

## Physical Contact (Touch) in Sport

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### What do we know?

There have been myriad claims in recent years, in mainstream and social media, academia and politics, that adults are becoming increasingly concerned, even fearful, about touching children (see for example Furedi, 2001; Gove, 2012; Leonard, 2006; Sawer, 2012). This paper reviews the empirical evidence for these claims in organised sport in the UK (as opposed to the different socio-politico-cultural contexts of Physical Education or other child-related settings).

There is evidence that adults in child-related settings including sport are becoming more conscious of how they interact with children. The first empirical evidence of this in British sport was published in 2010 (see below) and related to coaches working with (mainly child) athletes across the performance spectrum. Almost a decade on, no research exists that relates specifically to physical interactions between coaches or other sport stakeholders and *elite and talented athletes*. As such, this review discusses the evidence relating to physical interactions with athletes across all levels of sport.

Only a handful of studies on touching practices in sport have had their findings subjected to academic peer review, and only three of these relate to research conducted in sport in the UK (Lang, 2010, 2015; Gleaves & Lang, 2017; Piper *et al.*, 2012, 2013b). In a study of youth swimming coaches' perceptions of good practice when working with child athletes, Lang (2010, 2015) found that some swimming coaches were concerned about being accused of child abuse and, consequently, sought to remain visible to others when interacting with children and limit their use of physical contact with child swimmers. The data, generated from a year-long observation of 13 coaches of 17 different squads at three swimming clubs plus extended interviews with 12 coaches and two club welfare officers, suggested coaches believed these behaviours would minimize their chances of being accused of abuse (Lang, 2010, 2015). These findings applied whether coaches were male or female, whether they worked with male or female athletes, with adult or child athletes, and irrespective of the performance level at which the coaches worked. A study on preventing and managing sexual harassment and abuse in sport in Quebec, Canada, reported similar findings, with coaches noting they restrict their physical interactions with athletes including some refusing to give athletes massages (Parent, 2008).

Piper *et al.*'s UK study focused explicitly on touch practices in sport. They report that some coaches are so anxious and fearful of being accused of abuse that they are adopting 'defensive' practices such as avoiding/restricting their use of physical contact with child athletes (Piper *et al.*, 2012, 2013b; Piper & Garratt, 2012). There are significant limitations to this study, however. It aimed to, among others, "Establish how sports coaching has responded to wider concern in relation to touch" and "Consider the discourses of (eg) professionalism, policy, gender, capability, and media, to the construction of touch in sports coaching as problematic and sexual" (Piper & Garratt, 2012, p. 2, my emphasis). As such, it began by assuming that a) "concern in relation to touch" would be evident in sport, and that b) touch practices in sport were "problematic and sexual", so the fact the study found this to

be the case is unsurprising. Additionally, the study, which was predominantly based on interviews with 70+ sport stakeholders, only included a sample of 10 practising coaches; the vast majority of interviewees were academics and senior stakeholders in sports organisations and professional bodies (Piper *et al.*, 2013b), i.e.: people who do not actually coach athletes. These factors mean the study's findings are unreliable.

Meanwhile in Australia, another study found no evidence of concern about touching practices among sport stakeholders (Scott, 2013). The study involved interviews with 20 sport stakeholders – four administrators/policymakers, two heads of university sports education programmes and 14 others involved in junior and amateur sport, including coaches, athletes (including two former elite gymnasts-turned coaches), athletes' parents and officials from various sports. It found awareness of concern among stakeholders about touching practices but this did not translate to widespread reluctance from adults to become involved in sport as coaches, officials or athletes. No documented cases of allegations relating to 'unacceptable touch' were identified, and athletes and athletes' parents considered certain touching practices (especially when instructing and/or ensuring the safety of an athlete) acceptable and a necessary part of sport. Papaefstathiou (2015) reported similar findings in a study into the understandings of competitive track and field child athletes about child protection in Cypriot sport. The study of four coaches, four athletes and two sport administrators found that coaches and athletes believed touching behaviours were acceptable and necessary for athletes' holistic development. Concern about the potential for misunderstandings to arise from touching athletes was limited, although coaches recognised the need for ethical boundaries regarding appropriate physical contact.

Gleaves and Lang (2017) report similar findings from parents of competitive child swimmers in the UK. Child athletes' parents acknowledged coach-child athlete touching practices were a necessary part of a coach's job. They were critical of coaches who restricted their use of physical contact in order to protect themselves at the expense of the impact on the children with whom they worked, considering this a dereliction of coaches' professional and moral duties. Parents recognized touching practices are contextually specific and identified three circumstances in which they deemed it legitimate:

- 1) when physical contact was used to prevent, minimize or treat physical harm to a child,
- 2) when it was used to teach a child a sport-specific technique or skill, and
- 3) when it was used for pastoral care or moral support purposes.

