment** that children may experience in sports environments. A section on **vulnerabilities in safeguarding** delves into the systemic and contextual weaknesses that hinder effective protection, particularly for **young athletes**, whose unique position in sports organisations can amplify these risks. The issue of **dropout from sport** is then explored, emphasising the factors that push children away from participation.

Subsequent sections focus on the dynamics of safeguarding within **sports events**, the roles of **advising, monitoring, and support** mechanisms, and the **barriers** that persist in implementing effective safeguarding measures. The document also highlights the importance of **encouraging a culture of listening to children**, empowering coaches through **knowledge**, and **building bridges** between different stakeholders. **Committed leadership** emerges as a crucial element in driving positive change, and the need for **ongoing research** and **continuing education for sports practitioners** is underscored as vital for maintaining progress.

Finally, the document concludes with a description of the **methodology** used in the literature review, offering a thorough foundation for the insights and recommendations presented throughout the text.

This document is part of the CRC Sport EU funded project. The project stands at the forefront of a transformative movement within the European sports community. Our mission is clear: to empower sports organisations to uphold the fundamental rights of children participating in sports activities.

Aligned with the European Union's directives and recommendations, CRC Sport embarks on a pioneering journey to protect the integrity, values, and dignity of young and children. Our project is rooted in the belief that sports organisations bear a profound responsibility to shape the future of the new generations.

for further information, please refer to:

[***https://crcsport.isca.org***](https://crcsport.isca.org)

DEFINITION OF SAFEGUARDING

The literature consistently highlights the absence of standardised safeguarding terminology. Most discussions centre on what individuals or groups are being safeguarded from rather than a uniform definition of safeguarding itself.

Some definitions are detailed and specific, while others remain more general. However, there is no clear pattern regarding how different countries or authors define safeguarding, although national legal frameworks and terminologies often influence these definitions.

However, it is important to note that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) provides a comprehensive definition:

“To take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect children from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s), or any other person who has the care of the child.”

This definition outlines both the necessary protective measures and the types of risks from which children should be safeguarded.

Similarly, the Coaching Association of Canada extends this concept by adopting a comprehensive, human rights-based approach to foster a secure, inclusive, and supportive sports environment. As McCrae et al. (2024) note, their definition focuses on:

“creating an environment free from all forms of maltreatment, harassment, and discrimination in sport.”

Regardless of the definition or the approaches adopted, one key concept remains crucial to any effective safeguarding strategy: **the best interest of the child**. This principle, embedded in both national and international child protection frameworks, serves as the foundation upon which safeguarding policies and practices are built.

The concept of the best interest of the child is rooted in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which unequivocally states that "the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration" in all actions concerning children (Article 3). This principle is further reinforced by the CRC's emphasis on the child's right to protection from all forms of violence, exploitation, and abuse (Article 19).

But what does it mean to prioritize the best interest of the child? In essence, it requires a child-centered approach that places the child's needs, rights, and well-being at the forefront of all decision-making processes. This involves considering the child's unique circumstances, experiences, and perspectives, as well as their physical, emotional, and

psychological needs. It demands a nuanced understanding of the child's developmental stage, cultural background, and individual characteristics, and a willingness to adapt safeguarding strategies accordingly.

In the context of sport, the best interest of the child means prioritising the child's safety, well-being, and rights above all other considerations, ensuring that the environments in which children participate are not only conducive to their development but also free from harm and forms of maltreatment.

Safeguarding requires more than just reactive measures; it demands a proactive, child-centred approach that anticipates risks and actively seeks to prevent them. This involves implementing comprehensive policies that address all potential forms of harm—whether physical, emotional, psychological, or sexual—and putting in place systems for monitoring, reporting, and responding to safeguarding concerns. Furthermore, it requires the active involvement of all stakeholders, from coaches and parents to sports organisations and policymakers, to create a culture where children's voices are heard, respected, and acted upon.

The centrality of the best interest of the child in sport also underscores the importance of individualised approaches in safeguarding. No two children are the same, and their vulnerabilities can vary widely depending on factors such as age, gender, disability, sports experiences and socioeconomic background. Therefore, safeguarding strategies must be flexible and adaptable, taking into account the specific needs and circumstances of each child.

This broader approach emphasises the importance of safeguarding across various contexts, including sports, by addressing various risks. In the realm of sports, safeguarding is crucial due to the unique physical, social, and psychological dynamics that can affect individuals. Sports environments, while fostering development, teamwork, and personal growth, can also expose children to risks such as maltreatment, abuse, bullying, and exploitation. Therefore, safeguarding in sports involves creating protective frameworks that not only prevent harm but also promote a positive, inclusive, and supportive atmosphere for young participants.

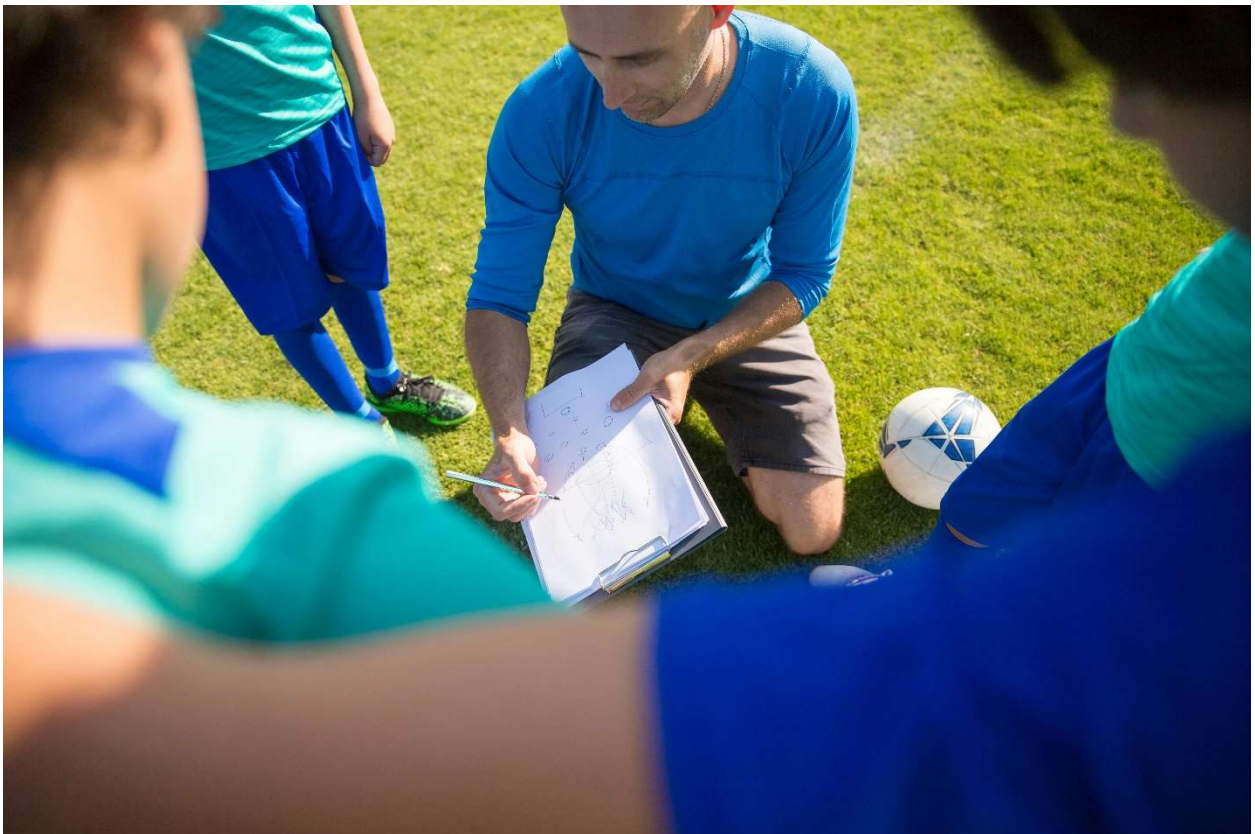
Today, sports organisation groups are learning that they must put strong safety measures in place. They look to important guidelines, tools, policy and strategies to guide their safety efforts. These measures are all about keeping children safe from harm and making sure they have the emotional support they need. This means protecting them from abuse and ensuring their overall well-being is taken care of.

International bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and UNICEF have also played key roles in shaping safeguarding policies in sports. The IOC's initiatives on safeguarding athletes emphasise the importance of education, awareness, and protection from abuse, promoting standards that national and local sports organisations can adopt.

Similarly, UNICEF advocates for a child-centred approach in sports, ensuring that safeguarding measures account for the specific vulnerabilities of young athletes.

In practical terms, safeguarding policies in sports often involve measures such as background checks for coaches, education on recognising and preventing abuse, and clear reporting mechanisms for any incidents of harm. These initiatives are designed to create a safer sporting environment where children can participate in physical activities free from fear of exploitation or mistreatment.

Ultimately, safeguarding in sports is about fostering an environment that nurtures the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of individuals. It ensures that sport remains a positive force in children's lives, supporting their development while protecting them from potential harm and misconducts.



VIOLENCE: A UNIVERSAL CHALLENGE

Protecting kids from violence is essential, and when we talk about violence, we are covering a wide range of harmful behaviours. Understanding the different types of violence and what they entail is crucial for keeping children safe.

Every organisation and adult should aim to shield children from all forms of harm. Depending on where you are in the world, the laws might describe these harmful actions differently. However, common terms used to describe these harmful actions include physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, bullying, and exploitation, among others. It is all about ensuring **a safe environment for children to grow and flourish in.**

There are some contradictions and key differences also. Maltreatment is focused on **deliberate** acts. Others have broadened this to include omission, referring to harmful inaction, commission referring to harmful action and exploitation, referring to actions that are deception, cynical and harmful. It also extends to both direct and indirect actions and includes actions with or without malicious intent. The other focus is on the outcome and whether harm is required or if the potential to cause harm or even intent to cause harm is sufficient to consider an action an infringement of safeguarding.

The available knowledge identifies a shift in research from more traditional areas, which originally focused on sexual abuse and then expanded to physical abuse, neglect and emotional abuse, towards contemporary themes focusing on things like discrimination, child labour, and institutional and virtual maltreatment.

There is also more scrutiny on the fact that sport is often seen as a domain where basic societal norms do not apply. Things that are unacceptable within other contexts are often seen as not only acceptable but also encouraged or required in the sports world.

At the high-performance level, there is a balance between a culture that promotes faster, higher, and stronger with the importance of protecting athletes from harm. However, there is the need to discuss critically how the glorification of toughness and resilience might contribute to normalising harmful practices in sports. Often, behaviours deemed unacceptable in other sectors of life are justified as 'good' coaching practice, which brings positive results and builds resilience.

While the importance of safeguarding children from violence is clear, some points of contention arise in discussions on how best to implement these measures and their implications:

Broad definitions can be problematic: the wide range of behaviours categorised under violence can sometimes make it difficult for organisations and individuals to clearly identify and address specific issues. A more targeted approach might be necessary to effectively tackle and prevent specific types of abuse.

Cultural sensitivities and legal variances: what is considered abuse or neglect can vary significantly across different cultures and legal systems. This diversity can lead to challenges in establishing universally accepted safeguarding standards without infringing on cultural practices or autonomy.

Balancing protection with autonomy: overly stringent safeguarding measures might inadvertently restrict children's freedom and opportunities for growth and learning. Finding the right balance between protecting children and allowing them to experience calculated risks as part of their development is crucial.

Potential for wrongful accusations: when policies and awareness campaigns are aggressively implemented, there's a risk that innocent interactions could be misconstrued as abuse. This could lead to wrongful accusations, causing unnecessary distress to families and potentially diverting resources away from actual cases of violence. Wrongful accusations can also impact future cases.

Resource allocation and effectiveness: implementing wide-ranging safeguarding measures requires significant resources. There's an ongoing debate about whether these resources might be more effectively used if targeted towards addressing the root causes of violence, such as poverty, lack of education, and social inequality.

FORMS OF MALTREATMENT

Maltreatment can manifest in various forms, including psychological, physical, and sexual harm and neglect. These types of abuse have a profound impact on both mental and physical health, potentially leading to long-term consequences. The relationship between maltreatment and overall well-being is well-established, with victims often suffering from anxiety, depression, and other mental health disorders alongside physical health problems. In the context of sports, however, the perception of maltreatment becomes more complex.

In many sports, behaviours that would be considered abusive in other settings, such as schools, are sometimes normalised or even justified by the unique demands of athletic performance. High-pressure environments, intense competition, and the hierarchical nature of coach-athlete relationships create situations where psychological and emotional dominance may be seen as essential for achieving success. The pursuit of excellence in sports often involves pushing athletes to their physical and mental limits, blurring the lines between what is considered acceptable and abusive.

The normalisation of potentially harmful behaviours in sports can make it difficult to recognise maltreatment. Psychological pressure, social control, and emotional dependency are sometimes seen as essential for improving performance. Coaches and trainers may rationalise harsh treatment as a way to toughen athletes or prepare them for competition. Athletes, in turn, may accept or internalise these behaviours, thinking that enduring such treatment is necessary for success.

