Child Abuse Review

Association of Child Protection Professionals

EDITORIAL

Special Issue on Creating a Culture of Child Safety in Sport: Recognising the Need for an Integrative Approach

Suzanne Everley

University of Chichester, Chichester, UK

Correspondence: Suzanne Everley (s.everley@chi.ac.uk)

Received: 23 January 2026 | **Revised:** 23 January 2026 | **Accepted:** 26 January 2026

Within public consciousness, sport has been, and is, largely represented as a cultural form providing positive value for the physical, social, cultural and psychological development of children (Baker and Byon 2014; McPherson et al. 2016). However, through growing attention on the realised experiences of participants, this conceptualisation has been exposed as delusive; as a representation idealistically created to serve the interests of those holding power in sport (Brackenridge et al. 2005; McMahon et al. 2018; Papaefstathiou et al. 2013). The ideological, politically motivated contexts of sport have actually been identified as creating a framework predisposed to facilitate abusive practice.

Despite concerns of abuse in sport being problematised by researchers in the 1980s (Hartill and Prescott 2007), it was not until the press headlining catastrophic events of the 1990s exposing assaults by prominent coaches leading to their conviction that a more concerted response to abuse in sport materialised (Hartill 2013; Lang and Hartill 2016). Within the United Kingdom, the response to highlighting concerns with safeguarding in sport led to a National Action Plan for Children in Sport, ratified in 2000 (Papaefstathiou et al. 2013; Sport England/NSPCC 2000) and the Child Protection In Sport Unit being established as part of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (Brackenridge 2003; Brackenridge and Rhind 2014). This made the United Kingdom the first country to have a Government-funded safeguarding in sport body (Rhind et al. 2017).

Worldwide, we have seen the development of international safeguarding principles leading to the International Safe Sport Declaration (Safe Sport International 2014) leading to UNICEF's International Safeguards for Children in Sport (UNICEF 2014). These developments emanated from the collaborative efforts of Safe Sport International (SSI) and UNICEF UK along with elite sport organisations, medical professionals, researchers and children's Non-Governmental Organisations indicating a recognition of the need for collective action. Alongside this, the International Olympic Committee's Consensus Statement on Training the Elite Child Athlete, 2008, Olympic Charter 2013 and the Olympic Medical Code (2024) all focus on the prevention of harm to elite performers in sport (Mountjoy et al. 2015); The Olympic Agenda 2020 + 5 highlights safe sport as a strategic priority (International Olympic Committee 2021; Mountjoy et al. 2022). This is clearly significant progress although it must be acknowledged that such movement has largely utilised research conducted in the global north and/or by researchers based in the global north, and there is also a recognition that, moving forward, concerted efforts need to be made to conduct research in the global south to create more widely relevant approaches to safety in sport.

Despite an evolving movement towards improvements in policy and practice we still see the exposition of safeguarding violations in sport and there is a recognition that, for some sports, cultures had been significantly flawed over a protracted period—investigations into abuse in football (Sheldon 2021) and gymnastics (Whyte 2022)—both UK examples—highlighted this as simultaneously a historic and contemporary cultural phenomenon.

Perhaps most notorious are the cases that occurred in the sport of gymnastics in the USA in 2016 when team doctor Larry Nassar was sentenced to up to 175 years in prison for the sexual abuse of women and girls (Kızılgüneş et al. 2024). However, his abuse was not limited to gymnastics but had also taken place in dancing, figure skating, basketball, softball, swimming, rowing and track athletics with reporting and commonly known warning signs ignored. In particular, Nassar was acknowledged as exploiting what he presented as a natural power imbalance

between himself and those who he worked with (Taylor 2018). Often, solutions for all kinds of non-accidental violence are directed towards coach education. However, as many recollections of abuse by those who experienced exploitation as child athletes indicate, it was their enforced silence that allowed the perpetrator to continue his/her abuse. It is the bravery of athletes speaking out on issues of human rights that has supported progress (Lang 2022) in this field but it continues to be crucial that we communicate across disciplines to create an integrated approach to concerns. Although headlines draw public attention regarding elite level performance, the pervasive, routinized and normalised abuse of children at all levels of sport demands immediate attention.

As sport has been identified as a cultural form that has failed to respond adequately to the response to the United Nations Convention in the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations 2023) in some instances (Yelamos et al. 2021), there has been an increasing call to create rights-based approaches to research and practice in sport (Lang 2022) against a backdrop where the chasm between rights rhetoric and experience clearly identifies further work to be done (Eliasson 2017; Pavlogiannis et al. 2024). Within human rights legislation, children are to be consulted on issues that affect them (Everley 2020; Mountjoy et al. 2022), including in the organisation of sport. Good safeguarding practice involves incorporating children's views which are crucial to understanding needs and enhancing participation.

