Safe Sport and safeguarding in sport: A review and synthesis of the literature

Prepared by the Sport Information Resource Centre (SIRC)

Last updated: January 2025

Acknowledgements

The Sport Information Resource Centre (SIRC) thanks Dr. Joseph Gurgis, PhD, for reviewing, editing, and providing feedback on the content of this literature review.

Introduction

Playing sport is encouraged for its ability to provide participants with opportunities to develop mutual understanding, fair play and teamwork in addition to a variety of health benefits (Tuakli-Wosornu & Kirby, 2022). Sport is also considered a driver of positive social change and a platform to celebrate humanity (Hedges, 2014; Tuakli-Wosornu & Kirby, 2022). Until recently, less attention had been paid to the power dynamic that exists between sport leaders and participants, the unregulated nature of sport, and growing "win-at-all-costs" attitudes (Kerr et al., 2014).

It's this side of sport that contributes to instances of maltreatment, defined as volitional acts or omissions that result in harm or have the potential for physical or psychological harm (Kerr et al., 2014; UCCMS, n.d.). Across global studies, between 40% and 79% of athletes have reported instances of psychological abuse alone (MacPherson et al., 2022). In a survey of more than 1000 Canadian athletes from 14 to 17 years old, 79.2% reported at least one experience of psychological violence, 39.9% reported physical violence, 35.7% reported neglect, and 28.2% reported sexual violence (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2021). At the Canadian national sport level, of 995 current and retired athletes, 75% reported having experienced at least one harmful behavior in the sport context, primarily in the form of psychological harm and neglect (Willson et al., 2021). For centuries, sport has operated as an unregulated body, meaning cases of physical, mental and emotional maltreatment tend to go unmonitored or evaluated by a third party and perpetrators are often not held accountable (Kerr et al., 2014).

"Safe Sport" has become the widely accepted term to refer to athletes' rights to participate in sports free of maltreatment or any form of violation against human rights (such as bullying, neglect, and physical, psychosocial and sexual abuse). Initially, this body of literature took a "protective" or "reactive" approach to Safe Sport, focusing on eliminating maltreatment at the individual level through educational programs and developing codes of conduct, policies, and procedures (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2021).

Safeguarding aims to take a more proactive, values-based and athlete-centred approach to advancing Safe Sport (MacPherson et al., 2022). Researchers further suggest that for Safe Sport initiatives to be truly effective, they must be grounded in and informed by a human rights and safeguarding lens (Gurgis et al., 2023).

Though more organizations have incorporated Safe Sport strategies into their mandates in response to maltreatment prevention, the current review demonstrates a need for further safeguarding, along with the evaluation and updating of these initiatives on a continual basis (MacPherson et al., 2022). Continued high-profile cases of maltreatment in media further amplifies the need for more effective and evidence-informed sport programming, especially for those that receive lesser media attention despite prevalence of maltreatment evident across all levels and types of sport (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2021) This is critical for advancing Safe Sport environments and ensuring sport participants capitalize on the benefits of sport.

Purpose and objectives

The purpose of this review is to summarize the research on safeguarding initiatives in sport and assess the quality of evidence behind these initiatives. By summarizing this research, our goal is to highlight the importance of evidence-informed safeguarding initiatives for the effective delivery of Safe Sport, as well as the availability of this evidence for all individuals involved in sport (including coaches, parents and guardians and officials). We aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What is safeguarding in sport?
2. Who is responsible for safeguarding in sport?
3. What types of safeguarding initiatives and approaches exist in sport?
4. What quality of evidence do we have to support these safeguarding initiatives and approaches?

The findings of this review are focused on safeguarding in organized sport environments, which involves structured practices and competitions, rules, and an official body to govern and officiate competitions.

Search strategy

For this review, SIRC searched 2 primary databases: Google Scholar and SPORTDiscus in January 2023. The terms and phrases used in the search included “Safe Sport,” “safeguarding,” “safeguarding in sport,” “Safe Sport initiatives,” and “safeguarding initiatives.” We identified additional articles by manually searching through reference lists of key articles included in this review. We included studies if they were peer-reviewed and published in English. In total, we identified 29 articles to include in this review. This search protocol was repeated in December 2024, and an additional 17 articles were included.