It is important to question these assumptions and acknowledge that mistreatment, no matter the context, can harm individuals' health and overall well-being. It is crucial for the

sports community to be able to differentiate between appropriate training practices and detrimental behaviours that qualify as abuse. Creating a supportive and respectful environment is essential for the lasting growth of athletes, both as individuals and as competitors.

CRITICAL STAKEHOLDERS TO SAFEGUARDING

Key actors involved in preventing and addressing safeguarding policy violations include victims, potential victims, perpetrators, and stakeholders. It's important to note that people in roles considered protectors can also be perpetrators and vice versa.

Research has identified perpetrators in various positions within sports, including coaches, parents/guardians, athletes, scientific and medical staff, high-performance directors, trainers, administrators, sponsors, referees, strangers, fans, and mentors. While much research focuses on the athlete-coach relationship, prominent cases, such as the US gymnastics scandal, have increased scrutiny of medical teams. Recent research has also highlighted elements of bullying by peers and others within physical spaces, extending to online platforms in the context of general child safeguarding and within school contexts. Furthermore, joint reports from several sports disciplines and Federations have highlighted bullying, harassment, and abuse by 'fans', who are ultimately strangers, within physical stadium spaces and online platforms. Not much has been done concerning such incidents within youth sports, but it is important to acknowledge that some young players have increased online platforms, media attention, and visibility.

Building upon the initial notion that safeguarding is a multifaceted issue within sports and similar domains, it is critical to develop comprehensive strategies that encompass the broad range of actors involved. These strategies should not only focus on prevention but also on creating a culture of accountability and support.

As the right of children to play is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, any organisation providing sports activities for children and young athletes should establish safeguarding measures to prevent interpersonal violence. This requires the involvement of various stakeholders, including governments, national sports governing bodies, organisations, national and international associations, coaches, support staff, parents, caregivers, medical and psychological professionals, educators, and athletes themselves. Athletes should be encouraged to speak out for change, while survivors should be given a safe space to share their experiences. It's important to note that the responsibility to speak up and stop the abuse lies with the perpetrator, bystanders, and those responsible for organising sports, not with the athlete.

SEXUAL ABUSE

Child sexual abuse in sports settings is a critical issue requiring in-depth understanding and attention for several reasons:

1. **Power dynamics:** coaches and sports staff often hold significant power over young athletes, which can sometimes be misused to exploit or harm young athletes. This unequal power dynamic can make it difficult for children to refuse unwanted advances or to speak out against inappropriate behaviour.
2. **Closeness and trust:** the close relationships and bonds that can develop in sports environments between coaches, staff, and athletes might, unfortunately, provide opportunities for abuse to occur under the guise of mentorship or care.
3. **Competitive pressure:** the high-pressure environment of competitive sports can sometimes lead to situations where children might be vulnerable to abuse. The fear of losing their place on a team, not meeting expectations, or being singled out can make children less likely to speak up about abuse.
4. **Lack of awareness and education:** athletes, parents, and even coaches can lack awareness or understanding about what constitutes appropriate vs. inappropriate behaviour in sports settings. This can lead to situations where warning signs are missed or not acted upon swiftly.
5. **Inadequate safeguarding policies:** not all sports organisations have robust safeguarding policies in place, or if they do, these policies may not be stringently followed or enforced. This lack of oversight can put young athletes at risk.

BODY SHAMING AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Body shaming is a significant and often underappreciated issue in sports, especially in high-performance and elite-level disciplines. During the selection process for athletes, where only individuals deemed most physically suited for a particular sport are chosen, the risk of body-related abuse can escalate considerably. This issue becomes particularly pronounced in disciplines where strict weight control, specific body proportions, or height are crucial in determining an athlete's competitiveness, such as gymnastics, ballet, wrestling, or weight-class-based sports like boxing and judo.

The pressure to conform to idealised physical standards exerts a significant toll on individuals, particularly in environments where appearance and physical prowess are highly valued. This drive for a certain body type or athletic capability can lead to unhealthy practices that have far-reaching consequences for both mental and physical health.

Engaging in extreme diets, over-exercising, and use of potentially harmful substances to achieve or maintain a specific weight or shape are common manifestations of this pressure. Negative body image, where individuals view their bodies from a place of dissatisfaction and self-criticism, can pervade one's mental health, leading to diminished self-esteem and, in severe cases, to disorders such as depression and anxiety.

Athletes, especially young, are particularly vulnerable to these pressures. The world of sports often heralds certain body types as the epitome of success and ability, leaving those who do not naturally conform feeling inadequate. This not only results in stigmatisation and potential exclusion within their sporting communities but also pushes many to adopt harmful practices. The consequences of such actions are not only immediate, affecting the athletes' performance and well-being. They can also have long-lasting effects on their health, including the development of chronic conditions and eating disorders.

The psychological distress stemming from these pressures is profound. The constant scrutiny and comparison can erode athletes' confidence and enjoyment of the sport, replacing it with fear of failure or judgment based on physical appearance rather than skill or dedication. This not only affects their mental health but can also detract from their focus and commitment to the sport itself, potentially derailing promising careers.

Moreover, the health risks associated with conforming to these narrow physical expectations are significant. From the immediate risks of nutrition deficiencies, physical injury, and exhaustion to the more insidious development of conditions like osteoporosis, heart issues, and chronic eating disorders, the cost of conformity is high. It's essential for communities, coaches, and organisations within sports to recognise the diversity of healthy bodies and to promote practices that prioritise athletes' well-being over outdated ideals of physical appearance. Encouraging a culture of acceptance, focusing on health, skill, and personal progress, can help mitigate these pressures and foster a more supportive environment for all athletes.

Given the prevalence of these issues, it is essential to foster an environment that prioritises physical and mental well-being over rigid body norms. Coaches, sports organisations, and governing bodies should actively work to prevent body shaming and associated forms of abuse, promoting inclusivity and ensuring that athletes are valued for their skills, dedication, and overall performance rather than just their physical appearance. This approach will not only contribute to the mental and physical health of athletes but also promote diversity in body types across various sports disciplines.

VULNERABILITIES IN SAFEGUARDING

Safeguarding children in sports requires a comprehensive understanding of the various vulnerabilities that exist within the system. These vulnerabilities can be grouped into three

interconnected thematic areas: **organisational, individual, and societal**. Each category plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of children and young people in sports, highlighting the complexity of protecting their rights and well-being.

1. Organisational Vulnerabilities

Organisational vulnerabilities arise from how sports organisations are structured and managed. Poorly defined policies, inadequate training for staff and coaches, and a lack of clear reporting mechanisms all contribute to environments where safeguarding may be neglected. When there is a lack of accountability or governance, children are exposed more to potential harm, and the processes for addressing issues become cloudy. Often, organisations may fail to recognise or prioritise safeguarding, treating it as a secondary concern rather than a core responsibility.