Progress in 'safe sport' as that without non-accidental violence (Mountjoy et al. 2022), 'safeguarding in sport' as that which prevents violence and abuse (Bekker and Posbergh 2022) and sport wherein children are seen as rights holders (Lang 2022) has been significant in recent years. Pioneering work by Brackenridge, Parent, Rhind, Tiivas and Mountjoy amongst others has served to drive the beginnings of what will, no doubt, be a continuing journey as we learn to critique, reflect and apply research. Crucial to creating change is the need to share and ensure that research is accessible and applicable; ensuring integrative approaches and creating impact.

This special edition brings together the projects of authors who are working to ensure the safe participation of children in sport. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child informs much of the work here and each has a practice-based application at governing body, organisational or individual conduct level.

Within this edition, considering a conceptualised timeline, Weber and Weber consider age trends and the evolution of child athletes winning Olympic awards between 1924 and 2024 in relation to athlete wellbeing and the strategic growth of the Games. Focusing on child athletes placing in the top 8 of competitors, they found that although there was a 'substantial decline' in the mean age of athletes attaining such a position, most recent data (post 1994) indicates a relatively large number of outliers in the games for those aged 16 and under. There was a significant gender difference over the period under scrutiny as well as differences associated with 'traditional' and 'new' sports. They ultimately call for 'sports promotion' to address that the pursuit of Olympic success does not compromise child rights.

Reinforcing ongoing concerns regarding inadequate response to calls to protect children, specifically focusing on children's experience of abuse in sport in Poland, a country identified as a context where research into violence in organised sport 'remains rare'. Wocjik, Organista, Kopycka and Szolajska identify the similarities in the experiences of children in this context with those in Canada (Parent and Vaillancourt-Morel 2020, Belgium (Vertommen et al. 2022), and Australia (Pankowiak et al. 2022). Utilising the Violence Towards Athletes Questionnaire (VTAQ) they find that the majority of children in sport experience abuse (89%) but that when they experience this, children are relatively unlikely to seek support (29%). They highlight particular concerns with self-harming behaviour and suicide tendencies associated with 'victimisation'. Consequently, they recommend the introduction of child safeguarding within sports clubs, including mechanisms for monitoring coaches, officials, managers and other individuals working with children, as well as providing comprehensive training for these individuals and offering emotional and legal support to survivors.

In this special issue Carr controversially challenges the compatibility of taking a child rights approach to sport competition, which he argues to be 'necessarily discriminatory'. Drawing on Elias and Dunning's (1986) concept of 'civilising processes', he suggests that there is a 'monopolistic use of legitimate violence by safe sport advocates' in implementing child rights. He ultimately states that 'non-violent' policies in sport are actually compelled through violence. Within this framework, Carr argues the 'harmful paternalism' of 'even holistic development' and the obfuscation of the 'voice of the child' subject to 'how long it has steeped in its sociocultural norms'.

In contrast, Everley directly refers to the value of human rights in analysing the place of children's experiences in sport. Recognising the importance of exploring the experiences of children in sport as players/performers in safeguarding research, she argues that there is an urgent need to extend this to the consideration of children in other roles. Focusing on child referees in football and drawing on Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Armstrong 2015; Fadyl and Nicholls 2013; Poorghorban 2023) she evaluates how children's power relations are exercised to frame their experiences as football referees in England. Here, she identifies how abusive practices towards child referees in football are normalised, rationalised and justified within a culture that accepts behaviours unacceptable in any other working (or playing) environment.

Broadening considerations, Villa, Amendola and Bright, in their short report, consider safeguarding child athletes at elite mega sports events. Utilising the socio-ecological model for violence prevention, they recommend that safeguarding be incorporated into all phases of 'event lifecycle' with assurances that unresolved safeguarding concerns will be addressed beyond the point at which the organising committee is dissolved. Application of the socio-ecological model for violence prevention, when integrated into multi-agency approaches and the concept of shared responsibility, can provide the 'building blocks' for a safeguarding framework at sports mega events. They also suggest that teams responding to safeguarding concerns must be 'highly skilled, appropriately qualified and competent'. Assurances

must be made that child-centred support be provided for survivors that is trauma informed.

This collection of papers provides an overview of a range of concerns on domestic and international levels regarding safe sport. Common within them is a call to take a relational view of concepts associated with ensuring a safe environment in which children can participate in sport but also extend this to ensure the actualisation of their rights to realise a positive, fulfilling experience.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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