Summary of findings

1.1 What is safeguarding in sport?

1.1.1 Defining Safe Sport

A Safe Sport environment is described by researchers as one that is respectful, equitable and violence-free for all individuals involved in sport (Mountjoy et al., 2016, 2021). According to Gurgis et al. (2023), a Safe Sport environment encompasses 3 components:

1. Environmental and physical safety (a safe environment that is free from issues of physical danger from equipment and doping)
2. Relational safety (relationships that are free from sexual abuse, physical abuse, psychosocial abuse, or neglect)
3. Optimising sport (programs that prioritize positive development, rights of inclusion, accessibility, fairness, and safety)

While the term itself is newer to the sport sector, the intent behind Safe Sport has been present for decades. For example, in 1986, Brackenridge and Lyons recognized the increasing high standards of performance set for athletes and advocated for a Code of Practice to be

implemented for coaches and properly qualified sport leaders to optimize athlete wellbeing and potential. Then, in 1996, Sport Canada established the Sport Funding and Accountability Framework (SFAF) which required National Sport Organizations (NSOs) to have a publicly accessible harassment and abuse policy, as well as harassment officers.

By 2006, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) assembled its first consensus statement meeting on sexual harassment and abuse in sport (MacPherson et al., 2022). Despite increased attention on the need for safer sporting environments since the original consensus statement was published, leading experts in the field state that the advancement of Safe Sport has been challenging (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021; Kerr & Stirling, 2019; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2021; Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2018). One reason for this is the lack of a generally accepted definition of Safe Sport or a framework for understanding and advancing Safe Sport in academic literature (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021; Gurgis et al., 2023; Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Consequently, organizations have struggled with inconsistencies in terminology (Gurgis et al., 2023; Kerr & Stirling, 2019; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2021). Despite most definitions reflecting a harm-free environment, even minor inconsistencies can hinder understanding, replicability, transferability and advancement of research and practice (Kerr & Stirling, 2019; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2021).

To demonstrate, in Canada, Safe Sport is conceptualized by some researchers through 'maltreatment' which has been adopted in education and policies (Gurgis et al., 2022). For example, all Canadian NSOs must implement and adhere to the Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS). Within the UCCMS, maltreatment is defined as any serious issue that undermines the health, well-being, performance and security of individuals, communities and society. It includes psychological, physical, and sexual maltreatment and neglect. According to the UCCMS, individuals should have the reasonable expectation when they participate in sport in Canada that it will be in an environment that is free from all forms of maltreatment and that treats every individual with dignity and respect. In contrast, other Canadian scholars use terms such as 'abuse' and 'harassment' in their definition of Safe Sport (Kirby & Demers, 2013).

1.1.2 Defining safeguarding

"Safeguarding" is another Safe Sport term gaining traction. It's derived from child protection legislation and utilized in sport-related legislation in the United Kingdom and Ireland (Hedges, 2014; Gurgis et al., 2023). It has 4 central tenets:

1. Protecting children from maltreatment
2. Preventing harm to children's health or development
3. Ensuring children grow up with the provision of safe and effective care
4. Taking action to enable all children and young people to have the best outcomes

Safeguarding diverges from Safe Sport in that it intends to not only produce harm-free sport environments but also use sport as a vehicle to advance human rights (Gurgis et al., 2023; Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Safeguarding then becomes a measure of athletes' human rights and safety (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). For this reason, safeguarding and associated initiatives have become more prevalent and advocated for by researchers in North America.

Safeguarding is most often defined as action that is taken to promote the welfare of an athlete and protect them from harm (Mountjoy et al., 2021). It further includes the development of policy, educational programs, reporting pathways and investigation mechanisms. For example, in 2016, the IOC updated all its documentation regarding harassment and released the first

Safeguarding Framework for the Olympic Games (Mountjoy et al., 2021; MacPherson et al., 2022).

Safeguarding can be achieved in sport **during** training and competition (adhering to practices and policies), **around** sport (promoting safe decision making), and **through** sport (sport for development programs; Hedges, 2014; Owusu- Sekyere et al., 2019). In sum, safeguarding should function in ways that highlight to sport stakeholders their fundamental right to participate in safe and inclusive sport (Gurgis et al., 2023).

While the obligation to protect athletes from abuse now occupies space in governing bodies such as the Olympic Charter and IOC Code of Ethics, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child reported that there is no mechanism in place to ensure compliance with these obligations by the IOC and other international sport federations (MacPherson et al., 2022). This lends to another key challenge of advancing the Safe Sport movement. That is, the quality of safeguarding initiatives (Kerr et al., 2014).

For example, Canadian Safe Sport scholars found that protection initiatives across 4 different countries (Australia, Canada, United States, United Kingdom) were not grounded in evidence nor had they been evaluated (Kerr et al., 2014). As such, scholars have begun investigating the quality of evidence supporting various initiatives in the sector to determine their actual potential for efficacy (Kerr et al., 2014; MacPherson et al., 2022; Mountjoy et al., 2020; Rich & Gilles, 2015).