2. Individual Vulnerabilities

Children are inherently vulnerable due to their developing understanding of the world and their limited ability to recognise and respond to harmful behaviours. They may trust adults, including coaches and mentors, who can exploit that trust, making it difficult for children to speak up about negative experiences. Within the child population, certain individuals face heightened vulnerabilities based on factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, religion, or socioeconomic status. These additional layers of vulnerability mean that not all children face the same risks or barriers to protection. Marginalised children, in particular, may be more isolated, less visible to safeguarding systems, or more likely to experience discrimination and exclusion.

3. Societal Vulnerabilities

At a broader level, societal pressures also play a significant role in influencing vulnerabilities. Social norms, stereotypes, and cultural expectations can push individuals to conform, often at the expense of their safety and well-being. Marginalised groups, including children from ethnic minorities or those with disabilities, may feel pressure to adapt to societal standards, which can make them more susceptible to mistreatment or neglect. Furthermore, societal attitudes towards safeguarding often reflect broader cultural values, which can either reinforce protective measures or create environments where abuse and neglect are more likely to be overlooked or justified.

YOUNG ATHLETES IN SPORT

Recent cases and studies underscore the urgent need to implement robust safeguarding measures for children and adolescents participating in sports as athletes. The world of youth sports, while offering tremendous benefits in terms of physical development,

discipline, teamwork, and self-esteem, also exposes young athletes to a wide range of potential abuses that can severely impact their well-being. These abuses often go unnoticed or are normalised within the competitive sports culture, making effective safeguarding protocols crucial.

Abuse in competitive sports can manifest in various forms, each with unique and devastating consequences.

Psychological abuse is one of the most prevalent, often taking the shape of verbal degradation based on gender, body shape, or performance. Coaches, peers, or even parents may impose unrealistic expectations or constantly belittle athletes, leading to long-term emotional and psychological damage.

Undue pressure to succeed at a young age can result in burnout, anxiety, and depression, as young athletes may feel trapped by the demands of achieving success in highly competitive environments.

In more severe cases, sexual abuse has been reported, with perpetrators using their positions of authority to coerce athletes into inappropriate or exploitative situations. This can include sexual demands as a condition for team selection or progression, a deeply traumatic experience that can scar the individual for life.

Physical abuse can also be masked within seemingly acceptable practices, such as harmful initiation rituals (hazing), physically punishing drills, or forced participation in risky activities beyond the athlete's capacity or comfort. These can result in both immediate physical injuries and long-term harm to the athlete's body and self-esteem.

Harmful nutrition and weight loss regimes, especially prevalent in sports that emphasise specific body types (such as gymnastics or wrestling), can lead to eating disorders, malnutrition, and long-term health complications.

Perpetrators of such abuse are frequently found within the athlete's immediate environment. Coaches, trainers, teammates, or even family members may exploit their positions of trust or authority. Coaches, in particular, hold a significant amount of influence over young athletes, as they are often seen as mentors or role models. This power dynamic can make it difficult for athletes to report abusive behaviour, as they fear repercussions, such as loss of playing time, team expulsion, or reputational damage. Moreover, the close-knit nature of sports teams can create a culture of silence, where athletes feel pressured to conform and not challenge abusive practices, further compounding the risks.

In many cases, the sports culture itself can contribute to the perpetuation of abuse. The hyper-competitive environment, combined with an emphasis on winning at all costs, can lead to the normalisation of harmful behaviours. Athletes may be encouraged to "tough it

out" or "prove their worth" by enduring physical or psychological harm, while concerns about well-being are downplayed or dismissed.

To address these issues, safeguarding measures must be multi-layered and comprehensive. These should include clear codes of conduct for coaches, regular training for staff on recognising and preventing abuse, accessible reporting mechanisms for athletes, and strong governance structures to ensure accountability. The involvement of parents, sports organisations, and regulatory bodies is essential to creating an environment where young athletes can pursue their passion for sports safely and free from exploitation.

Ultimately, the goal of safeguarding in sports is not only to prevent harm but also to promote an environment where athletes can thrive—mentally, physically, and emotionally. By recognising the unique vulnerabilities that children and adolescents face in the sports world, we can implement effective protections that ensure their well-being remains the priority, allowing sports to be a positive and empowering force in their lives.

DROPOUT FROM SPORT

Sport dropout is becoming an increasingly urgent issue for sports organisations across Europe. While the extent of the problem may vary between countries, it affects the European sports movement as a whole. One key factor contributing to this dropout trend is the inability of some sports environments to fully cater to the needs, interests, and well-being of children and young people. Many sports practitioners struggle to create an inclusive and supportive context, which leads to disengagement from sports. This can then have negative consequences for overall health and well-being.

Children and young people require sports settings where they feel safe, respected, and valued, not just as athletes/participants but as individuals. When the adult around a child centres the whole identity of the child around their role as an athlete, a child might also only see themselves within this role. This can impact the short and long-term development of the child. When their physical and emotional needs are overlooked, they may lose interest, feel alienated, or even experience harm, causing them to abandon sport altogether.

Addressing this issue requires sports organisations to adopt more child-centred practices prioritising health, well-being, and enjoyment.

One promising solution to reduce sport dropout is implementing a child safeguarding approach. This strategy aligns with the principles of the UNCRC, which emphasises the right of children to participate in activities that promote their development in a safe and nurturing environment. Safeguarding ensures that children's rights are respected, helping to prevent harm and promoting their well-being.

By embedding child safeguarding policies into their structures, sports organisations and sport practitioners can create environments where young people feel protected and supported. This involves training coaches, managers, and other stakeholders to recognise and respond to the unique needs of children and young athletes. By doing so, the risk of negative experiences that lead to dropout can be significantly reduced. The policies must prioritise a preventative approach, not just reactive and punitive measures.

The adoption of child safeguarding measures is not only beneficial for reducing dropout rates but also helps foster a healthier and more sustainable sports culture. When young athletes feel secure and appreciated, they are more likely to stay engaged in sports, developing their skills and enjoying the long-term benefits of physical activity. In turn, this contributes to the overall strength of the European sports movement and encourages lifelong participation in sport.



SPORTS EVENTS

Recently, concerns have escalated regarding the insufficient commitment of mega sports event (MSE) organisers to ensuring children's rights are thoroughly respected, protected, and championed before, during, and after these events occur. This situation underscores the critical need to advocate for event owners and organisers not only to reinforce but also

expand protections within the planning and implementation of their events, ensuring a secure and rights-respecting environment for children.

