



TOOLKIT

on prevention
and reaction to child
sexual abuse in sport

Factsheets 1-6



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Definitions and facts and figures on child sexual abuse in sport



This factsheet provides information on definitions, prevalence rates, risk factors and the impact of child sexual abuse in sport.

What is child sexual abuse?

The Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (2007), known as the Lanzarote Convention, defines child sexual abuse as:

- ▶ engaging in sexual activities with a child who, according to the relevant provisions of national law, has not reached the legal age for sexual activities;
- ▶ engaging in sexual activities with a child where:
 - use is made of coercion, force or threats;¹
 - abuse is made of a recognised position of trust, authority or influence over the child, including within the family;² or
 - abuse is made of a particularly vulnerable situation of the child, notably because of a mental or physical disability or a situation of dependence.³

Sexual offences against children include child sexual exploitation, various actions related to child sexual abuse material, sexual grooming/solicitation and causing a child to witness sexual abuse or sexual activities. It may involve contact and/or non-contact activities and can happen in person and/or online (Council of Europe 2024: 8).

Examples of child sexual abuse are:

- ▶ sexual touching of body parts, including breasts and genitals;
- ▶ intercourse and oral sex or anal penetration without consent or where consent cannot legally be given due to the age of the victim or due to the position occupied by the perpetrator;
- ▶ showing of indecent images;
- ▶ voyeurism;
- ▶ inappropriate sexualised language;
- ▶ online grooming;
- ▶ coercing or manipulating a child into viewing or distributing abusive images or videos;
- ▶ engaging a child in sexually explicit conversations.

1. This also applies to children above the legal age for sexual activities.
2. This also applies to children above the legal age for sexual activities.
3. This also applies to children above the legal age for sexual activities.

What is sexual violence?

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as “the Istanbul Convention”, defines sexual violence as the following intentional conduct:

- ▶ engaging in non-consensual vaginal, anal or oral penetration of a sexual nature of the body of another person with any bodily part or object;
- ▶ engaging in other non-consensual acts of a sexual nature with a person;
- ▶ causing another person to engage in non-consensual acts of a sexual nature with a third person.

This definition would apply to sexual relations between children above the legal age to consent to sexual activities.

What is sexual harassment?

The Istanbul Convention defines sexual harassment as unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

What is sexual consent?

Sexual consent means voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity. It must be voluntarily given as the result of the person’s free will assessed in the context of the surrounding circumstances. Children under the legal age for sexual activity cannot legally consent to sexual activity. Across European countries, the legal age for sexual activity ranges from 14 to 18 years. Moreover, in instances where adults hold a position of trust or authority over children, the child cannot provide consent before the age of 18.

Sexual abuse, violence and harassment are criminalised internationally under various laws and conventions (see Factsheet 2 for further details).

This toolkit will mainly focus on recognition of, responding to and preventing child sexual abuse in sport. However, when citing research, the terminology used by the authors in the original article will be retained.

More definitions can be consulted in the [Glossary on safe sport \(Council of Europe 2024\)](#).

■ Who are the children impacted by child sexual abuse⁴ in sport?

Child sexual abuse can affect any child regardless of age, sporting ability, gender, nationality, ethnicity, social class, education level, sexual orientation or identity, or disability. Some prevalence studies have found no or only small differences in prevalence between victimhood in boys and girls in sport (Parent and Fortier 2017; Vertommen et al. 2016; Hartill et al. 2023). However, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls to the United Nations General Assembly, and UNESCO, have highlighted that the risk of sexual violence against women and girls is disproportionately high, with 21% of females (compared with 11% of males) having experienced a form of sexual abuse at least once as a child in sport (UNESCO and UN Women 2023).⁵ Furthermore, several studies show that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and more (LGBTQ+) athletes⁶ and athletes with disabilities are more at risk of being victims of sexual violence in sport (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024; Mountjoy et al. 2016).

■ How often does it happen?

Studies surveying sexual harassment in sport reveal prevalence estimates between 11% and 78%, and for sexual abuse between 0.5% and 12% (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024). Studies conducted in Europe demonstrate prevalence estimates for sexual violence from a minimum of 2% to a maximum of 55% of athletes having experienced such behaviours at least once (Khomutova et al. 2025). Meanwhile, in terms of sexual violence against children, a recent study in six European countries found that 20% had experienced contact sexual violence and 35% had experienced non-contact sexual violence as a child involved in sport (Hartill et al. 2023).

The wide variation in estimates can be explained by the differences in methodology and definitions used. In any case, if studies include abuse by peers and non-contact cases in their definitions of sexual abuse and violence, this is likely to raise the prevalence rates significantly.

4. This toolkit focuses on child sexual abuse as defined by the Lanzarote Convention. Some studies referenced here use “sexual violence against children” as their primary terminology. While these concepts are not identical across all legal and academic frameworks, they refer to substantially overlapping phenomena, and relevant findings from such studies are included throughout. When referencing research, we follow the terminology used by its authors.

5. Due to this high prevalence, the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) consistently addresses the need to promote the principles of equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, non-violent conflict resolution and the right to personal integrity in sports and analyses and issues findings on the prevention and combating of sexual violence against women and girls in sports. See for example, in this respect, GREVIO’s thematic evaluation report on France, paragraphs 6 and 60.

6. In this factsheet, the term “(child) athlete” is used when referring to research specifically involving children or adults who participate in organised sport. However, participation in sport extends beyond the role of the athlete. Children and adults may also engage in physical education classes, recreational sports activities or other sport-related activities. In addition, they may be involved in sport as coaches, referees or volunteers, or in other capacities, and may likewise be affected by sexual abuse in these contexts.

■ Who can perpetrate child sexual abuse in sport?

Anyone can commit child sexual abuse in sport, including children/adults involved in sports, coaches, parents/carers and members of the athlete health and performance team (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024). Most individuals who commit child sexual abuse in sport are known to the affected child. Coaches and other entourage members are persons who often perpetrate sexual abuse, but peers are more likely to carry out acts of sexual harassment than coaches (Mountjoy et al. 2016).

Sexual harassment by peers often involves more than one person who perpetrates (for example during initiation or hazing rituals). However, when coaches are involved in incidents of sexual violence against children in sport, incidents tend to be more severe and occur within a context of power abuse (Vertommen et al. 2017). Finally, there is evidence that the majority of known persons who commit sexual violence are men (Vertommen et al. 2017; Mountjoy et al. 2016; Fasting, Brackenridge and Kjolberg 2013; Sand et al. 2011).

■ What is the impact?

Several studies in sport show a considerable negative impact of sexual violence on people with lived experience in sport (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024; Gillard et al. 2025; Mountjoy et al. 2016):

- **psychological impact** – low self-esteem/self-worth, psychological distress, depression, anxiety, fear, guilt, anger, volatile mood states, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidality, etc.;
- **behavioural impact** – sport dropout, disordered eating and eating disorders, etc.;
- **relational impact** – challenging personal relationships, social exclusion/marginality;
- **physical impact** – sexually transmitted infections, fatigue, non-sport and sport-related injury and illness, etc.;
- **material/performance impact** – economic loss, more difficulty achieving athletic goals, diminished sport and academic performance.

Child sexual abuse also has a detrimental effect on those surrounding the impacted child, often leading to feelings of guilt, fear, self-censorship and a decline in team performance. At the organisational level, the consequences may include reputational harm, athlete withdrawal and the loss of sponsorship.

■ What are the risk factors for child sexual abuse in sport?

Sports are characterised by unique structures and cultures that are infused with a high tolerance for incidents of physical violence and injury that are often considered by the child’s entourage (coaches, parents, peers, etc.) as “part of the game”.