1.2 Who is responsible for safeguarding in sport?

Safeguarding sport is the responsibility of all sport participants, including athletes, coaches, officials, parents, volunteers, and sport administrators (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021; Lang & Hartill, 2015; McMahon et al., 2018; Willson et al., 2021). Therefore, it's critical to understand unique experiences, roles, and responsibilities of each participant. Much of the early safeguarding research has centered on high performance athletes, although there have been recent efforts to include other perspectives, such as coaches, sport administrators, athlete support staff, and youth sport athletes (for example, Culver et al., 2024; Furusa et al., 2024).

It's also important to recognize that safe sport and safeguarding initiatives do not serve participants from all backgrounds (Gurgis et al., 2022; Willson et al., 2021). In a 2022 study, Gurgis and colleagues highlighted that equity-denied sport participants experience increased prevalence of maltreatment, harassment, and discrimination. However, Safe Sport initiatives often do not adequately support equity-denied participants. For example, McRae et al. (2024) explored whether the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action were included in NSO Safe Sport policy and practice and found that reconciliation was not included. Additional efforts are needed to include equity-denied voices in safeguarding initiatives and research.

1.2.1 High performance sport

Much of the safeguarding research conducted to date has focused on high performance athletes, as seen in the work conducted in Canada by Willson and colleagues. In 2021, Willson et al. conducted a study exploring prevalence of maltreatment with 995 current and retired Canadian national team athletes and found that 75% of athletes experienced at least one form of harm, with neglect being most common. Importantly, Willson and colleagues highlight that the athletes reported increased experiences of harm during their time on a national team, compared

with their time in sport before joining a national team. In a follow-up study of the same sample, Willson et al. (2023) discussed the mental health impacts of maltreatment, and found that experiences of maltreatment were significantly correlated with decreased well-being as well as increased eating disorders and self-harm among national team athletes. The authors recommend educating coaches on the impact of psychologically harmful coaching behaviours and alternatives (for example, positive coaching).

Utilizing a smaller sub-set from the sample of Canadian national team athletes, Willson et al. (2022) explored athletes' perspectives on challenges and recommendations for advancing Safe Sport, arguing that the inclusion of the athlete perspectives is critical when designing initiatives. The athletes outlined the following challenges for advancing Safe Sport: the normalization of harm in sport, including framing abusive practices as necessary for success in sport; a culture of silence, resulting from fear of retribution for speaking up; and a lack of attention to equity, diversity, and inclusion. To advance Safe Sport, the athletes suggested a whole person approach that prioritizes athletes as people over medals, educating all sport participants (including athletes, coaches, administrators, and support staff), prohibiting sexual relationships between athletes and staff, and mandating independent investigations and accountability processes.

Finally, Mountjoy and colleagues have explored the Safeguarding experiences of elite youth athletes through exploring perceptions of harassment and abuse, as well as an evaluation of safeguarding initiatives at the Youth Olympic Games (Mountjoy et al., 2020; Mountjoy, Vertommen, Tercier, et al., 2022). See section 1.3.1.1 for an overview of safeguarding at the Youth Olympic Games.

1.2.2 Youth sport

In addition to the elite youth explored in Mountjoy and colleagues' work, the experiences of youth in community sport settings is a key area for future safeguarding research and practice.

For example, in the youth sport context, Furusa et al. (2024) conducted a grounded theory study with youth athletes, coaches, administrators, and parents in the United Kingdom to explore how to create a sport environment for youth that is safe and enjoyable. The authors found that the broader sport environment needs to be set up to facilitate safeguarding via physically safe play spaces, access to professional development, and designated safeguarding staff, while the immediate sport context should emphasize building an environment that fosters trusting and welcoming relationships in a developmentally appropriate setting.

Parents are a population that has typically not been included in safeguarding initiatives but could play an influential role in preventing and addressing maltreatment with youth sport athletes (McMahon et al., 2018).

