

## SPORT WITH BOUNDARIES: THE FLAG SYSTEM

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This description comes from the study commissioned by the European Commission on gender-based violence in sport ([Mergaert L., & al., Study on gender-based violence in sport – final report, European Commission, 2016](#)). It was updated within the framework of the European Union-Council of Europe joint projects **Pro Safe Sport +** and **Child Safeguarding in Sport** ([www.coe.int/CSiS](http://www.coe.int/CSiS)) by collecting more recent information from the organisation responsible for the project.

### DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE

#### Background

In 2010, political pressure to improve child protection in extra-familial settings increased, following the public disclosure of more than 700 cases of child sexual abuse within the Roman Catholic Church in Belgium. In February 2012, the Flemish ministers for Sport, Youth, Education and Welfare signed a 'Declaration of Commitment on the protection of children's physical and sexual integrity', prompting the implementation of prevention initiatives in Flemish sport organisations (Vlaamse Overheid, 2012). Soon after signing the Declaration of Commitment, Flemish sport authorities subsidised the International Centre Ethics in Sport (ICES) to provide expertise related to ethical sport practices, including the issues of integrity, sexual abuse and violence. ICES took up its role of supporting sport federations in developing ethical policies, providing substantive guidance, and designing and delivering tools, education and workshops.

#### **Supporting sport organisations, professional staff and volunteers in addressing physical and sexual integrity in sport**

ICES' first action was to create a sport-specific version of the 'Framework for Sexuality and Policy' developed by Sensoa, a centre of expertise in sexual health and Child Focus, an NGO for missing and sexually exploited children. Both organisations supervised the ICES working meetings with the various stakeholders from sport (umbrella) organisations and federations which led to the publication of the 'Framework on Physical and Sexual Integrity and Policy in Sport'. The framework targets professional staff of sport organisations and offers a comprehensive toolbox with 11 different instruments offering an integral approach to safeguarding the physical and sexual integrity of athletes. It emphasises the need for a protective environment that allows for the normal, positive aspects of a young athlete's sexual development. The tools to facilitate the implementation of the prevention policy framework include a competency checklist, profile outline for an integrity contact person, code of conduct, list of risk factors, and an action protocol.

#### **The Flag System**

One of the tools in the framework is the Flag System. The aim of the Flag System is to help adults to identify and aptly respond to inappropriate behaviour between adults and young (underage) athletes and their peers. The system includes a practical toolkit consisting of playing cards with pictograms of undesirable behaviours together with brief situational descriptions. The toolkit is based on both experiential and social learning theories emphasising a problem-based cognitive approach to planning future behaviour, based on past knowledge/experience and a client-centred approach to communication and the use of shared experiences. The Flag System is a key tool due to its positive and pro-active approach to behaviour change.

To help professionals assess the appropriateness of different sexual behaviours, the Flag System relies on three criteria: consent, equality and free will. When each criterion is fulfilled, the behaviour can be classified as healthy. Although the three criteria help set the essential conditions for positive sexual interactions, they do not suffice. So Sensoa introduced three additional criteria to guarantee appropriate and non-damaging sexual behaviour; age and developmental appropriateness, context appropriateness, and self-respect. In 2021 Sensoa updated and expanded the Flag System which can now be used to judge sexual interactions between adults. Sensoa adapted the criterion 'age and developmental appropriateness' by adding 'functioning' for adults, which means we check if a coach coaches his/her athletes in ethical ways that respect the wellbeing of the athlete. In addition, the criterion self-respect has been changed to the criterion impact where we look at the impact of the behaviour on the people involved. Other than judging behaviour as 'OK' or 'not OK', the Flag System proposes a four-flag scale, with flag colours ranging from green (entirely appropriate/acceptable), yellow (slightly inappropriate/undesirable), red (inappropriate/unacceptable) to black (entirely inappropriate/unlawful). Based on the assessment of each criterion and the total sum and severity of the transgressions an overall rating, i.e. flag, is assigned. A green flag indicates the sexual behaviour meets all six criteria and is therefore fully acceptable. A yellow flag indicates there have been occasional, minor transgressions on one or several criteria (e.g. inappropriate verbal or non-verbal sexual interactions or harassment) that may warrant attention. A red flag signals more serious or repeated transgressions and lesser acts of sexual abuse (e.g. inappropriate touching), while the black flag is signals serious harmful sexual behaviour and (severe) sexual abuse (e.g. sexual assault, (attempted) rape or rape). Drawing upon available research on children's sexual development in Western countries, the Flag System manual provides a list of developmentally appropriate behaviours for children (age range 2 – 17 years) to assist users in assessing the 'normality' of sexual behaviours according to the corresponding age group.