Furthermore, the unequal power dynamics between coaches and children, coupled with authoritarian coaching techniques, foster a precarious environment that creates conditions for the abuse of power. Together with the often

required physical contact, direct personal contact on-site and offline between adults and children, the prioritisation of performance over the well-being of children, the lower social status of children and adults' failure to value or listen to their views and the reward structures, these conditions contribute to a climate that is conducive to child sexual abuse (Mountjoy et al. 2016).

Children participating in sport on elite development pathways or involved in early specialisation sports are particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse and other forms of interpersonal violence within the sporting environment (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024; Mountjoy et al. 2016).

There are contexts in which there is potential risk in sports, such as:

- ▶ changing rooms;
- ▶ showers;
- ▶ travel to/from training and competitions;
- ▶ overnight stays during training camps or competitions;
- ▶ residential training centres that physically isolate children from their support networks;
- ▶ one-to-one contact on social media.

A large multi-country study involving nearly 10 000 adults who participated in organised sport before the age of 18 found that participants in team sports had significantly higher odds of reporting all types of interpersonal violence compared to participants in individual sports. This elevated risk in team sports may be explained by higher exposure to peers (including potential perpetrators), the physical contact that is inherent to many team sports – which can blur boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour – and team cultures that may normalise or rationalise harmful conduct as “part of the game”. Being male and participating in a team sport were the two factors most strongly associated with reported victimisation across all forms of interpersonal violence.

The study also found that participants in sports with non-revealing sports attire and less weight-sensitive sports also reported higher prevalence of interpersonal violence across all categories. The higher rates in sports with non-revealing attire may partly reflect that adults working with athletes in body-revealing sports (such as swimming or gymnastics) internalise safeguarding norms more consciously, restricting physical contact to avoid any appearance of misconduct. The overlap between sports with less weight sensitivity, team format and non-revealing attire (such as football or basketball) largely explains these patterns. Importantly,

interpersonal violence was found across all sport types and genders, and previous childhood experiences of violence outside sport remained the strongest individual predictor of victimisation in sport. For sexual violence specifically, the risk of contact sexual violence was notably higher in team sports compared to individual sports, and even higher when comparing sports where athletes wear less revealing attire (Vertommen et al. 2024).

Still, very few people associate sports with child sexual abuse. Organisational factors that influence an increased risk of sexual violence include:

- ▶ a sports culture where inappropriate sexual behaviour is tolerated;
- ▶ bystanders ignoring indicators of sexual violence or tacitly approving of it;
- ▶ the tolerance of discrimination and gender inequality;
- ▶ the creation of a culture of fear, mistrust and secrecy within some sports (Mountjoy et al. 2016; Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2024).

Disclosing experiences of child sexual abuse in sport is difficult. Certain sociocultural factors may play a role, such as the belief that athletes must embody strength, where showing vulnerability is often perceived as a sign of weakness. This can prevent children from speaking out about incidents of sexual abuse they have experienced in sport. The boundless ambition of promising child athletes makes them vulnerable and will maintain the secrecy introduced by the perpetrator, as the child fears the negative consequences for their sporting career (such as having to leave the sport or losing specialised training opportunities) when the secret is disclosed. Moreover, parents, sponsors and other stakeholders may exert pressure on the child to remain silent (Woessner et al. 2023).

Furthermore, the roles of individuals within the sporting context are not always clearly defined for children: at times, parents assume coaching responsibilities, while some coaches appear to adopt a parental role. This can make it difficult for children involved in sport to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour from coaches and other adults from the sport entourage.

Also, the absence and/or non-implementation of safeguarding measures (such as a safeguarding policy, codes of conduct, safe recruitment systems, reporting procedures) within sporting organisations further heightens the risk of sexual violence (Mountjoy et al. 2016).

The International Olympic Committee consensus statement: interpersonal violence and safeguarding in sport

The 2024 International Olympic Committee consensus on interpersonal violence and safeguarding aimed to synthesise evidence on interpersonal violence and safeguarding in sport, introduce a new conceptual model of interpersonal violence in sport and offer more accessible safeguarding guidance to all within the sports ecosystem by merging evidence with insights from Olympic athletes.

Key references

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Further reading

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Legislation, regulations and best practice guidance



This factsheet outlines key conventions, regulations and good practice guidance related to preventing and addressing child sexual abuse in sport.

Legislation, conventions and regulatory frameworks

— The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)

The [UNCRC](#) is the key instrument for safeguarding children in any setting. All rights enshrined in the UNCRC are also at stake in sport.

Article 19 of the UNCRC makes states responsible for ensuring that children are protected from “all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child”.

Under the convention, states must have in place protective measures that:

include effective procedures for the establishment of social programmes to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment ... and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.

UN General Comment No. 13 (2011) provides further detail on the child’s right to freedom from all forms of violence.

To strengthen and expand its protections, the UNCRC is supplemented by optional protocols. If states choose to sign these, they are legally bound by them.

The [Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography](#) is especially relevant to child safeguarding in sport. It criminalises the sale of children (including for labour), as well as child prostitution and child pornography. It requires the provision of support services to victims and the promotion of public awareness and education to prevent child sexual exploitation.

This optional protocol also expands extraterritorial jurisdiction by allowing states to prosecute nationals who offend abroad. This is highly relevant to sport given that sports personnel may move across jurisdictions for work and/or to accompany athletes to training or competitions.

— The Hague Convention (1996)

The [Hague Convention on Jurisdiction, Applicable Law, Recognition, Enforcement and Co-operation in Respect of Parental Responsibility and Measures for the Protection of Children](#), referred to as the 1996 Hague Child Protection

Convention, promotes international co-operation in cross-border child-protection cases. It was drafted by the Hague Conference on Private International Law, a permanent intergovernmental organisation that develops international treaties that harmonise rules of private international law.

The convention aims to ensure that children are protected across borders, that decisions taken in one country about a child’s welfare are respected in others and that authorities work together to safeguard children in international situations. For example, it allows states to alert authorities abroad to child safeguarding risks – authorities from one state can inform another if a known abuser moves across borders so the relevant authority/body can monitor the individual, assess risk to the children and take preventive safeguarding measures. This is useful in sport as coaches may move across borders to work/volunteer or with athletes, including children, to train and/or compete.

— The European Convention on Human Rights

The [European Convention on Human Rights](#) (the Convention) is the most comprehensive instrument protecting human rights in Europe. It affirms the right of every individual, including children, to be free from discrimination, forced labour, human trafficking and ill-treatment (including but not limited to gender-based violence and violence against women and girls).

It prohibits torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment (Article 3) and discrimination (Article 14), confirms the right to access to court and the right to a fair trial (Article 6), respect for private and family life (Article 8) and the right to effective remedy (Article 13). It is supplemented by additional protocols to which states can become party (for instance the right to education, provided for by Article 2 of Protocol No. 1). The Convention also obliges states to prevent, protect from and investigate abuse, neglect or inhuman or degrading treatment, and to hold those responsible for violations to account.

The European Court of Human Rights (the Court) supervises the respect of the rights enshrined in the Convention by member states. In its case law, it recognises the particular vulnerability of certain groups, such as children, women, minors, girls, refugees, people with disabilities and others.

■ The Council of Europe Lanzarote Convention (2007)

The Council of Europe [Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#), known as the Lanzarote Convention, is the foremost global instrument for the protection of children from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. It sets out minimum standards for preventing and combating sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children and protecting the rights of child victims, and recognises the risk posed by individuals in positions of trust, which can include sports coaches and other personnel.

To this end, the Lanzarote Convention recognises sport as a setting where child sexual abuse and sexual exploitation may occur and mandates background screening of and training for those with regular contact with children (Article 5). It also requires states to collect and store data relating to the identity and the genetic profile of convicted sexual offenders (Article 37), which can prevent known offenders accessing children through sport. The convention encourages the participation of the private sector and civil society in the development and implementation of prevention policies (Article 9).