1.2.3 Coaches

Coaches are another important group to consider and include in safeguarding initiatives. Coaches have historically been positioned primarily as perpetrators (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Tam et al., 2020), creating a culture of fear and reactivity among coaching communities (Culver et al., 2024; Tam et al., 2020). Indeed, in Culver et al.'s (2024) study of a community of practice for Canadian coaches on Safe Sport education, the findings highlighted coach concerns around team selection being a "minefield" (p. 6) as well as coaches "second guessing habitual habits" (p. 8) such as communication approaches. The researchers also suggest that Safe Sport is

about more than just athletes and needs to consider other stakeholders – coaches, staff, and parents. This study highlights the need to support coaches in feeling safe, including through educating and positioning them as someone who can create a safe environment, rather than as a perpetrator. Coach education is further explored in sections 1.3.1.3 and 1.3.2.

1.2.4 Sport administrators and other support staff

Beyond coaches, other groups that have been studied are sport administrators (Gurgis et al., 2022), sport psychology consultants (Newman et al., 2024), and sport medicine physicians (Mountjoy et al., 2024).

Gurgis and Kerr (2021) argue it's important to include sport administrators in Safe Sport initiatives given their decision-making authority on issues such as staffing and budget allocation. Gurgis and Kerr interviewed Canadian sport administrators, who highlighted the importance of increased and wider-reaching education within an organization, such as educating all sport participants, rather than only coaches. The study also highlighted the importance of advancing positive concepts such as healthy, inclusive, and fair sport experiences as part of education, to bolster the current harm reduction approaches. Finally, participants outlined the importance of Safe Sport policies that are clearly written and accessible, and more importantly are effectively implemented and adhered to.

Newman et al. (2024) explored sport psychology consultants' experiences working with maltreatment in sport, arguing that these professionals are well positioned to advance safeguarding as a result of the trusting and confidential relationships developed with athletes. The authors found that understanding maltreatment as well as having support to report were barriers to safeguarding. Therefore, it's important to provide education for sport psychology consultants on maltreatment so they can safeguard athletes (Newman et al., 2024).

Similarly, Mountjoy et al. (2024) explored sport medicine physicians' competence in recognizing and reporting maltreatment in sport in a survey of 406 participants from 115 countries. The authors found that despite witnessing maltreatment, the sport medicine physicians did not report it for fear of breaching patient confidentiality or incorrectly diagnosing the issue. An additional barrier was a lack of confidence regarding where and how to report. Notably, over 84% of participants expressed a desire for increased education on athlete safeguarding. The roles and experiences of other sport support staff, such as physiotherapists or other mental health practitioners have not been studied (Gillard et al., 2024).

1.3 Safeguarding initiatives in sport

1.3.1 Safeguarding case studies

1.3.1.1 2018 Youth Olympic Games

Mountjoy and colleagues (2020) surveyed athletes about their experiences at the 2018 Youth Olympic Games (YOG) in Buenos Aires. The YOG consists of athletes primarily from the ages of 15 to 18 years, and the 2018 Games purposefully intended to emphasize Safe Sport and employ safeguarding strategies. In fact, the YOG Framework for Safeguarding Athletes was developed for these Games to clarify the policy and procedures for the prevention, reporting and management of incidents of harassment and abuse.

Moreover, a physical space was dedicated to educational purposes. The space was part of the IOC's newly implemented Athlete365 educational program that aims to provide developmental support and guidance for young athletes, owners and organizers. The space was located at the heart of the Olympic Village Square for easy access and attention and consisted of 5 booths: (1) antidoping, (2) anticompetition manipulation, (3) post-career learning opportunities, (4) Olympic Solidarity, and (5) Safe Sport. The Safe Sport booth was designed with survivors of harassment and abuse, and was staffed by 7 international safeguarding experts, 2 experts by experience (survivors), and 6 volunteers.

The Safe Sport program included a scenario-based education tool to help athletes identify moral and ethical boundaries, an animated film to raise awareness and identify resources, and a "pledge," where the participants received a photograph of themselves pledging to adhere to the values of Safe Sport.

The International Federations also held educational "Focus Days" in the Olympic Village. This, for example, included days dedicated to social media safety and cyber-bullying and an overview of harassment and abuse in sport.

As this was a new approach to the YOG, Mountjoy and colleagues (2020) surveyed athletes about their experiences. Through their surveying, the researchers learned that the multinational cohort of athletes were not knowledgeable about the concept of harassment in sport. When asked to define Safe Sport, the athletes related the concept to physical and environmental safety, fair play and clean sport, rather than sport free from harassment and abuse. Almost half (46%) of the athletes expressed surprise when learning about the various forms of harassment and abuse that fall under the definition.

Despite these findings, it was determined that 72% of athletes rated the educational tools as being good to excellent. This demonstrated that the age group was receptive to the learning tools and style implemented at an elite sporting competition. As well, the experts and volunteers reported that the educational tools were well designed, age appropriate, relevant for the subject matter and engaging for the target audience.