Together with different stakeholder in Flemish sport, Sensoa and ICES developed a unique version of the Flag System for sport. Instead of using 'general' examples (such as parent-child or teacher-pupil behaviours), the sport flag system uses typical examples from the setting of sport (i.e. interactions between coaches and athletes, and among athletes). While the underlying theory and methodology is identical, a sport-specific version will make users more familiar with the instrument.

## **OUTCOMES AND STRENGTHS**

ICES developed a webpage with a recognisable URL that contains all the project information (theme, tools, seminars, etc.). Additionally, a humorous promotional video was launched to attract the attention of sport organisations (available on YouTube and other social media channels). The information campaign was set up in three stages. First, major sports and umbrella organisations were informed and requested to communicate the project to their member organisations. Second, sports federations (34 from a total of 95) received information about the subject, purpose, problems and the instruments during a seminar on integrity in sport. Third, municipal sports services (212 from a total of 308) were informed in a plenary session of their annual Flemish-wide conference. The toolkit materials and background information were made freely available during these events. Sports federations and municipal sport services were urged by ICES to promote the Flag System to their members (i.e. the sports clubs). They were encouraged to post information on their websites, to incorporate the project in newsletters and to raise awareness about the toolbox at meetings.

In the first year, ICES organised 19 Flag System workshops with a combined attendance of 282 participants (sport organisation administrators, coaches, parents). Additionally, a training-of-trainers workshop (TOT) was staged to enable participants to organise workshops themselves, while relying on the support provided by ICES. During the workshops, participants are also made aware of other policy instruments within the framework to allow them to get acquainted with the whole range of available measures.

The practical toolkit, educational material and ICES' support services relating to the Flag System and the other tools are clear examples of a hands-on implementation strategy that strongly facilitates actions at the grassroots level. The resources serve as incentives to help all parties involved deal with sexuality issues in the context of organised sport. Additionally, the toolkit materials are based on 'real life' examples and in part developed in co-operation with administrators experienced in their particular field of sport. This approach increases self-identification and reduces the mobilisation of inhibiting defence mechanisms. All examples are closely linked to a policy initiative in the toolkit, emphasising the complement nature of all the instruments. Children were also consulted during the development of the 'mother' version of the Flag System. Based on the 'first users' feedback, a second version of the Flag System and other instruments and measures was released in 2014 taking into account minority groups, such as disabled or migrant athletes. In 2021, ICES in collaboration with Sensoa, Icoaba and Pimento extended the methodology of the Flag System to judge not only sport-specific cases of sexuality issues, but cases including physical and psychological violence and bullying in sport (the so-called 'Grenswijs' System - [www.grenswijs.be](http://www.grenswijs.be) ). Fifteen sport-specific cases were developed and will be used in discussions during workshops organised by ICES for the sport sector.

By February 2016, 1600 packages of the Flag System and policy manual were distributed to sport organisation members in Flanders. The tools were presented during ten sport events (e.g. exhibitions) were featured in two magazine articles, a newspaper and a TV show. Promotional materials (such as door hangers) were distributed and ordered via the website. (The website has recorded 10056 page views between 2015 and July 2021).

During the early years of development and implementation (2012-2014) the 'Sport with Boundaries' project received €107,000 funding through the Flemish Ministry of Sport. Since 2014, ICES is structurally funded by the decree on healthy and ethical sports (20 December 2013) and the implementation of the 'Sport with Boundaries' initiatives which became a structural part of the overall tasks of the organisation. The workshops are being offered and charged via official programmes (Flemish Coach School and the Dynamo Project – a support system for voluntary sport organisations). The Flag System package can be ordered via the ICES website at a price of €24. No additional external funding is needed to continue the implementation of the project.

The implementation of the general Flag System methodology has proven to be successful in the Netherlands, Ecuador, Australia and the UK (Brook 2012). This demonstrates there is learning value/potential to inspire others and it can be replicated in other countries in the sport (and other) contexts. The regular update of the sport and the mother version, adapting cases to new developments (ethnic minorities in sport, use of social media...), shows how the instrument is dynamic and sustainable.