The concern that has been raised is not merely about the absence of intentionality in safeguarding children's rights but also about the missed opportunities to positively impact young lives and the broader community.

First, it is critical to emphasise that MSEs often command global attention, offering unparalleled platforms for advocacy and change. When organisers place a strong emphasis on respecting, protecting, and promoting child rights, they set a powerful example for millions worldwide. This not only involves preventing harm but also actively contributing to the well-being and development of children.

Second, the substantial economic and infrastructural investments accompanying these events can, and should, consider the needs and rights of children. This includes creating safe spaces for children at event venues, ensuring accessible facilities for all, and integrating child-friendly services and spaces. Moreover, community outreach and engagement programs can be designed to benefit the local children, from promoting education and sports programs to safeguarding measures against exploitation and abuse.

Third, there's an opportunity for MSE organisers to collaborate with child protection organisations, local communities, and governments to establish comprehensive strategies and policies that not only protect children during the event but also leave a lasting positive impact on child welfare standards in the host communities.

Unfortunately, the lack of intentionality and commitment to these principles can lead to negative outcomes, such as the displacement of families, increased vulnerability to child labour and exploitation, and the missed opportunity to promote inclusivity and equality. Therefore, it is not just about strengthening protections but expanding the vision of what MSEs can achieve regarding child rights and welfare. This approach ensures that the legacy of these events is not marred by negligence or exploitation but is instead remembered as a catalyst for positive, long-standing change in communities worldwide.

ADVISING, MONITORING AND SUPPORT

Organisations must significantly enhance their capacity to monitor and uphold children's rights, as doing so is essential to fostering the appropriate development and well-being of young individuals. Effective safeguarding requires more than passive policies; it demands a proactive, systematic approach to ensure that all organisational activities, interactions, and environments are centred on the welfare and protection of children.

To achieve this, implementing a comprehensive monitoring system is critical. This system should not only scrutinise the core operations and procedures within the organisation but also assess how these practices align with child protection standards and human rights frameworks. Such a system would involve continuous evaluation, where every department and activity is reviewed to identify potential risks to children's safety. Monitoring should also be dynamic, incorporating feedback loops that allow organisations to adapt quickly to new risks, emerging issues, or changes in the external environment.

One crucial component of safeguarding is the development of self-assessment mechanisms within organisations. These self-assessments should measure the organisation's capacity to protect children per established codes of conduct and child protection policies. A thorough self-assessment would allow organisations to identify strengths and weaknesses in their existing safeguarding measures. For example, it might highlight gaps in staff training, insufficient reporting mechanisms, or ambiguous protocols for responding to allegations of abuse. By regularly conducting such assessments, organisations can not only ensure compliance but also foster a culture of accountability and vigilance around child protection.

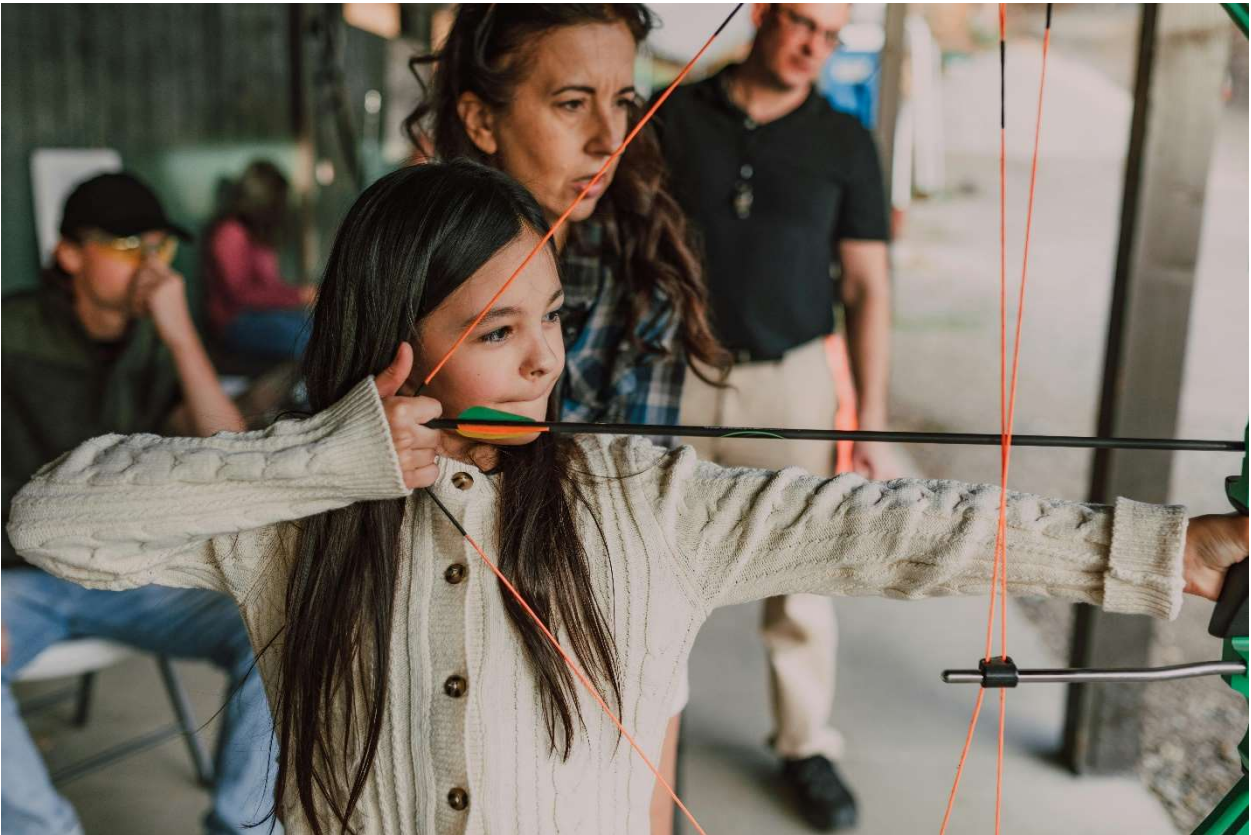
In addition to internal monitoring, there must be external support systems in place at both local and national levels to assist organisations in their safeguarding efforts. Governments and regulatory bodies should provide resources, such as guidelines for best practices, training modules, and tools for risk assessment, to help organisations improve their safeguarding frameworks. This support would also include access to specialised personnel—such as child protection officers and legal advisors—who can assist in developing, implementing, and refining organisational policies on child welfare. Crucially, these systems should be designed to foster collaboration between organisations, enabling them to share knowledge, experiences, and strategies for addressing challenges in safeguarding.