Importantly, this research demonstrated that educational initiatives focused on Safe Sport should occur early in sport and that they are feasible during major events.

1.3.1.2 Canadian Red Cross's (CRC) Water Safety Instructor Development Program

In 2015, Rich and Giles examined a cultural safety training module piloted by the Canadian Red Cross's (CRC) Water Safety Instructor Development program.

The CRCs offers a Swim Program which consists of basic swimming skills, fitness, and water safety. While not focused on organized sport, the program acts as a developmental pathway for organized sports like competitive swimming, artistic swimming, and water polo. As such, the program offers potential learnings for Safe Sport education in organized sport environments.

To deliver the CRCs Swim Program, individuals must undergo the Instructor Development program to become a certified Water Safety Instructor (WSI). The participants in this study were instructors of the CRC's Swim Program who had various levels of experience and qualifications.

A cultural safety approach is one that acknowledges the power relations involved in a provider-recipient relationship. It was first developed in New Zealand to help nurses offer more meaningful, effective health care to the Indigenous peoples in New Zealand. It has since been applied in a similar way to provide more meaningful heath care services to the Indigenous peoples in Canada.

A cultural safety approach requires the recipient to determine whether they have experienced respectful and culturally sound interactions or environments. Cultural safety is more than being knowledgeable about other cultures, but also being self-aware. Those who run programming are called to reflect upon their own accepted norms, values, beliefs and practices to understand how culture may factor into their interactions with participants.

In this pilot program, the researchers delivered a cultural safety training module to 4 different WSI development programs. The cultural safety approach focused specifically on addressing discourses of Whiteness and similarity that manifest in swimming and water safety. The module consisted of 3 components of cultural safety: promotion of self-reflection, understanding of exclusion and application to possible scenarios.

For the program, various optional activities and prompts were provided and could be used to suit the teaching style of the instructor and the needs of the students. First, participants were encouraged to explore and critically reflect on their own culture(s). This was accomplished by discussing culture broadly and then on the more unconscious aspects of culture. Next, participants were led to discuss some of the diverse ways that inclusion and exclusion can be manifested in swimming and water safety programming as well as the ways that instructors and organizations can work to avoid exclusionary practices and conditions. Finally, participants were provided with scenarios that they were encouraged to work through and discuss as a group to apply their thinking.

After interviewing WSI trainers and trainees, Rich and Giles (2015) noted that it was apparent instructors valued the program and desired to deliver inclusive swimming programming. However, there was resistance to alter programming due to desire to promote fairness for all swimmers and to avoid confrontation with parents.

It was also determined that the CRC should offer cultural safety resources and training not only at the instructional level but also at the organizational level. Multilevel cultural safety training would allow aquatics managers and decision makers to reflect on their standard practices and appreciate the complexities of offering inclusive and accommodating programs.

1.3.1.3 Coach Bystander Intervention Training

Verhelle et al. (2024) designed, implemented, and evaluated a bystander intervention training (“All Aboard Program”) for youth sport coaches in Flanders, Belgium, to prevent sexual violence. The program was piloted and then implemented in 9 Flemish sports clubs. Importantly, this is one of the few studies examining an evidence-based intervention and also taking a bystander approach.

The program targets bystander behaviours (how bystanders react to an event) and their determinants (for example, attitudes), and draws on Latané and Darley’s (1970) 5-step bystander process. The authors created a bystander intervention model specific to addressing sexual violence in a sport context: “(1) the coach is vigilant for signs of sexual violence, (2) the

coach adequately responds (for example, addresses the persons involved) to, and (3) reports a situation of sexual violence to the safeguarding officer or the club manager of the sports club" (Verhelle et al., 2024, p. 813). The researchers also involved coaches in the process of designing the program in an effort to bridge the research-practice gap. For the pilot, the program was designed to be completed in small groups of 6 to 8 coaches from the same club, consisting of 3 in-person sessions of 90 minutes. The 3 sessions covered education and understanding of sexual violence, bystander behaviour and assessing sexual violence, and finally, grooming and responding to sexual violence. Following the pilot, the program was scaled using a 'train the trainer' program.

The evaluation found that 61% of coaches felt they learned something through participating in the program and felt that after participating in the program there was something they could do to combat sexual violence. Attitude measures, reflecting coaches' readiness and willingness to act, improved throughout the course of the program and remained stable at a 12-week follow-up. However, despite improved attitudes, behaviour change is not clear at this time (Verhelle et al., 2024). Adriens et al. (2024) have published a protocol for the design and implementation of a bystander training that will address the gaps in Verhelle et al.'s (2024) study. For example, broadening the focus from sexual violence to harassment and abuse.