## LIMITATIONS

While ICES encourages and supports Flemish sport organisations to adopt the Flag System as their key tool in the prevention of sexual violence in sport, this tool does not deliver a complete prevention strategy. It is only in combination with other instruments in the policy framework such as a code of conduct, competence checklist and criminal record check, reaction plan, and disciplinary system, that the Flag System constitutes, a comprehensive policy can be established.

Changing the mind-set of the sporting world with regard to the issue of sexual violence (i.e. "*sexual violence does not happen in sport*") has proven to be particularly difficult. However, since the start of the project we have witnessed more and more organisations are taking up the issue. Since 2021 some ethical obligations have been implemented for recognised sport federations to take in order to receive funding from the Flemish government. The goal is to link subsidies for Flemish sport federations with a set of minimum prevention and reaction measures concerning abuse and violence against athletes. The implementation is monitored by means of regular contact with sport federations (permanent coaching) and evaluated annually as a quality aspect of the federations sport policy. The evaluation (by Sport Flanders) is part of a global evaluation of the co-operation

between the sport federations and the Flemish government. This approach by the Flemish government will help ICES reach more sport organisations with our workshops, policy instruments and tools like the Flag System.

Finally, working with people employed at sport federations is one thing but the biggest challenge is to work with grassroots sport clubs who mostly rely on volunteers. However, there are some mechanisms available to promote this activity with volunteers. Some sport federations use their funding mechanisms for sport clubs. For example, when sport clubs have an educated safe sport officer for their youth members, they will receive more funding. Also if they have an integrity policy, more funding is also available. But it is important to check that the activities are actively implemented and not simply window dressing. Some sport clubs can for example just appoint a safeguarding officer without really supporting the role or the person doing it. To overcome these challenges, sport federations work with club support officers and make an annual visit to the club to assess which measures are in place. Specialised education about safeguarding and integrity policies should be available to club support officers to enable them to have the competences required to do the assigned job.

## **LESSONS LEARNT**

Creating a version specific to sport has facilitated 'buy in' of the instrument. The involvement of different sport stakeholders in the translation of the mother version to a sport context has enhanced the tool, as specific examples, sport related norms and values could be included. Using a general theory and methodology for the Framework and the Flag System guarantees the quality of the instrument and increases the uniformity in policy and actions across policy domains.

Relying on the enthusiastic reception and informal feedback from the field, the Flag System appears to be an effective icebreaker when broaching the issue of sexual harassment and abuse within the sport sector. Instead of calling on parents' and sport leaders' fear of abuse, the Flag System's positive approach makes it easier for those responsible to place the topic on their organisation's agenda and to demand that both reactive and proactive measures are taken. The use of 'real life' sport examples facilitate identification with the topic of sexual violence.

This practice shows that human and financial resources are required to ensure that interpersonal advice, in case of an incident, can be provided. When implementing a tool that stimulates conversations about sexual behaviours of children, one must be equipped and prepared to properly deal with complaints and reports of actual incidents.

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## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

The project: [http://www.ethischsporten.be/sport\\_met\\_grenzen](http://www.ethischsporten.be/sport_met_grenzen)

The policy framework:

[http://www.ethischsporten.be/images/uploads/downloads/RaamwerkSeksualiteitEnBeleidInteractief\\_Sportorganisatie.pdf](http://www.ethischsporten.be/images/uploads/downloads/RaamwerkSeksualiteitEnBeleidInteractief_Sportorganisatie.pdf)

The manual with policy initiatives:

[http://www.ethischsporten.be/images/uploads/downloads/Sportmetgrenzen\\_beleidsinitiatieven\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.ethischsporten.be/images/uploads/downloads/Sportmetgrenzen_beleidsinitiatieven_WEB.pdf)

The educational resource:

[http://www.ethischsporten.be/sport\\_met\\_grenzen/instrumenten](http://www.ethischsporten.be/sport_met_grenzen/instrumenten)

Flag system promotional video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ze7pEKLAs-M>

Scientific article on the implementation of the flag system: Vertommen, T., Stoeckel, J. T., Vandevivere, L., Van Den Eede, F., & De Martelaer, K. (2014). A green flag for the Flag System? Towards a child protection policy in Flemish sport. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 1–17.

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PHD 'Interpersonal violence against children in sport' Dissertation by Tine Vertommen

[https://www.kenniscentrumsportenbewegen.nl/kennisbank/publicaties/?interpersonal-violence-against-children-in-sport&kb\\_id=23087](https://www.kenniscentrumsportenbewegen.nl/kennisbank/publicaties/?interpersonal-violence-against-children-in-sport&kb_id=23087)