These findings mirror those from a Canadian study that found that athletes understand coaching may involve physical contact and that such contact can be a useful pedagogical tool (Pépin-Gagné & Parent, 2016). Indeed, athletes said they consider certain forms of coach-athlete physical contact a vital part of good coaching practice to improve athletic performance (Pépin-Gagné & Parent, 2016). A similar study by Kerr *et al.* (2015) in Canada found that athletes and coaches recognised the many benefits of physical contact – for effective instruction, injury prevention/ management, to enhance wellbeing and develop sportspersonship, for example – and noted that while individuals differ in their tendency to use contact behaviours and in how they feel about being a recipient of such behaviour, touching behaviours are generally used and accepted across sports.

Published data, then, suggests there is *some* evidence that *some* adults in sport, specifically coaches, are restricting their use of physical contact, especially with children – or at least some coaches *say* they are doing so; most of the data is based on interviews with adults/coaches and few lengthy observational studies have been conducted to

confirm coaches' behaviours in practice. While the data is not conclusive, such concerns should be treated seriously. Physical contact is a common part of sport and of life outside sport. Children who do not experience positive, appropriate forms of physical contact are less likely to be able to recognise inappropriate contact should it occur (Lang, 2015). Equally, coaches who restrict their use of physical contact with athletes where it is appropriate may be relinquishing an effective pedagogical and social tool (Lang, 2015; Pépin-Gagné & Parent, 2016).

Coaches who say they minimize their use of physical contact with (child) athletes report that they do so as a strategy to protect themselves from what is commonly referred to as 'false' allegations<sup>2</sup> of (child) abuse (Lang, 2010, 2015; Gleaves & Lang, 2017; Piper *et al.*, 2012, 2013b). This is despite substantial evidence that such allegations are extremely rare (Brackenridge *et al.*, 2005; CFS Select Committee Inquiry, 2009; Lang, 2012). Concern about 'false' allegations is a distortion of the reality of abuse – substantiated and non-reported abuse and maltreatment are far more prevalent than unfounded cases (Lang, 2015). It also has the potential to raise an element of doubt about *all* allegations, even those that are proven (Lang, 2015), and ignores the fact that physical contact can be used to abuse children and to desensitize them to sexual abuse as part of the grooming process (Roberts & Vanstone, 2014). After all, safeguarding regulations were introduced to protect (child) athletes following a series of high-profile cases of coaches sexually abusing children (see Brackenridge, 2001; Lang & Hartill, 2015). Much of research on this topic to date fails to acknowledge these points and is predicated on the impact of safeguarding and child protection regulations on *adults* rather than *children/athletes*. This risks (re)producing damaging negative constructions of (adult) coach-(child) athlete physical contact, exacerbating the moral panic about unfounded allegations of abuse and maltreatment.

### **Recommendations for best practice**

The research literature on touch behaviours in sport contains surprisingly few recommendations for practice. Papaefstathiou (2015) recommends the development of a more positive and trusting environment in sport, though no suggestions are made of how to achieve this. Coaching is a holistic, social process and, as part of this, touch behaviours can have myriad positive functions – touch can foster positive social and personal relationships; communicate feelings of approval, reassurance and security; provide physical and psychological support; and be an effective pedagogic tool (Andrzejewski & Davis, 2008; Field, 2003). One concrete suggestion is that sport stakeholders learn to construct (child) athletes as active participants in the coaching process and prioritize the best interests of the individual when coaching (Lang, 2015). As such, athletes should be informed about and asked for their consent for physical contact (Lang, 2010, 2015). Additionally, recognizing athletes as agents in the coaching process could help sport stakeholders understand that touching behaviours are appropriate when in athletes' best interests. To this end, Lang (2015) and Gleaves and Lang (2017) suggest coaches receive training on human (and children's) rights in sport and that includes information on best practice and appropriate physical contact, the low rate of 'false' allegations of abuse, and activities designed to problematize sensationalized reports of touching behaviours.

### **Recommendations for further research**

More research that investigates and, importantly, theorizes all aspects of touch behaviours in sport is urgently needed on this topic. In particular, the following should be prioritized:

- Studies that focus on the understandings of appropriate and inappropriate touch behaviours among elite and talented athletes and their entourage (parents, coaches, other sports staff)
- Studies that explore (child) athletes' perceptions of touching behaviours
- Studies investigating the differences among the views of various sports stakeholders across different socio-cultural contexts of specific sports (i.e.: among coaches/athletes of different ages, ethnic backgrounds, qualification/experience levels; among those working with athletes of different ages, ability levels, sex, ethnic background or with disabilities)
- Quantitative studies on the extent of concern about touching behaviours and about allegations of abuse among all sport stakeholders
- Studies that examine this issue across different sports (i.e.: comparative studies) and within specific sports (i.e.: case study research)
- Longitudinal observational studies of coaches' touching practices
- Research on coach education courses that encourage coaches, and others such as parents and athletes, to understand and problematize constructions of adult-child touch as risky

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