1.3.2 Studies of publicly available athlete protection initiatives

Three studies have explored the content and delivery of publicly available athlete protection initiatives (Battaglia et al., 2024; Kerr et al., 2014; MacPherson et al., 2022).

First, Kerr et al. (2014) assessed 7 publicly available athlete protection initiatives from 4 countries:

1. Play by the Rules from Australia
2. Speak Out and Respect in Sport from Canada
3. Safe4Athletes and Safe to Compete from the United States of America
4. Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) and Children First from the United Kingdom

To be included in the study, the initiatives needed to have a focus specifically on child maltreatment and protection in sport, give organizations access to information and resources, and be available in the English.

Through a web-based analysis, the researchers found that all initiatives referred to reducing harm and addressed sexual abuse within the content. In addition, 6 of the 7 initiatives referred to notions of raising awareness, addressed physical abuse, and addressed emotional abuse. In contrast, only 4 of the 7 initiatives addressed neglect. In terms of delivery, all of the initiatives provided educational materials and engaged in different modes of dissemination, but only 3 used social media as a dissemination tactic.

The researchers concluded that all initiatives were "protection-focused" instead of promoting overall wellbeing. References to the misuse of power and vulnerability of children were lacking in addition to content related to issues with "win-at-all-costs" mentalities.

Second, MacPherson et al. (2022) assessed 3 organizations' safeguarding strategies, which included overlap with the CPSU in the United Kingdom:

- US Centre for SafeSport from the United States of America
- Child Protection in Sport Unit from the United Kingdom

- Sport Integrity Australia from Australia

To start, MacPherson et al. (2022) noted that the most common method of content delivery was through e-learning modules, though other methods of delivery included podcasts, face-to-face training, and virtual reality.

Intended audiences for the educational materials included coaches, parents and guardians, athletes, committee members, administrators and volunteers. Most organizations also had specialised courses for specific audiences such as health professionals.

Adding to Kerr and colleagues' (2014) findings, the researchers recognized that the organizations typically developed Safe Sport education in 2 ways: (1) through content created by the organization itself, or (2) through partnerships with experts in child protection (in sport and outside of sport). For example, Sport Integrity Australia offers Safe Sport training through partner organizations, such as Play by the Rules, whereas the US Center for SafeSport produces and offers its own maltreatment awareness and prevention courses.

Consistent with findings from Kerr and colleagues (2014), MacPherson et al., (2022) determined that the CPSU and Sport Integrity addressed the 4 types of maltreatment (neglect and physical, sexual, and emotional abuse), whereas the US Center for Safe Sport had no mention of neglect.

With respect to content, all organizations covered reporting processes and each addressed signs and symptoms of maltreatment. Sport stakeholders were also provided with steps for responding to maltreatment disclosures from young athletes (for example, determining when to share concerns with parents). The research team found that generally the programs focused on stakeholder roles with respect to safety in sport, apart from the CPSU which included content about the frequency and nature of stakeholders' contact with young people in sport exclusively (opposed to participants of all ages; MacPherson et al., 2022).

Finally, Battaglia and colleagues (2024) explored the influence of Safe Sport training on Ontario coaches' knowledge, confidence, efficacy to support others, and stress related to athlete well-being and Safe Sport issues. In the review of 11 different education options, 65% of coaches had taken at least 1 training and 35% had taken no training. The authors also found that there was increased uptake for the education at higher levels of sport, where such training is both cost-free and mandatory. In response to this finding, the authors highlight that cost is a barrier to increased uptake of Safe Sport training. While Battaglia et al. (2024) found that the education positively influenced awareness about Safe Sport and coach efforts to support others, the training also led coaches to adopt a risk-averse approach to Safe Sport (for example, "no touch"). Indeed, the authors found that the completion of Safe Sport education was not significantly related to stress about maltreatment or managing athlete well-being. Therefore, further research is needed on effective Safe Sport education.

1.4 Proposed approaches to safeguarding in sport

1.4.1 Cultural approaches to safeguarding

In early efforts, safeguarding had focused primarily on the individual and the organization despite research that would suggest an interplay between individual, organizational, and systemic influences like culture (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2021). In this vein, some researchers

argue that safeguarding initiatives need to target cultural change as a means of addressing both the tangible (such as physical spaces and policy documents) and intangible factors (such as attitudes and behaviours) that influence Safe Sport (Komaki et al., 2021; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2021; Rich & Giles, 2015).