Further, it sets standards for promoting national and international co-operation in this field, which is important given the international nature of organised sport, whereby coaches and other sports staff and volunteers may move across countries, regions and sports disciplines.

■ The Council of Europe Istanbul Convention (2011)

The Council of Europe [Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence](#), known as the Istanbul Convention, aims to prevent gender-based violence against girls and women, protect them from harm, prosecute perpetrators and ensure co-ordinated policies in this area. As recognised by the Istanbul Convention and the Council of Europe more generally, gender-based violence and domestic violence disproportionately affect women and girls.

The Istanbul Convention requires states to promote principles of equality between women and men, non-stereotyped gender roles, mutual respect and non-violent conflict resolution in interpersonal relationships in formal and informal educational facilities, as well as sports contexts. A body of independent experts (GREVIO) monitors implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

The Istanbul Convention also requires states to take measures to exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate, punish and provide reparation for acts of gender-based violence against women and girls, and to establish specialist support services for victims of gender-based violence against women and girls. It requires law-enforcement authorities to ensure an immediate response to allegations of gender-based violence and to ensure that specialist support services be provided to/arranged for all women victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence and their children.

The convention criminalises psychological, physical and sexual violence, forced abortion and forced sterilisation.

This is relevant as some athletes have spoken out about how they have been pressured into having an abortion to avoid taking time off training and maintain their sporting performance.

■ The Anti-trafficking Convention (2005)

The [Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings](#) sets out legal obligations to prevent trafficking in human beings, protect victims, punish perpetrators and engage in international co-operation. The convention applies to all forms of human trafficking (whether national or transnational, linked or not linked to organised crime), all trafficked persons and all forms of exploitation.

It adopts a child-sensitive approach, making it clear that all measures must take into account the best interests of the child. States are obliged to prevent trafficking through education and awareness raising, to discourage demand that fosters exploitation, to identify victims, including children, to assist them in their recovery and to apply special protection measures for child victims.

■ The European Social Charter

The [European Social Charter](#) (1961) and the [Revised European Social Charter](#) (1996) set out fundamental social and economic rights that are relevant to the protection, well-being, safety and development of individuals, including children.

The Charter guarantees the right of children to be protected against all forms of exploitation (Article 7, paragraph 10), including labour and sexual exploitation (such as child prostitution, child pornography and sex trafficking of children). States must take specific measures to prohibit and combat all forms of child sexual exploitation, including by criminalising these acts and protecting children against the misuse of information technologies. The Charter also prohibits children from entering employment in any sector, including sport, until the age of 15 (Article 7, paragraph 1).

The Charter also affords children the right to effective protection against negligence and violence, alongside other social, legal and economic protections (Article 17), and contains measures to enable children to enjoy the highest possible standards of health.

■ Convention 108+ (2018)

The [Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to the Processing of Personal Data](#), known as Convention 108+, protects individuals with regard to the processing of their personal data, contributing to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and in particular the right to privacy. It pays specific attention to the data-protection rights of vulnerable individuals, including children.

Convention 108+ applies to the public and private sector so includes sports organisations, sports event organisers and anti-doping bodies. It requires that personal data, and especially “sensitive data” such as biometric and health/physiological data, are subject to strict security measures and restricted use. For example, data collected for performance monitoring and/or doping control must not be used for unrelated purposes.

Convention 108+ also provides strict rules for cross-border data transfers, allowing these only if adequate protection is guaranteed in the recipient country, and has implications for the sharing of child safeguarding case data and child safeguarding concerns between agencies nationally and internationally.

European Sports Charter

The [European Sports Charter](#) (ESC) is a recommendation of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe that promotes positive values such as child safeguarding, inclusion, ethical conduct and human rights in sport. As opposed to the previous instruments, the ESC is not legally binding.

It recommends that states and sports bodies protect children from physical, psychological and sexual abuse in sport and that they ensure that facilities, coaching and organisations respect participants' dignity and prevent exploitation or corrosive disciplinary environments.

The charter makes clear that government authorities, civil society/NGOs and the private/professional sector all have a role to play in respecting human rights, the rule of law, equity and transparency in sport.

It defines ethical standards applicable to integrity, safety and child protection, and highlights sport's role in promoting social cohesion, gender equality and human dignity.

EU Directive 2011/93/EU on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography

This directive contains, *inter alia*, provisions to ensure that when recruiting a person for professional or organised voluntary activities involving children, the criminal record will be checked for sexual offences and if a person did commit a sexual offence, this person will be prohibited from working/volunteering with children. See the directive here: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32011L0093LEX:32011L0093>.

Civil and criminal law

Civil law is a body of laws of a state that regulates private matters. Criminal law is a body of rules and statutes that defines behaviour prohibited by a government because it threatens and harms public safety and the welfare of the state and state institutions. It also establishes punishments for breaking criminal law. In some countries the time when a person can be prosecuted for a criminal offence is limited to a certain number of years following the commission of the offence.

Country-specific context

- ▶ Definitions: of sexual offences and the legal age for sexual activities in criminal law
- ▶ Main legislation, for example criminal law and civil law
- ▶ Statute of limitations for sexual offences
- ▶ Legal sanctions
- ▶ Government/statutory guidance
- ▶ Professional/voluntary sector standards/guidance
- ▶ Sport governance and integrity frameworks

Good practice guidance

Safe Sport International – Declaration of Principles (2014)

The Brunel Declaration sets out the principles that should underpin the protection of all athletes, including young athletes, from all forms of violence in sport.

The International Safeguards for Children in Sport (2014)

In 2001, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC)'s Child Protection in Sport Unit in the UK developed a set of standards for safeguarding and protecting children in sport, which set out how government-funded sports bodies should have appropriate safeguards in place. Subsequently, UNICEF UK has led a partnership of organisations to define the core components/pillars of safeguarding that need to be put in place to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence (including sexual violence) in and through sport.

The eight safeguards are:

1. developing policies;
2. developing a system to respond to safeguarding concerns;
3. advice and support;
4. minimising risks to children;
5. guidelines on behaviour;
6. recruiting, training and communication;
7. working with partners;
8. monitoring and evaluation.

They have been tested with over 50 sports bodies around the world and are becoming adopted by a range of sports bodies. A [guidance document for organisations](#) was produced in 2016 and a specific version for e-sports is also available.

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Recognition of child sexual abuse

How to identify child sexual abuse



This factsheet offers information on

- 1) the barriers children may face when speaking about child sexual abuse involving themselves or others;
- 2) potential indicators;
- 3) sexual grooming; and
- 4) sexually harmful behaviour among children.

In many cases, children do not exhibit clear or specific signs of having experienced sexual abuse. However, the absence of such indicators should not be interpreted as evidence that child sexual abuse has not occurred. Moreover, any behaviours listed as examples below are not diagnostic and should not be considered definitive proof of child sexual abuse.

Why children find it hard to speak out

A mixed-methods study with Australian community sport participants found that fewer than half of children who experienced interpersonal violence in sport ever disclosed to any adult. Disclosure rates were highest for peer-perpetrated violence (35%), followed by coach-perpetrated violence (27%), and lowest when the perpetrator was a parent or carer (13%). Parents were the most frequent recipients of disclosures, yet adult responses typically rationalised or normalised the violence, acting as a buffer that reduced immediate distress but impeding formal reporting. Fear of losing access to sport was a prominent barrier to disclosure for children across all forms of interpersonal violence (Woessner et al. 2023).

- ▶ There are numerous possible reasons why children find it difficult to talk to an adult about sexual abuse that happened to them (Tuakli-Wosornu et al. 2023).
- ▶ They might fear that no one will believe them when they speak out.
- ▶ They may be forced into sexual acts by someone in a position of trust (which means the adult is responsible for the care, supervision or welfare of the child) and a position of power, such as a coach, doctor, an older team mate or leader.
- ▶ They may be threatened about the consequences of telling someone – either to hurt them or their family.
- ▶ They may feel unable to speak out, as the individual who has perpetrated the sexual abuse is regarded as a “family friend”.
- ▶ They may be groomed by an adult building an emotional connection with them to gain their trust and may even believe they are in a “real” relationship with them. Abusers often groom the child’s family and sports team making it even harder for the child to feel they will be believed.