Training and capacity building are key elements in strengthening organisational safeguarding measures. Staff at all levels—from senior management to volunteers—should be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to recognise signs of abuse, understand their responsibilities, and take appropriate action when concerns arise. Training should be regularly updated to reflect the latest research, legal requirements, and best practices in child protection. Furthermore, organisations should adopt a child-centred approach, ensuring that staff are not only trained to protect children but also to empower them by fostering open communication and trust.

Organisations must also ensure that they have a robust reporting and response system to prevent harm to children. This system should allow children, parents, and staff to report concerns or incidents of abuse in a safe and confidential manner. Clear protocols should be in place for how these reports are handled, with swift and effective responses that prioritise the child's well-being. Importantly, this system should include mechanisms for

independent oversight, ensuring that complaints are addressed impartially and that appropriate action is taken when necessary.

Another critical factor is the role of organisational culture in safeguarding. Organisations must work to build a culture of respect for children's rights, where safeguarding is seen as a collective responsibility rather than an administrative requirement. This can be achieved by embedding safeguarding into every aspect of the organisation's operations—from recruitment practices to the design of programs and activities. Regular communication about the importance of child protection, alongside the visible commitment of leadership, can help create an environment where safeguarding is a shared priority.



BARRIERS TOWARDS SAFEGUARDING

The response and prevention of safeguarding infringements should be incorporated into organisational policies. Policy considerations should include responding to concerns, unified policies, operating systems, prevention, code of ethics and conduct, equity, communication, education and training, access to advice and support, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, minimising risks to children, guidelines for behaviours, recruiting, working with partners, access to resources like funding, and influencing. The increase in regulations from governments and international entities mandating the

implementation of safeguarding policies within organisations should lead to substantial enhancements in safeguarding measures.

However, evidence shows that even when policies are in place, several barriers exist to their implementation and impact.

One primary barrier to effective safeguarding is the prevalence of top-down approaches within the sporting environment. The overemphasis on winning and achieving success can create a toxic culture where athletes are pressured to prioritise performance over their well-being. This can lead to a lack of empathy and understanding for athletes' experiences, making it difficult for them to feel comfortable reporting abuse. Furthermore, inadequate employment screening procedures can allow individuals with a history of abuse to enter coaching positions, putting athletes at risk and undermining trust between coaches and athletes. Additionally, the prioritisation of winning over well-being can create a culture where athletes are expected to endure physical and emotional hardships, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Often, not wanting to endure any physical and emotional hardship is seen as a weakness, and children within sports are often taught that weakness is likely to prevent progress within the sport.

Children's lack of voice is another significant barrier to effective safeguarding. Cultural conditioning can teach children to prioritise obedience and respect for authority figures, even when their own safety is at stake. This can make it difficult for children to recognise and report abusive behaviour, as they may fear the consequences of speaking out. Additionally, the fear of negative consequences, such as being ostracised by teammates or coaches, can deter children from coming forward. This fear can be exacerbated by the power dynamics within the sporting environment, where athletes may feel powerless to challenge the authority of coaches or team officials. Moreover, the pressure to conform to certain standards of behaviour and performance can create a culture of silence and secrecy, making it difficult for athletes to seek help and support and fear that their concerns will not be taken seriously.

Reporting cultures play a crucial role in preventing and addressing sexual abuse in sports. However, fear of retaliation and lack of support for survivors can create a hostile environment that discourages athletes from reporting abuse. Survivors may fear that reporting abuse could jeopardise their careers or relationships with teammates and coaches. Additionally, the lack of trust in the systems designed to protect athletes can hinder the reporting process. Athletes may feel that their concerns will not be taken seriously or that they will be blamed for the abuse they have experienced, leading to a sense of hopelessness and despair.

There are additional barriers to effective safeguarding in sports. These include lack of awareness and education, power imbalances, cultural factors, and stigma associated with being a survivor. Education programs can help raise awareness and equip individuals with the knowledge they need to prevent and address abuse. The power dynamics within the

sporting environment can create a culture of fear and intimidation, making it difficult for athletes to report abuse. Cultural norms and values can influence how athletes perceive and respond to abuse.

Additionally, survivors of abuse may face stigma and discrimination, deterring them from coming forward. This stigma can be exacerbated by the pressure to maintain a positive public image, especially in the sports industry. The media also takes responsibility for this. Children might see media representations of previous cases or be exposed to the stigma associated with speaking out.

ENCOURAGE A CULTURE OF LISTENING TO CHILDREN

In line with the principles outlined in the UNCRC, children must be recognised as individuals with the right to express their opinions and thoughts freely. Article 12 of the UNCRC specifically states that children have the right to be heard in all matters affecting them, with their views being given due weight according to their age and maturity. This right is not only a legal obligation but also an essential aspect of fostering children's development, autonomy, and self-esteem.

Therefore, organisations working with children have a responsibility to create a culture that encourages active listening and participation. This involves establishing clear procedures and mechanisms that empower children to express themselves and ensure their voices are meaningfully considered in decision-making processes. Such procedures may include child-friendly consultation methods, accessible communication channels, and the involvement of children in shaping policies or activities that directly impact their lives.

Mindfulness over the methods of communication and the message that different forms of communication convey is important. Awareness of words used, tone of voice, and timing are essential elements of verbal communication. Body language is also important. Children can understand aggressive or violent body language, which will instil fear into the child.

Moreover, creating a culture of listening is crucial for safeguarding and promoting children's well-being. When children feel heard, it strengthens their sense of belonging, reduces feelings of powerlessness, and builds trust in the adults and institutions that support them. In contrast, failing to listen to children can lead to feelings of alienation and frustration and even perpetuate harmful environments where their rights may be overlooked or violated.

Organisations should also take proactive steps to build children's confidence and capacity to express themselves. This includes offering training and support to develop communication skills, encouraging the use of creative expression, and ensuring an inclusive approach that reaches marginalised groups, such as children with disabilities or those from

minority backgrounds. Special attention should be given to overcoming barriers such as language differences, socio-economic factors, and power imbalances between adults and children.

By embedding the right to be heard into organisational culture and practices, institutions not only comply with the UNCRC but also contribute to the holistic development of children, fostering a generation of empowered individuals who can confidently engage with society.

EMPOWERED COACHING THROUGH KNOWLEDGE

To enhance coach development and learning contexts, it is imperative to create environments that not only encourage the discussion of child safeguarding procedures in sport-specific settings with experts but also delve into selecting the appropriate pedagogies based on the athlete's age, gender, and competitive levels. Such discussions should be robust, involving various stakeholders in the sports community to ensure a wholesome approach towards child development and safety in sports.