The current culture and increasing "win-at-all-costs" mentality in sport, especially at the youth level, is described as harmful, and one of the key contributors to maltreatment (Komaki et al., 2021; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2021). To address the need for cultural change, Komaki et al. (2021) proposed a strategy, known as "carrots and sticks," that has demonstrated success in other sectors. This safeguarding strategy is based on positive reinforcement theory (Skinner, 1953).

Positive reinforcement theory is a well-established theory that focuses on one's environment and the addition of a positive, pleasant, or desirable outcome following a behaviour. As a major driver of human motivation, the effectiveness of the positive reinforcement methods in other sectors has been substantial. For example, controlled experiments outside of sport using this theory have demonstrated success rates as high as 93%.

Applied to the sport sector, Komaki and Tuakli-Wosornu (2021) suggest that teams should be rewarded for cultivating a positive culture as judged by athletes themselves. For instance, athletes can be asked to complete a weekly (online) safeguarding checklist. In the checklist proposed by the researchers, athletes would be asked questions pertaining to 3 themes: camaraderie, leadership and wellbeing. Instead of being asked directly about wrongdoings, the questions are posed to ask about input and feedback. Individual data would be kept confidential and only group scores would be shared by athletic directors, sport authorities or other sport leaders.

In this model, feedback graphs would be given out for participants to see progress, discuss suggestions for the following week, and adjust accordingly. Struggling coaches are given an opportunity to seek out guidance, while an athletic director, for example, can acknowledge coaches with strong improvement or accomplishments. Team celebrations can be held monthly with results shared with the top team officials and sponsors.

Behind this approach is the idea that sport participants may be more motivated to make behavior changes when positive consequences such as recognition and encouraging feedback ("carrots") are used rather than negative consequences such as sanctions and dismissals ("sticks").

Rather than waiting for reports of abuse, sport organizations and leaders could use this approach as a safeguarding metric to foster positive and encouraging environments that provide a platform for athlete voices. By using a safeguarding metric where athletes highlight positive behaviors (rather than reporting only negative behaviors), the power dynamic shifts. Using checklist data, coaches can be recognized for positive achievements and collective feedback opens opportunities for growth.

The theory behind this safeguarding strategy would suggest that fostering a positive, athlete-centred culture demonstrates that sports organizations care and can also prevent physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Komaki et al., 2021; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2021). Importantly, this approach empowers athletes' voices.

On the other hand, it's important to recognize that this reinforcement model requires a paradigm shift from wrongdoing to "right-doing" and from punishment to reward. Rather than ferreting out "bad apples," the emphasis is on transforming the culture which takes time (Komaki et al., 2021; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2021).

1.4.1.1 Survivor engagement strategies

Another proposed approach to safeguarding involves engaging survivors of maltreatment in the development of safeguarding initiatives (Gattis & Moore, 2022; Mountjoy, Vertommen, Denhollander, et al., 2022; Willson et al., 2021). Survivor engagement aligns with the United Nations survivor-centered approach to violence and has been successfully implemented in other fields like cancer research, mental health, human trafficking and domestic violence (Mountjoy et al., 2022).

According to Mountjoy, Vertommen, Denhollander, et al. (2022), survivors are best equipped to recognize an organization's vulnerabilities in safeguarding, allowing them to adapt to the deficits. Moreover, a survivor-centered approach to safeguarding is believed to empower athletes and ensure their safety due to survivors' lived experiences and understanding of abuse in sport (Gattis & Moore, 2022; Wilson et al., 2022). Within this approach, survivors' choices and autonomy are prioritized (Wilson et al., 2022).

It's important that survivors do not feel used for posterity or retraumatized by the process. Coping strategies and opportunities for survivors to lead in the decision-making processes and voice their concerns should be in place (Mountjoy, Vertommen, Denhollander, et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2022). Currently, there are no guidelines outlining how to engage survivors of harassment and abuse from sport in safeguarding initiatives. However, researchers recommended using the BASE acronym, which suggested that survivors always feel Believed, Acknowledged, Safe and Empowered (Mountjoy, Vertommen, Denhollander, et al., 2022).

In addition, scholars advise that organizations prioritize creating survivor trust, providing respectful and ethical support and ensuring safe institutional policies and procedures (Mountjoy et al., 2022). It's important that survivors are not asked for a testimony only, tokenized, or communicated to in a paternalistic way.