- ▶ They may fear that disclosing what happened will lead to everyone around them finding out.
- ▶ They might not realise that their experience qualifies as abuse.
- ▶ They may be unsure of whom to approach to speak about what has happened or do not have trust in the current reporting systems.
- ▶ They may be unsure how to disclose what has happened due to language or cultural barriers.
- ▶ Psychological effects of trauma, including dissociation and memory gaps, can make it difficult for them to open up to others.
- ▶ Boys may encounter additional barriers as a result of societal expectations around masculinity and the heightened taboo surrounding sexual abuse against males.
- ▶ In sport, children may be dependent on the adult for selection or for participation in competition but in some sports the child also depends on the adult for safety and well-being. This is a big issue when grooming.
- ▶ For children with a recognised athletic potential this psychological bond may be even harder to break.
- ▶ They may feel ashamed and even be made to feel they are in some way responsible for what has happened.
- ▶ In some sports settings there can be a culture of “initiation ceremonies”, which involve sexual abuse. This may also be sanctioned or ignored by adults, making it difficult for a child to speak out against older peers.
- ▶ In cases of child sexual abuse material, children may remain silent out of fear that the images will be shared online or used to threaten them.

Remember that child sexual abuse may include different kinds of behaviours and may involve grooming in person or online. The indicators may include physical, emotional/psychological, sexual, social and behavioural warning signs.

■ Indicators of child sexual abuse

First, it is important to be able to identify what is appropriate sexual behaviour for different stages of development. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children has some useful information about this: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-health-development/sexual-behaviour>.

■ Behavioural indicators of sexual abuse may include:

- ▶ sexualised behaviour that is significantly more advanced than normally expected for a child of a particular age;
- ▶ sexual interest in adults or children of very different ages to their own;
- ▶ forceful or aggressive behaviour;
- ▶ compulsive habits;
- ▶ signs of being afraid of a particular adult;
- ▶ reports from a school or sports club that their behaviour is affecting their progress and achievement;
- ▶ poor sleep;
- ▶ being withdrawn;
- ▶ avoiding or withdrawing from direct contact with a certain adult or multiple adults;
- ▶ isolation;
- ▶ bed wetting;
- ▶ avoiding showing their body to others (for example in the dressing room or during showering);
- ▶ participating in potential harmful activities.

■ Physical indicators:

- ▶ bruises or other injuries;
- ▶ physical discomfort or limitations when walking, sitting or completing routine tasks;
- ▶ sexually transmitted diseases/infections;
- ▶ changes in how one chooses to dress;
- ▶ misuse of alcohol or drugs;
- ▶ weight loss/gain;
- ▶ pregnancy;
- ▶ urinary tract infections.

■ Psychological and emotional indicators:

- ▶ mental health issues (anxiety and/or depression, thoughts about suicide);
- ▶ self-harm;
- ▶ eating disorders;
- ▶ nightmares;
- ▶ sleep disturbances;
- ▶ irritability;
- ▶ trauma-related behaviours (flashbacks, dissociation, etc.);
- ▶ change in friendship group;
- ▶ decline in educational performance.

■ Sexual grooming for abuse

Children can be sexually groomed for abuse by adults or by older, more powerful children. Grooming behaviour can be difficult to distinguish from the behaviour of any other trusted individual in a sports setting. “Groomers” may spend a great deal of time, months or even years, building a relationship with the child’s family and social circle, including sports club colleagues. They may seek out positions of trust and make themselves invaluable club/sport members.

Grooming may take place online and involve non-contact abuse (Helgheim and Frøyland 2025; Brackenridge and Fasting 2005). This is why it is so important that sports clubs and venues have in place safeguarding policies, procedures and codes of conduct or behaviour for all adults and children, both online and offline. These codes should clearly set out what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and they should be well known by sports participants, coaches, board members, volunteers and parents/guardians.

■ Signs of sexual grooming and inappropriate behaviour by adults may include:

- ▶ showing an excessive amount of attention to one or more children;
- ▶ giving gifts or special favours;
- ▶ offering to provide the individual transport for the child to/from training, matches or away events/competitions;
- ▶ befriending children involved in sport who are not their family members on social media sites or other communication channels;
- ▶ testing boundaries of sexually appropriate behaviour, language or humour;
- ▶ requesting that a child arrive before or remain after scheduled sport sessions, thereby creating unsupervised one-on-one situations;
- ▶ posing sexually explicit or suggestive questions to the child;
- ▶ demonstrating an inappropriate level of interest in the child’s body, physical development or appearance;
- ▶ inviting the child to their home or taking them to places outside of a professional context.

Signs in children include those previously described, but you may also notice a child receiving expensive gifts that they cannot account for or being unusually secretive about who they are seeing or where they are going.

Sexually harmful behaviour in children

Sexually harmful behaviour by child peers in sport is more common than is often assumed. Research in Belgium and the Netherlands found that peers were among the most frequently reported perpetrators of sexual violence against children in sport, and that more than half of incidents involved more than one perpetrator (Vertommen et al. 2017). Peer-perpetrated sexual violence often occurs in group settings and may include initiation or hazing rituals. Importantly, children under 16 were identified as alleged perpetrators in some cases, including in incidents against children under 12, which underlines that sexually harmful behaviour by children can involve a meaningful age and power gap between perpetrator and victim. Hackett (2014) noted in a review not specific to sport that children and

young people are responsible for approximately 25% of convictions related to victims across all age groups, and account for one third of sexual abuse cases that come to the attention of the UK's professional safeguarding system.

It is essential that adults in sport are aware of the signs and know how to respond. In sport there have been reported incidents of initiation or "hazing" rituals in sports teams that have involved sexually abusive and harmful behaviour. They affect the lives of the children impacted, the lives of children who demonstrate these harmful behaviours and bystanders (individuals who are not directly involved in the situation as a "victim" or "perpetrator" but, by their presence, have the ability to react to the situation positively or negatively before, during or after the occurrence (Banyard 2008)). These should be treated as violations of codes of conduct.

Key references

- ▶ Brackenridge C. and Fasting K. (2005), "The Grooming Process in Sport: Narratives of Sexual Harassment and Abuse", ResearchGate, available at (PDF) [The Grooming Process in Sport: Narratives of Sexual Harassment and Abuse](#).
- ▶ Banyard V. L. (2008), "Measurement and correlates of prosocial bystander behaviour: the case of interpersonal violence", *Violence and Victims* 23(1), pp. 83-97.
- ▶ Hackett S. (2014), "Children and young people with harmful sexual behaviours, research in practice", available at: https://tce.researchinpractice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/children_and_young_people_with_harmful_sexual_behaviours_research_review_2014.pdf.
- ▶ Helgheim É. P. B. and Frøyland L. R. (2025), "Conceptualizing 'grooming' in child sexual abuse: a scoping review of Scandinavian and non-Scandinavian research", *Nordic Journal of Criminology* 26(2), pp. 1-23, available at: <https://doi.org/10.18261/njc.26.2.7>.
- ▶ Tuakli-Wosornu Y. A. et al. (2023), "The journey to reporting child protection violations in sport: stakeholder perspectives", *Front Psychol* 13, 907247, available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.907247>.
- ▶ Vertommen T. et al. (2017), "Profiling perpetrators of interpersonal violence against children in sport based on a victim survey", *Child Abuse & Neglect* 63, pp. 172-182, ISSN 0145-2134, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.11.029>.
- ▶ Woessner M. N. (2023), "Telling adults about it: children's experience of disclosing interpersonal violence in community sport", *Sport in Society*, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2023.2268555>.

