

Symposium abstract

Safeguarding 1: Advancing Understandings & Prevention of Interpersonal Violence and Abuse in Sport

Chaired by Dr Melanie Lang, Edge Hill University, UK

Sport has been recognized as a locus of violence and abuse for almost 30 years, but much of the research on this topic has, until recently, focused on understanding sexual forms of violence (Brackenridge, 2001; Lang, 2021). The wide range of harms athletes are exposed to is now becoming clear, as is recognition that all sport stakeholders have a role to play in addressing this.

This symposium aims to advance understandings of forms of interpersonal violence and abuse in sport and provide an evidence base for how sport stakeholders, including psychologists, can prevent this. The symposium comprises five presentations from researchers from Europe and North America.

Parent and colleagues set the scene, presenting the results of a study into the prevalence of interpersonal violence against teens in sport in Quebec. Only in knowing the extent of the problem can we begin to effectively address it. Meanwhile, Adriaens and colleagues report on a study that explored knowledge, attitudes and confidence in managing harassment and abuse among athlete health and medicine professionals globally – a group often omitted from work in this area. Next, Muhonen and colleagues discuss the impact of athletic identity on the normalization of emotional abuse and reporting decision-making among athletes in Finland. Laureys and colleagues continue on emotional/psychological abuse. They identify athletes' and coaches' perceptions of behaviors in the 'grey zone' between acceptable-unacceptable conduct in sport in Belgium. Finally, Ohlert and colleagues discuss the impact of an education e-learning platform on understandings of safeguarding among volunteers in small sports organizations in Germany.

In all, the symposium offers new insights into how interpersonal violence and abuse are understood by a range of sport stakeholders across various cultural contexts and the concomitant consequences of this in order to support development of effective prevention strategies in sport.

Symposium presentation abstracts

Prevalence of interpersonal violence towards children in sport: Results from a large sample of Quebec teenagers

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Objective: Research documenting the prevalence of interpersonal violence (IV) in sport is rapidly growing. However, many studies suffer from limitations such as low sample size and lack of validated tools to measure IV. The objective of this study was to describe prevalence rates of IV toward children in sport in a large sample of Quebec teenagers.

Methods: Between November 2022 and May 2023, an online survey was conducted using the Violence Toward Athlete Questionnaire (VTAQ) (Parent et al., 2019). The sample (n =

9,120) consisted of teenagers aged 14 to 17 years old practicing various organized sports at the time of the study (53.7% girls, 45.7% boys, 0.6% gender-diverse).

Results: Results showed that 46.0% of athletes reported at least one experience of psychological violence, while 25.2% reported physical violence, 17.5% sexual violence, and 15.8% instrumental violence (from an authority figure). Boys (23.4%) were more likely to report having experienced physical violence from peers than girls (14.7%) and gender-diverse youth (20.3%), although the association was weak (Cramer's $V = 0.11$). Gender-diverse teenagers (38.4%) and girls (30.5%) were more likely than boys (22.4%) to report having experienced psychological violence by a person in authority (Cramer's $V = 0.10$).

Conclusion: This study shows that a significant number of youth practicing organized sports experience IV and prevalence rates of forms of IV vary among genders. These results can support policymakers in better targeting violence-prevention practices.

The role of health professionals in the prevention of athlete harassment and abuse: A Belgian and an international study

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Objective: Studies indicate that not all athletes are free from harassment and abuse. Youth athletes in high-performance settings are particularly vulnerable to harassment and abuse by coaches, parents, officials, entourage members and peer athletes, significantly impacting their well-being. Often, bystanders do not notice or intervene when harassment and abuse occur. It is imperative to stimulate positive bystander behaviors in the athlete health and performance team (sports psychologists, physiotherapists, sports doctors, nutritionists, etc.) since they play a vital role in (early) detection and responding to signs of athlete harassment and abuse.

Methods: A Belgian study ($n = 72$ health professionals) and a global study ($n = 406$ sports medicine physicians) used an online questionnaire to assess current knowledge, attitudes, norms, and competence of professionals regarding the detection and response to signs of athlete harassment and abuse. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-squares or t-test to test possible differences between groups.

Results: Half of Belgian health professionals encountered concerns related to athlete harassment and abuse in the past 12 months. One third of professionals indicated not knowing what the role of a safeguarding officer entails, had no knowledge of where to report or of the reporting standards. Most professionals were positive toward a mandatory reporting code. In the international study, sports medicine physicians acknowledged the importance of vigilance and reporting suspected cases yet expressed discomfort in doing so. When reporting, they faced several barriers and a lack of knowledge about reporting pathways. The majority felt undertrained in handling cases.