Furthermore, there is a critical need for stakeholders within these contexts to scrutinise whether misinterpretations or misunderstandings of children's rights and needs are inadvertently leading to the adoption of defensive pedagogies. These approaches, while well-intentioned, might prove unhelpful or even detrimental to the overall development and well-being of children in the sports framework. It is essential to strike a balance that promotes safe, inclusive, and developmentally appropriate practices that benefit the children both on and off the field.

Coaches play a pivotal role in not only safeguarding the well-being of their athletes but also in ensuring their development is not solely measured by competitive success. The aspiration for positive results in sports must never overshadow the paramount importance of supporting the comprehensive growth and well-being of young athletes. This entails a commitment from coaches to foster an environment that nurtures the physical, psychological, and social development of the child, ensuring sports serve as a powerful vehicle for positive life lessons and personal growth.

To further this goal, continuous education and development programs for coaches should incorporate modules on ethical coaching, emotional intelligence, communication skills, and strategies for handling diverse groups of young athletes. By equipping coaches with a broader set of skills and knowledge, we can better guarantee that sports environments are safe, supportive, and enriching for all participants - paving the way for a healthier, more inclusive sporting culture that truly recognises and nurtures the potential in every young athlete.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Sports organisations play a pivotal role in safeguarding children’s rights, as they are key environments where millions of young individuals participate in activities that significantly shape their development. Through interactions with coaches, managers, and other sports practitioners, children and adolescents experience moments that are not only physically engaging but also emotionally meaningful. For many young people, sport represents a vital aspect of their daily life, contributing to their sense of identity, belonging, and personal growth. The high levels of emotional and physical engagement make sports a powerful platform for positive influence.

However, the responsibility to safeguard children within the sports sector is complex and cannot be fulfilled by sports organisations alone. While they can implement foundational policies and procedures, the breadth and depth of safeguarding work require a more comprehensive, collaborative approach. Sports organisations often lack the specialised expertise and resources necessary to address all dimensions of child protection, such as mental health support, education on abuse prevention, and legal frameworks for reporting violations.

To effectively protect children, sports organisations must build partnerships with external entities that specialise in child protection and welfare. These partner organisations may include child advocacy groups, legal advisors, mental health professionals, educational institutions, and governmental agencies dedicated to children’s rights. By creating these bridges, sports organisations can enhance their capacity to implement robust safeguarding frameworks. This collaboration enables sports bodies to access specialised knowledge, provide training for staff, and ensure proper reporting and response mechanisms in cases of abuse, neglect, or exploitation.

This collaborative approach also allows for developing a holistic safeguarding strategy that addresses the unique challenges young athletes face, both on and off the field. Partnering with external experts ensures that sports organisations are equipped not only to respond to incidents but also to prevent them by fostering a culture of awareness, vigilance, and proactive protection.

Safeguarding young athletes is not just the duty of coaches and sports administrators; it requires a collective effort from all sectors that touch a child’s life. By leveraging the expertise of external partners, sports organisations can ensure that their safeguarding policies are comprehensive, up-to-date, and responsive to the evolving needs of young athletes. This collaborative network not only reinforces the protection of children but also enhances trust within the sports community, as parents, athletes, and stakeholders recognise the commitment to safety and well-being.

COMMITTED LEADERSHIP

Children's rights must be a central priority in the policies, strategies, and activities of any sports organisation. Ensuring the safety, well-being, and development of young athletes is not just a legal obligation but a moral imperative that fosters a positive environment for growth. To achieve this, the commitment of the leadership is essential. Leaders set the tone and vision for the entire organisation, and their active dedication to child protection is fundamental to establishing a safe, inclusive, and child-oriented culture.

Leadership commitment involves not only endorsing safeguarding policies but also embedding children's rights into the organisation's core values and operational procedures. This means that safeguarding principles must influence every aspect of the organisation's work, from recruitment and training of staff to the design of programs and events. Leaders must ensure that policies are not just documents on paper but are actively implemented, monitored, and regularly updated to reflect evolving best practices and legal requirements in child protection.

Furthermore, fostering a child-centred organisational culture goes beyond compliance. It requires promoting an ethos where children's voices are valued, and their needs and rights are prioritised at all levels of decision-making. This includes creating channels where children feel empowered to express concerns, share feedback, and participate in shaping their sporting experience. Leaders can support this by instituting regular consultations with young athletes, appointing child safeguarding officers, and ensuring that all staff are trained to recognise and respond to risks.

To solidify this commitment, sports organisations should also establish accountability mechanisms that track the effectiveness of safeguarding measures. This could involve regular audits, independent evaluations, and transparent reporting systems to ensure that any gaps in protection are identified and addressed promptly. Leaders should champion these efforts, reinforcing the message that child protection is non-negotiable and integral to the organisation's mission.

ONGOING RESEARCH

There is undeniable evidence underscoring the urgent need for a more thorough investigation and analysis of child maltreatment in sports. The increasing recognition of this issue has led to a gradual proliferation of research on safeguarding within the sporting context, reflecting growing awareness of the risks that children face. Over recent years, the volume of studies and research activities in this area has expanded significantly, offering valuable insights into the complexities of child protection in sports. However, the body of knowledge remains incomplete, and further research is essential to gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the problem.

Ongoing research is critical for several reasons. Firstly, it helps to uncover the various forms and contexts in which maltreatment occurs, contributing to a more comprehensive picture of how children experience harm within sports settings. Additionally, research plays a pivotal role in shaping effective policies, strategies, and interventions that can enhance the capacity of sports organisations and professionals to safeguard children's rights.

By advancing knowledge in this area, researchers can help inform the development of tailored tools and frameworks that empower sports organisations to create safer environments. This involves not only preventing maltreatment but also responding effectively when incidents occur. Furthermore, evidence-based research supports advocacy efforts, raising awareness among stakeholders—including policymakers, coaches, and parents—about the importance of child protection in sports. Ultimately, a stronger research foundation is crucial for fostering a culture of safety and respect that prioritises the well-being of young athletes.

CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR SPORTS PRACTITIONERS

Continuing education for sports practitioners in the area of child safeguarding is critical for enhancing the capacity of sports organisations to protect children's health and well-being. While technical skills and knowledge related to coaching and athletic development are essential, sports practitioners must also be equipped to act as guardians and custodians of the children in their care. This dual role is becoming increasingly important as awareness of the risks children face in sports environments grows.

There is an urgent need to strengthen the safeguarding knowledge and competencies of sports professionals. This involves training them not only in the physical and technical aspects of sports but also in recognising, preventing, and responding to potential risks of abuse or harm. Sports practitioners are often in a unique position of trust, which means they play a crucial role in ensuring a safe environment for young athletes. By enhancing their capacity to safeguard children, sports organisations can better protect the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of their participants.