Useful resources

- ▶ Pro Safe Sport website, available at: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/safe-sport>.
- ▶ The International Olympic Committee has produced a toolkit to help adults (coaches and sport federations) to put safeguards in place for athletes of all ages and to identify and respond to sexual harassment and abuse: www.olympics.com/athlete365/app/uploads/2020/12/IOC_Safeguarding_Toolkit_ENG_Screen_Full.pdf.
- ▶ The NSPCC's Child Protection in Sport Unit has a website that has many useful resources to help parents and adults in sport to identify and respond to a range of concerns about sexual violence:
- ▶ <https://thecpsu.org.uk/resource-library/best-practice/harmful-sexual-behaviour-by-young-people-in-sport/>;
- ▶ <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/grooming>;
- ▶ <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/child-abuse-and-neglect/child-sexual-exploitation>.
- ▶ The International Safeguards for Children in Sport with guidance for implementation are available on this website: <https://safeinsport.org/>.

Key references

- ▶ Hartill M. et al. (2023), "Prevalence of interpersonal violence against children in sport in six European countries", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, p. 146, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2023.106513>.
- ▶ Lang M. (2015), "Touchy subject: a Foucauldian analysis of coaches' perceptions of adult-child touch in youth swimming", *Sociology of Sport Journal* 32(1), pp. 4-21.

Responding to child sexual abuse

How to respond to concerns or allegations



This factsheet explains how policies and procedures for addressing concerns or allegations of child sexual abuse are structured, how to respond in a trauma-informed manner when a child discloses abuse and how to handle concerns raised by third parties.

■ Policies and procedures on responding to concerns or allegations of child sexual abuse

Everyone should be familiar with their organisation's policy and procedures and know who to report their concerns to inside and outside the organisation. The safeguarding officer within the organisation plays a vital role in designing these procedures in partnership with senior management and ensuring they are clearly communicated to all members, both adults and children. If the organisation you are working for does not have safeguarding guidelines, you should refer to local children's services (child-protection social services, police, children's charities, etc.) who may be able to help and support you.

BOX – Legal requirements to report concerns about/ allegations of child sexual abuse

(to be completed according to country-specific context)

Please insert information on mandatory reporting requirements in your country.

■ National organisations should have:

- ▶ a written policy about the protection of children;
- ▶ codes of conduct/behaviour for adults and children;
- ▶ written procedures for how to respond to all concerns about children, including when they disclose sexual abuse themselves;
- ▶ complaints and disciplinary procedures;
- ▶ a designated person for child protection who everyone knows how to contact.

What matters most is that these policies and procedures are properly implemented throughout the organisation, so everyone is aware of them and puts them into practice.

Sports clubs must at least ensure that children are aware of their rights and any helplines they can turn to, and ensure that people in the club know who to report their concerns to. Different countries will have widely differing minimum expectations. There are not always policies and procedures for responding to concerns about children in

sports organisations, so sports leaders/coaches need to know what is in place, such as statutory agency contacts and child/adult helplines.

■ Information sharing and confidentiality

- ▶ An information-sharing agreement, joint working, a memorandum of understanding and multi-agency collaboration between organisations and statutory agencies are vital to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to be safe.
- ▶ Data-protection rules generally allow the sharing of information where necessary for the protection of children or adults at risk.
- ▶ Always keep key reports confidential but be prepared to share them on a "need to know basis" where it is necessary, proportionate and legal to do so.
- ▶ Statutory services and law enforcement may take priority when there is a criminal concern – be guided by them as to how and when to share information.
- ▶ Ensure awareness of data-protection legislation and consult national data-protection and safeguarding experts to align data-protection requirements with the need for appropriate information sharing in case management of child sexual abuse cases. It is essential to remember that data protection must not come at the expense of safeguarding.

■ How to respond to a child who tells you that they have experienced sexual abuse: dos and don'ts

Remember that most children find it extremely hard to tell someone they are experiencing sexual abuse. The voice of the child must be respected throughout this process. The engagement with the child must be appropriate to their age, cognitive ability, cultural sensitivity and gender awareness. When responding, always apply a trauma-informed approach, which means that you recognise the widespread impact of trauma and integrate this knowledge into policies, procedures and practices to prevent re-traumatisation and promote healing.

It is very important to:

- ▶ keep calm and not show shock or disapproval;
- ▶ listen carefully to what the child says;
- ▶ assure the child that speaking out was the right thing to do and emphasise that what happened is not their fault;
- ▶ tell the child that what happened to them should never have occurred;
- ▶ let the child freely recall what they want to say;
- ▶ only ask questions to clarify something you may not have understood;
- ▶ use open-ended questions allowing the child to unfold their own narrative about their experience. If you need to repeat a question for clarification, explain clearly and specifically why you are asking again. Otherwise, the child might think you want them to change what they already said;
- ▶ recognise the trust that the child has in you to disclose this to you;
- ▶ keep a detailed record of the child's account;
- ▶ avoid making any promises that you may not be able to keep, such as keeping what the child says secret;
- ▶ establish if the child is at immediate risk of further sexual abuse and/or needs immediate care;
- ▶ tell the child what you are going to do next;
- ▶ provide information on other sources of help such as child helplines;
- ▶ pass on the report to the designated person with responsibility for child protection in the sports organisation, as soon as possible. If they are not available, ensure that you pass information to statutory agencies who can take action to investigate the allegations and ensure the child's safety. Take their advice on who should contact the child's parents.

■ What is the appropriate response when a concern is brought forward by a third party rather than the child or the person directly affected?

Never assume that someone else will take the necessary steps. Every person within the organisation should be prepared to carry out the following actions.

- ▶ **Recognise** – Listen carefully to their story and what elements could imply that sexual abuse has occurred. Be mindful that the person raising the concern may show signs of secondary trauma.
- ▶ **Respond** – Act appropriately when a child may be at risk of experiencing sexual abuse. Estimate if there is a current risk of new sexual abuse and involve emergency services when necessary. If you observe signs of secondary trauma, guide the person towards appropriate support services or helplines.
- ▶ **Record** – Use your recording form (if you have one), record facts, observations not judgments, in as much detail as possible (who, what, when, where, how).
- ▶ **Report** – Pass on concerns to the designated person for safeguarding or the responsible authorities – either at the national level or local level depending on your sport's and national/local government's requirements.

Keep the person who brought forward the concern updated on how the sports organisation intends to respond.

■ Complaints and disciplinary procedures

Successful criminal prosecutions can be hard to achieve even with the most sophisticated systems, as the criminal threshold of "beyond reasonable doubt" is difficult to attain with vulnerable victims, especially as sexual abuse often takes place in secret. National organisations therefore are responsible for dealing with allegations against their own staff and volunteers. This should remain the case even in instances where criminal prosecution is pursued.

Support services in country

(to be completed according to country-specific context)

- ▶ Information on safeguarding officers in sport organisations
- ▶ Information on key support services and helplines in your country:
 - Emergency services;
 - National and local statutory services;
 - Law enforcement;
 - Mental health support services;
 - Legal services (include pro bono services if any are available);
 - Children's charities.

There is a need to develop policies and procedures to deal with breaches of codes of conduct that are fair and include:

- ▶ complaints processes;
- ▶ disciplinary hearings;
- ▶ grievances;
- ▶ appeals;
- ▶ sanctions.

■ Help for the child and others who are affected

Sports bodies and statutory agencies should provide information on local and national services for victims, their families and others who have been affected.

It is strongly advised to prepare in advance rather than wait for a crisis to implement safeguarding measures. Conducting a mapping of available support and resources at the local level before any incident occurs is an important recommendation. When concerns do arise, these pre-established connections can enable timely intervention, access to remedies and appropriate support for those affected.