Conclusion: Both studies underscore the critical role of basic safeguarding training and guidance of the athlete (health) entourage in ensuring a safe sports environment and promoting athletes' well-being. Reporting barriers and pathways should be addressed to encourage professionals to report suspected cases and disclosures of harassment and abuse.

Athletic identity affects prevalence and disclosure of emotional abuse in Finnish athletes

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The study presented here offers novel insight into the topic of experienced and observed emotional abuse by researching factors that affect athletes' responses to emotional abuse by coaches. The research aimed to explore three main questions: (1) whether athletic identity was associated with the prevalence of emotionally abusive coaching practices, and (2) disclosure of emotional abuse, and (3) whether demographic variations existed in the frequency of emotional abuse, athletic identity, and disclosure of the abuse. Study participants who filled in an anonymous digital survey consisted of athletes from elite to leisure levels living in Finland ($N = 3687$, aged 12–80, gender 61% female, 37.7% male, 0.8% other genders). The research findings highlighted three key insights. Firstly, Pearson correlations revealed that a salient athletic identity was related to a higher prevalence of emotional abuse. Secondly, ANOVA/Kruskal-Wallis tests between-groups indicated that particularly children were susceptible to abuse. Thirdly, a mediation analysis showed that self-identity (aspect of athletic identity) influenced the relationship between experienced emotional abuse and disclosure, by reducing disclosure. As a result, holistic identity development is recommended for athletes and particularly children in sports.

A Delphi study with coaches and athletes about their perceptions of 'grey zone' behaviors in psychological coach-athlete violence

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Objective: Recent research highlights that psychological violence is often accepted, normalized, legitimized, even encouraged when working with youth athletes. Consensus on what constitutes (un-)acceptable in sport is lacking, and the issue creates debate and polarisation within the sports community. Therefore, the objective of this project was to take the first step in reaching a consensus and give voice to athletes and coaches.

Methods: Using an online questionnaire, athletes (min. age 14; $n = 196$) and coaches ($n = 174$) shared their perceptions on the acceptance and impact of (un-)acceptable psychological behaviours by scoring 15 newly developed coach-athlete scenarios. These covered toxic leadership, controlling coaching styles, and psychological violence. Participants gave their perceptions of severity and grade of violence of the coach behaviour by scoring a 7-point Likert scale and scored the impact of this behaviour on the athlete with a 5-point scale. Chi-squares were used to analyse these scores for each scenario.

Results: Overall, no difference in perceptions between coaches and athletes was found. However, large inter-variability between the scores was observed, i.e., 66% of participants perceived these situations as psychological violence, whereby 33% scored them as 'high', 42% as 'moderate', and 33% as 'low' psychological violence. Participants mostly agreed (86%) that, although not perceived as violent coach behaviour, the behaviour would have a negative impact on the mental well-being of athletes. In contrast, almost 13% said the scenarios could have a positive impact on performance.

Conclusion: There is still no consensus on unacceptable behaviours in sport, hindering the creation of effective prevention and intervention programs. With these scenarios, we can create awareness and educate coaches and athletes to reach the ultimate goal: encouraging and supporting a violence-free environment for sport participants in Flanders.

Development and evaluation of an e-learning platform supporting small sport organizations in creating a safeguarding concept

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Objective: Many small sport clubs and organizations, especially those that are led by volunteers, have not yet established a safeguarding concept. Thus, an e-learning platform targeting German voluntary organizations was developed and evaluated. The platform comprises an online course for volunteer coordinators (workload 15 hours) focusing on the development of a safeguarding concept, an online module for volunteers (4 hours) providing basic sensitization regarding interpersonal violence, and an information platform accessible to everyone offering materials and further information.

Methods: The online course for volunteer coordinators was evaluated using the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB; Ajzen, 2002). Participants filled out questions regarding TPB factors at the start of the online course (T1), immediately after completing the course (T2), and six months after the course (T3). In total, 593 participants completed the survey at T1 and T2, while 81 individuals responded at T3.

Results: Results indicated a significant increase in intention and perceived behavioural control (PBC) between T1 and T2. Attitude did not change. Long-term changes over six months could not be found for the different factors: Subjective norm did not change from T1 to T3, and the increased values of intention and PBC at T2 dropped back to the level of T1 at T3.

Conclusion: Our results suggest a short-term effect on important variables regarding behavior change in favor of safeguarding. The reason for the fall back in intention might be that after six months measures had already been taken and it was not necessary to do more. Regarding planned behavior change, it is possible that after the course, people felt engaged but were afterwards confronted with restrictions of reality and thus lost the feeling of personal control. Possibilities to prevent this will be discussed.