In addition to improving the skills of sports practitioners, it is essential to establish effective collaboration with specialists in child safeguarding. These may include child psychologists, social workers, or legal professionals who are trained to address complex issues related to abuse and welfare. Working alongside these experts can provide sports practitioners with the support and guidance they need to handle sensitive situations and ensure that appropriate measures are taken when safeguarding concerns arise.

Continuous education in safeguarding also helps to build a culture of safety within sports organisations and ensures that policies and practices can be updated when required. Sports practitioners can help create environments where children feel safe, supported, and

empowered by regularly updating their knowledge and staying informed about best practices. This ongoing learning is crucial not only for preventing harm but also for fostering positive relationships between coaches, athletes, and their families.

Ultimately, safeguarding is not a one-time effort but a continuous commitment. Investing in the continuing education of sports practitioners will ensure that they are prepared to meet the challenges of safeguarding in an increasingly complex world. This will help sports organisations to uphold their duty of care and protect the rights and well-being of all children involved in sports activities.



Methodology

The document was developed based on a scoping literature review conducted by the CRC Sport Consortium as part of the project activities. Key findings have been synthesised and integrated into the various sections of this document, with the analysed articles encompassing a broad range of social and cultural contexts that extend beyond the European landscape.

Relevant literature included journal articles, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses, all centred around child safeguarding in sports. Priority was given to publications from the last decade. Keywords used in the review included terms such as "child safeguarding in sport," "policies child safeguarding in sport," and "self-assessment tools safeguarding." Although the initial focus was on research conducted within the European Union, there was considerable overlap in the information reviewed. Many articles did not specify countries or were based on studies spanning different continents.

The literature reveals a significant increase in attention to children's rights since 2015, signalling a pivotal shift in the field. This reflects broader societal transformations and growing awareness of the importance of safeguarding and promoting children's rights.

Nevertheless, when the review is refined to focus specifically on sports and sports organisations, it becomes evident that research on children's rights in these contexts remains limited. Despite the central role sports play in children's lives, scholarly interest in how their rights are addressed in sports settings is insufficient. This gap is especially concerning, given the profound impact that sports can have on children's physical, psychological, and social development.

The literature highlights several key considerations for developing safeguarding guidelines and procedures within sports organisations. Effective risk assessment, the identification of safeguarding leaders, and the creation of a comprehensive safeguarding policy statement are crucial. Additionally, ensuring that proper procedures are in place, such as establishing codes of behaviour, selecting suitable staff and volunteers, and providing continuous updates, helps maintain an effective safeguarding environment.

The arrangements must also be culturally sensitive, dynamic, and supported by adequate resources and strong leadership.

Further, the literature emphasises the importance of engaging stakeholders, building networks, and promoting empowerment as part of safeguarding efforts. It advocates for an approach that balances prevention, protection, proportionality, partnership, and accountability. A commitment to reporting poor practices, ensuring confidentiality, and addressing health and safety concerns is also fundamental, as is implementing strategies to combat bullying, promote equality, and uphold ethical codes of conduct. Comprehensive

systems should be in place to handle complaints, ensuring readiness, recognition of risks, and appropriate responses and remedies when safeguarding issues arise.

In addition to safeguarding practices, promoting children's well-being and equal opportunities is central to the findings. Supporting families and parenting, facilitating access to information and participation for young people, and preventing violence against children are key objectives. Encouraging the development of tools and scientific knowledge to advance a global understanding of children's rights is equally important.

The review also underscores several essential recommendations: addressing all forms of maltreatment, mandating education for all stakeholders, and prohibiting sexual relations and forced intimacy between athletes and those in positions of authority. The holistic well-being of athletes should be prioritised, with strong accountability measures in place to ensure safeguarding efforts are upheld. Providing resources and support for victims of maltreatment is crucial, and the creation of an independent body to investigate and adjudicate complaints while applying sanctions is strongly recommended.

A coherent safeguarding framework requires a clear policy structure, effective partnerships, and a robust system to respond to concerns. It must also provide advice, support, and continuous education to all stakeholders. Safeguarding standards must be continually monitored and evaluated, ensuring that recruitment processes are safe, and that ethical guidelines and codes of conduct are strictly followed.

Child-friendly version of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** is a global agreement that protects the rights of all children under the age of 18. Adopted in 1989, it outlines the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights that every child is entitled to. The UNCRC ensures that children have the right to be protected, to express their opinions, to receive education, healthcare, and to grow up in a safe environment. It covers 54 articles, highlighting the importance of equality, safety, development, and care. The convention also emphasizes the responsibility of governments, families, and communities to ensure that children's rights are respected and upheld. As the most widely ratified human rights treaty, it plays a vital role in shaping policies for children's welfare worldwide.

Below are just a few key points, but the UNCRC addresses numerous areas to ensure the safety, health, and happiness of all children:

1. **You have the right to life** – Governments should ensure you grow up in a healthy and safe environment.
2. **You have the right to a name and nationality** – You should have a name and belong to a country.
3. **You have the right to an identity** – No one should take away your name or where you come from.
4. **You have the right to have your opinion listened to** – Adults should listen to what you have to say and take it seriously.
5. **You have the right to privacy** – Your personal space, family, and things should be respected.
6. **You have the right to get information** – You can access information from books, the internet, and media, as long as it's good for you.
7. **You have the right to a loving and caring family** – You should be with parents or guardians who love and take care of you.
8. **You have the right to be safe** – You shouldn't be hurt, mistreated, or bullied. Governments should protect you.
9. **You have the right to education** – You should go to school and learn. Education should help you develop and prepare for the future.
10. **You have the right to play and rest** – You should have time for fun, play, and relaxation.
11. **You have the right to special care if you are disabled** – If you have a disability, you should receive extra help to make sure you have a full and happy life.
12. **You have the right to protection from harmful work** – You should not do work that is dangerous or gets in the way of your education.
13. **You have the right to healthcare** – You should receive help from doctors and nurses to keep you healthy.
14. **You have the right to be treated fairly** – No matter where you are from, what you believe, or how you look, you should be treated equally.

15. **You have the right to express yourself** – You can share your thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, as long as it doesn't hurt others.
16. **You have the right to meet and make friends** – You can meet with other children and join groups as long as it's safe.
17. **You have the right to be protected in war** – Children should be protected and not be part of wars.
18. **You have the right to help if you are in danger** – If something bad happens, you should get the help you need right away.
19. **You have the right to special protection if you are not with your family** – If you can't be with your family, you should be cared for by adults who will look after you.
20. **You have the right to be cared for and loved** – Wherever you live, you should be loved and treated kindly by those around you.

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