■ Preparing for the effects and aftermath, including re-victimisation – Maintaining a child trauma-informed approach (SAMSHA 2014)

- ▶ Have a basic knowledge about trauma and understand how trauma can affect individuals, families, groups, organisations and communities.
- ▶ Recognise the signs of trauma. Education about the signs of trauma is essential for people within the sports organisation.

- ▶ Respond by applying the principles of a trauma-informed approach that contains six key principles (more info: [SAMSHA 2014: 11](#)):

1. safety;
2. trustworthiness and transparency;
3. peer support;
4. collaboration and mutuality;
5. empowerment, voice and choice;
6. cultural, historical and gender issues.

- ▶ Resist re-traumatisation: avoid triggering painful memories and re-traumatisation of children with trauma histories. Ensure children are not re-victimised through other people's responses and reactions.
- ▶ Provide support to them and information to the others affected so they understand the organisation's and/or statutory agencies' decisions.
- ▶ Ensure that those affected are directed to relevant forms of support, including mental health services, legal guidance and other professional assistance tailored to their needs.

■ Key references

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2014), "SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach", HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884, Rockville, MD.

What is trauma?

Trauma results from an event, series of events or a set of circumstances that are experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that have lasting adverse effects on the individuals' functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being (SAMHSA 2014).

Prevention of child sexual abuse

What organisations can do to prevent child sexual abuse in and through sport



This factsheet outlines possible preventive measures that sports organisations can implement, such as developing safeguarding policies, conducting risk assessments, establishing codes of conduct and applying safer recruitment procedures to prevent child sexual abuse.

Putting in place practical preventive measures

Child participation is key

When developing and implementing preventive measures it is important that children's voices are heard during the whole process (Council of Europe 2020). According to Lundy's Model of Participation, which provides a way of conceptualising Article 12 of the UNCRC,¹ four elements are important to guarantee child participation (Lundy 2007):

1. **Space:** children must be given safe, inclusive opportunities to form and express their views.
2. **Voice:** children must be facilitated to express their views.
3. **Audience:** the views must be listened to.
4. **Influence:** the views must be acted upon, as appropriate.

Creating a high-quality and professional child-centred environment, where children understand their rights and feel confident to discuss things that worry them, is essential to prevent child sexual abuse.

Involve parents

Parents should be able and encouraged to ask questions about their children's sport. This can be achieved by offering opportunities at the start, throughout and at the end of the sports season for individuals to ask questions and receive information on:

- ▶ coach qualifications;
- ▶ staff/volunteer experience;
- ▶ staff/volunteer background checks and safer recruitment procedures;
- ▶ safeguarding procedures of the sports organisation (for example, what are the complaint procedures of the organisation and is there a process for raising concerns as a parent?).

Preventive measures

In previous factsheets we have talked about the steps that need to be taken by organisations to respond to concerns; see Factsheet 4. Child sexual abuse can coexist with other forms of violence. As such, efforts to address child sexual abuse in sport must form part of a comprehensive safeguarding strategy that protects children's right to participate in safe, respectful and non-violent sporting environments.

A good practice example of what safeguards need to be put in place and how to go about this are the [International Safeguards for Children in Sport](#) and accompanying guidance for sports governing bodies. These have been tested by over 50 organisations from National Olympic Committees to small sport-for-development organisations.

The eight safeguards

The International Safeguards for Children in Sport are as follows:

- ▶ Developing your sports organisation's policy;
- ▶ Procedures for responding to safeguarding concerns;
- ▶ Visible and accessible advice and support;
- ▶ Minimising risks to children and young people;
- ▶ Guidelines for behaviour;
- ▶ Recruiting, training and communicating;
- ▶ Working with partners;
- ▶ Monitoring and evaluation.

The guidance notes provide step-by-step help and practical advice and examples from a range of organisations across the globe who took part in the pilot scheme. The guidance notes are referenced below.

1. Article 12 of the UNHCR states that:

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.
2. For this purpose, the child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law.

■ Codes of conduct

Children often do not formally disclose their experiences of sexual abuse but rely on adults to see the signs in them and in the behaviour of their abusers (Hartill et al. 2023). It is essential that sports bodies put in place codes of conduct that set out acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for adults and children.

- ▶ In situations where an adult holds a position of power or trust over a child, any sexual relationship is considered non-consensual under the law (if this is the case under national law).
- ▶ A person of any age and gender may be involved in the sexual abuse of a child (Hartill et al. 2023).
- ▶ Children have clear boundaries when it comes to their own bodies and these boundaries must be respected (Lang 2015).
- ▶ Children have rights, like the protection against sexual abuse, that must be placed at the heart of all activities, whether in physical settings or online environments (UNCRC 1989).
- ▶ Alongside these rights come responsibilities that are appropriate to a young person's capability – such as treating others with respect, adhering to the code of conduct and seeking help or speaking up (also known as bystander intervention).
- ▶ Sport is one of the many environments in which children develop but not the only one. Family, friends and school environments must continue to be part of the child's life as their sporting level advances.
- ▶ Children have dreams, opinions, ideas and a clear voice about everything that affects them. They must be listened to and their views must be heard in everything to do with their own development (UNCRC 1989).
- ▶ You seek help if you break a bone – you should also seek help if you feel emotional pain.
- ▶ Children who have experienced sexual abuse are never to blame. It is essential to avoid any form of victim blaming.

■ Risk assessments in sports organisations

Risks of all forms of abuse increase with a child's performance level, when:

- ▶ children start to travel away from home and normal safeguards;
- ▶ talented and elite child athletes depend on their coaches and entourages for success and selection;
- ▶ elite sport is characterised by a "win at all costs" approach. Talented children gradually enter an adult performance world where they are "often children by age but adults by way of life". This is referred to as status confusion.

Some children are made more at risk of abuse by our lack of awareness and action to safeguard them. For instance, disabled children who may be more dependent on the adults who are abusing them for participation and progression in sport or children who are LGBTQI+ and who may be discriminated against.

■ Assessing organisational risk

Sports organisations need to identify potential safeguarding risks as part of good governance. Safeguarding risks should form part of this process as well as health and safety. Sports should develop and maintain risk registers. These should both cover assessments of risk and define the controls for minimising or removing potential hazards or risks. For sports events, safeguarding plans should be put in place that are relevant to the competition level. Guidance can be found on the NSPCC website: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/safer-activities-events>.

■ Assessing risks presented by individuals

This may form part of a recruitment process where safeguarding checks reveal concerns about an individual's suitability to work with children. Equally, concerns may arise during or following safeguarding or a child-protection investigation. Sports organisations may need to make an assessment of risk and/or suitability. This must involve a structured approach to assessment informed by good practice, which enables an organisation to make informed and defensible decisions.

States are strongly encouraged to explore mechanisms for providing and facilitating criminal record checks for individuals who have regular contact with children, and to ensure these checks are applicable within the context of sport. This recommendation is supported by various international standards, both within and beyond the sporting sector, such as the Lanzarote Convention (2007) and the International Safeguards for Children in Sport (2016). As a sports organisation you should ensure that such provisions and measures are applied to both voluntary activities and volunteers as well as paid positions ([Guidelines on safer recruitment in sport](#), Council of Europe 2025).

■ Safer recruitment procedures

Recruiting individuals who are suitable to work or volunteer with children is a key component in efforts to safeguard children from harm and promote their rights. While criminal record checks play an important role, they cannot detect those who have not yet come to the attention of authorities or those that have been subject to criminal proceedings but have not received a criminal conviction. Therefore, additional measures – forming part of a comprehensive, 360-degree approach to safer recruitment – are essential to uphold best practices in protecting children from sexual violence and safeguarding their rights (Council of Europe 2025).

When, as a sports organisation, you want to recruit new staff and volunteers, it is important to think about exactly what profiles you are looking for and what steps someone needs to take to be hired (for both paid and unpaid positions). By communicating clearly in advance about the expectations related to the role and corresponding responsibilities, you provide structure and a framework for new staff and volunteers. This starts when you post your vacancy and continues to apply during the job interview and induction process when a new staff member or volunteer starts. It is strongly recommended to regularly reinforce these expectations after the person has been hired, for example during the yearly development discussion or appraisal.

It is also advisable to check their professional background (paid and unpaid). Especially if someone will be working with children or vulnerable adults, you want to be able to rule out the possibility that someone may have committed sexual abuse of children in the past and may pose a safety risk to children from the club. We list below several actions you can take as part of the recruitment process. To minimise the risk of appointing individuals who are unsuitable for regular contact with children, it is strongly recommended to implement a combination of measures – adopting a comprehensive 360-degree approach (Council of Europe 2025) – **and providing or** carrying out:

- ▶ a clear role description;
- ▶ an ID-check;
- ▶ a right to work check;
- ▶ a birth certificate check;
- ▶ a criminal history check;
- ▶ employment references;
- ▶ an opportunity for self-disclosure;
- ▶ a qualification/training history check;
- ▶ a face-to-face interview;
- ▶ a (psycho-social) risk assessment;
- ▶ post-interview checks.

More information about these measures can be found in the [Guidelines on safer recruitment in sport](#) (2025).

Sports organisations should have clear policies in place for how to manage concerns raised as a result of conducting a criminal record check and/or other safer recruitment activities, alongside policies for managing concerns identified during employment (Council of Europe 2025).

■ Tips for the induction process

- ▶ Ensure the sports organisation has a clear induction process and applies it to every new staff member and volunteer.
 - Provide information on the safeguarding policy (who is the safeguarding officer, educational sessions, certain guidelines, etc.) and general club operations via, for example, an information brochure.
 - Go over the code of conduct and have them sign it.
 - Make them a member of the club.
 - Provide information on their role and responsibility within the club.
 - Provide a contact person they can contact with questions (you can also work with a mentor).
 - Does someone not have much experience yet? Arrange for someone to meet with an experienced coach or volunteer.
- ▶ Check together whether there are any educational needs in connection with safeguarding and agree on the time frame within which someone can follow a refresher course or training.
- ▶ After the start, regularly monitor how things are going and whether everything is clear.
- ▶ Provide a trial period (usually six months) during which the person is monitored and ask for feedback from colleagues, parents and children.
- ▶ Schedule an evaluation meeting after a few weeks.

More information on safer recruitment in sport and guidelines on conducting criminal record and other background checks can be found in the [guidelines of the EPAS Governing Board](#).

The Council of Europe's Start to Talk project provides useful resources to support public authorities and sports organisations in their work to prevent child violence and abuse and make sport safer for children, including policy-making support, as well as awareness raising and training tools. Further information about the Start to Talk project as well as its available tools can be found [here](#).

Key references

- ▶ United Nations (1989), United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child>.
- ▶ Council of Europe (2020), "Listen – Act – Change: Council of Europe handbook on children's participation", available at: <https://edoc.coe.int/en/childrens-rights/9288-listen-act-change-council-of-europe-handbook-on-childrens-participation.html>.
- ▶ Council of Europe (2025), Guidelines on safer recruitment in sport: human rights-compliant screening of professionals and volunteers in contact with children, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/37-guidelines-on-safer-recruitment-in-sport-pool-of-international-expe/1680b6bef8>.
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- ▶ Hartill M. et al. (2023), "Prevalence of interpersonal violence against children in sport in six European countries", *Child Abuse & Neglect* 146, 106513, available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S014521342300501X>.
- ▶ FIFA Guardians, Safeguarding in Football programme, available at: <https://safeguardinginfootball.fifa.com/>.
- ▶ FIG policy and procedures for safeguarding and protecting participants in gymnastics, available at: www.gymnastics.sport/site/pdf/safeguarding/20180927_Policy%20and%20Procedures_V14_with%20charts.pdf.
- ▶ Guidelines and codes of practice promoting best practice for the protection of children in sport consistent with child-protection guidance and legislation, available at: www.sportireland.ie/ethics/safeguarding-sport.
- ▶ International safeguards for children in sport with guidance for implementation are available on this website: <https://safeinsport.org/>.
- ▶ IOC resources "Safeguarding athletes from harassment and abuse in sport", IOC Toolkit for IFs and NOCs", available at: www.olympics.com/athlete365/app/uploads/2020/12/IOC_Safeguarding_Toolkit_ENG_Screen_Full.pdf.
- ▶ Play by the Rules was developed in 2001 by the South Australian Department for Sport and Recreation as an interactive education and information website on discrimination, sexual harassment and child protection in sport, available at: <https://www.play-bytherules.net.au/>.
- ▶ Safe Sport Climate – regulations by the Flemish government for sport organisations (Belgium), available at: www.sport.vlaanderen/veilig-sportklimaat/veilig-sportklimaat/.
- ▶ Safer Grassroots Sport, Erasmus+ project with a safe sport self-assessment tool and safe sport digital toolkit, available at: <https://safergrassport.eu/>.
- ▶ UEFA child safeguarding toolkit for UEFA member associations, available at: https://editorial.uefa.com/resources/025e-0f920dc4d3d5-600a1c849f53-1000/uefa_child_safeguarding_toolkit_for_uefa_member_associations.pdf.

Useful resources

- ▶ APAP (2022), Manual para a proteção de crianças e jovens no desporto, available at: <https://apav.pt/manual-para-a-protecao-de-criancas-e-jovens-no-desporto/>.
- ▶ FIBA safeguarding policy, available at: <https://assets.fiba.basketball/image/upload/documents-corporate-others-integrity-fiba-safeguarding-policy.pdf>.



start to talk

Education and raising awareness

How to raise awareness about child sexual abuse in sport and how to introduce the subject for discussion



This factsheet provides guidance on the key elements that should be included in the education of children, coaches, staff, volunteers and parents to help them recognise and respond to child sexual abuse in sport. It also offers practical tips for designing campaigns and materials to raise awareness about this issue.

Education on recognising and responding to child sexual abuse

Everyone in contact with children has a role to play in their protection. They can only do so confidently and effectively if they are aware of and have the necessary understanding of and the opportunity to develop, practise and implement key skills. Organisations providing sporting activities for children have a responsibility to provide training and development opportunities for staff and volunteers on the topic of child sexual abuse. In addition, children should be provided with training to help them understand which behaviours are acceptable and which are not, as well as who they can turn to if they experience sexual abuse.

Education for both adults and children in sports organisations alone does not ensure awareness that child sexual abuse can occur in sport, nor does it guarantee that they know whom to contact if they have concerns or have experienced abuse themselves. This should be integrated into clear and effective safeguarding policies, with regular efforts to refresh and update knowledge on the topic.

Everybody working with children in sport needs to be provided with education and learning opportunities in order to:

- ▶ understand the signs of sexual violence;
- ▶ know how to respond;
- ▶ know how to report their concerns;
- ▶ know how to put into practice what they have learned.

People with more significant responsibilities for safeguarding, like child safeguarding officers, need both education and support to fulfil their roles. When designing educational materials, it is essential to ensure they are age-appropriate, culturally sensitive and contextually relevant.

People delivering training on child sexual abuse should be qualified trainers due to the sensitivity of the topic and the ability to manage the needs of adult learners.

The Council of Europe has launched a new online module on child safeguarding in sports, developed by the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport in the framework of the Start to Talk project and published under the Council of Europe Programme for Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals (HELP).

This innovative module forms part of the HELP course on human rights in sports and aims to strengthen the capacity of legal professionals and sport stakeholders to prevent and respond to violence, abuse and exploitation of children in sport, in line with Council of Europe standards on human rights and the protection of children. The module can be taken independently of the course.

The course is available on the HELP e-learning platform [here](#).

Basic training needs for staff and children

In a number of countries there is now access to e-learning to provide basic information to a number of learners. This will generally provide an introduction to safeguarding, including child sexual abuse. Educational sessions for children should ideally be conducted in person, ensuring that a trusted adult is present to provide appropriate support and safeguard against potential re-victimisation.

All staff and volunteers who work directly with children must be provided with the opportunity to undertake face-to-face or online training. The basic training includes:

- ▶ how to identify signs of child sexual abuse;
- ▶ how to respond to concerns;
- ▶ how to report them.

For coaches and others in roles working directly with children they should have access to opportunities to keep their knowledge up to date. This might be known as continuous professional development. Topics might include basic principles of trauma-informed practice, online abuse, working with elite athletes or homophobic bullying. Training needs to be tailored for particular roles such as coaching.

To deliver training at different levels, the following step-by-step approach can be used:

- ▶ Introductory;
- ▶ Basic;
- ▶ Specialist;
- ▶ Continuous professional development.

Safe Sport International provides several online courses for different key stakeholders in sport clubs:

Coaches: www.safesportinternational.com/online-courses/i-protect-courses/coaches/

Club leadership: www.safesportinternational.com/online-courses/i-protect-courses/club-leadership/

Parents and families: www.safesportinternational.com/online-courses/i-protect-courses/i-protect-parents-families/

Safeguarding leads: www.safesportinternational.com/online-courses/i-protect-courses/i-protect-safeguarding-leads/

Event and facility managers: www.safesportinternational.com/online-courses/i-protect-courses/club-event-management/

■ Training for child safeguarding officers

Where national sports organisations or clubs have designated people in safeguarding roles, they should have specialist training. Several topics should be part of this training:

1. Defining interpersonal violence in sport and safeguarding, prevalence data, impact;
2. Understanding the safeguarding officer's role;
3. Legal and regulatory frameworks;
4. Prevention of interpersonal violence;
5. Safeguarding policy, procedures and structures for responding to safeguarding concerns in a trauma-informed way;
6. Safeguarding at events;
7. Partner organisations for advice and support.

The International Olympic Committee organises each year a comprehensive safeguarding officers course: "The IOC Certificate – Safeguarding Officer in Sport". More information: www.sportsoracle.com/course/ioc-certificate-safeguarding-officer-in-sport/. Also, many international sport federations, including UEFA, FIFA and FIBA, provide training courses for safeguarding officers in their respective sports.

Raising awareness of child sexual abuse

■ Key considerations for awareness raising

- ▶ Be clear about the nature of the issue and why this is a problem – provide the supporting evidence and case studies to bring the issue alive.
- ▶ When inviting a speaker with lived experience of sexual abuse in sport, organisers must take proactive steps to ensure a safe and supportive environment. This includes providing on-site access to a qualified mental health professional for audience members who may experience distress or trauma reactivation, offering a quiet space for reflection, and informing participants in advance that sensitive content will be shared – emphasising that it is acceptable to leave the room if needed. Equally important is offering appropriate care and support to the speaker, recognising the emotional impact of sharing such experiences.
- ▶ Acknowledge that there may be survivors of sexual abuse present – whether in the audience or among the speakers – who have not disclosed their experiences and may wish to access confidential support.
- ▶ Be clear about the outcomes/changes you want to see and ensure that this is realistic and achievable.
- ▶ Be clear who your audience is – for example, children, parents, coaches, the general public or government.
- ▶ Engage key stakeholders – such as a diverse group of audience representatives (including children) – to ensure your message is clear, respectful and free from offensive language.
- ▶ Agree clear, simple messages for your audience.
- ▶ Decide on what supporting materials you want to create and for whom – agree a budget and costs for the different elements, research previous campaigns on your subject and find out what has worked well with these.

- ▶ Decide on the communication methods you want to use: website, printed materials or social media.
- ▶ Agree how success will be monitored and evaluated at the outset.
- ▶ Agree the time scale and key moments for the campaign.
- ▶ If an organisation is to undertake an awareness campaign, it must be able to provide appropriate support for survivors when working with testimonials from young people who disclose their experiences.
- ▶ If you encourage a young person to disclose via a campaign but then you cannot provide the support needed, you might cause more harm than good.

■ Specific considerations for sensitive topics, including child sexual abuse campaigns

- ▶ Ensure that you involve safeguarding experts and children in the design and development of your campaign and resources.
- ▶ Where resources are developed for children, they must be: age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate; culturally sensitive; accessible in a safe and supportive environment. For young children this should involve parents or other trusted adults such as teachers, trained staff/volunteers. They must also be tested with their audience before being rolled out.
- ▶ Children and adults who may be affected by the subject matter must be directed to sources of information and help such as confidential helplines and specialist agencies.
- ▶ Where education and training programmes are developed, these must be delivered by people who have been suitably trained or are qualified.

■ Useful resources

- ▶ Compendium of resources on safe sport, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/61-compendium-of-resources-on-safe-sport/1680b2ac47>.
- ▶ E-learning on child safeguarding in basketball, available at: <https://about.fiba.basketball/en/services/integrity/safeguarding/excellence-programs>.
- ▶ E-learning on child safeguarding in football, available at: www.uefa.com/sustainability/child-and-youth-protection/online-training/ and <https://safeguardingfootball.fifa.com/>.
- ▶ E-learning on child safeguarding in gymnastics, available at: www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLkdUU_VbpMHFLkEVD0p50hoeBPk2iOxa.
- ▶ E-learning on child safeguarding in sport available at: www.safesportinternational.com/.
- ▶ Erasmus+ project Safe Sport Allies: as part of the Erasmus+ initiative, the Safe Sport Allies project has developed two interactive workshops – one tailored for coaches and another for young athletes – offering essential training on safeguarding in sport. The accompanying handbooks are freely accessible via the www.safesportallies.eu website.
- ▶ Erasmus+ project Safer Grassroots Sport, available at: <https://safergrassport.eu/>.
- ▶ HELP online module on child safeguarding in sports, available at: <https://help.elearning.ext.coe.int/login/index.php>.
- ▶ International standards for children in sport, available at: <https://safeinsport.org/>.
- ▶ IOC Safeguarding Officer Certificate, available at: www.sportsoracle.com/course/ioc-certificate-safeguarding-officer-in-sport/.
- ▶ Pool of international experts on safeguarding, available at: www.coe.int/en/web/sport/pool-of-experts.

Country-specific information on education and training for sports organisations

- ▶ Available education and training for safeguarding officers
- ▶ Available education and training for coaches, children, volunteers, staff, parents and other relevant stakeholders in sport
- ▶ Information on the responsible expert organisation for your country

This toolkit addresses the critical issue of child sexual abuse within the context of sport. In line with the Council of Europe (2007: 14), a child is defined as any individual under the age of 18. It aims to support policy makers, practitioners, organisations and stakeholders by providing clear, practical guidance across key areas, including understanding the scale of the problem, recognising signs of abuse and implementing appropriate responses and preventive measures.

The toolkit is structured into six concise factsheets, covering facts and figures, legal and regulatory frameworks, recognition, response, prevention, and education and awareness, offering a comprehensive yet accessible resource for safeguarding children in sport.

With this toolkit, the Enlarged Partial Agreement on Sport (EPAS) supports public authorities and sports federations in its member states to develop comprehensive safeguarding policies. Additional tools and guidance are available through the Start to Talk project, further strengthening efforts to protect children in sport.

This toolkit is the result of the work carried out by the Council of Europe's Pool of International Experts on Safe Sport to update the previous training kit to prevent and react to situations of potential sexual violence against children and young people in sport developed within the European Union–Council of Europe joint project Pro Safe Sport+.

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.