It's recommended that engagement occur in 4 phases: Pre-engagement, invitation, collaboration, and follow up (Mountjoy, Vertommen, Denhollander, et al., 2022). A description of these phases and the BASE acronym is outlined in Figure 1.

Through a survivor-centered or trauma-informed approach to safeguarding, survivors may be able to provide insight into the grooming processes, power dynamics, secrecy and culture around abusive relationships in sport. Some survivors may also have experience with disclosure and can provide feedback on how to improve an organization's reporting mechanisms (Mountjoy, Vertommen, Denhollander, et al., 2022; Gattis & Moore, 2022).

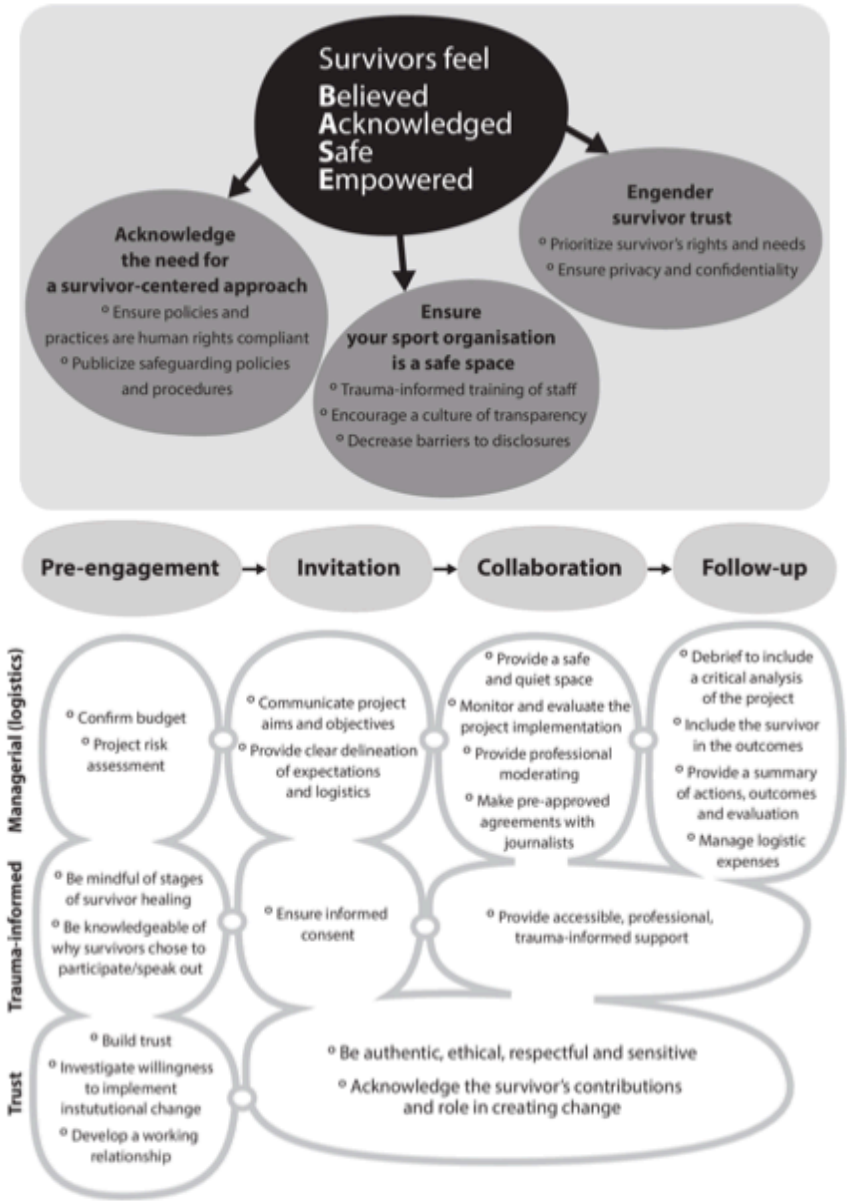

Figure 1. The BASE acronym and phases of survivor engagement (Mountjoy et al., 2021).

1.4.1.2 Trauma informed approaches

Another example of survivor engagement is described by McMahon et al. (2023), who adopted a trauma-informed approach to abuse education in sport. This approach involved the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration's (2014) principles of:

- Adopting a multifaceted approach to the meaning of safety (physical, social emotional; "anytime anyplace learning" (p. 965)
- Building trustworthiness and transparency (for example, outlining the full process verbally and in writing)
- Peer support (for example, the education program was facilitated by 2 survivors)

- Collaboration and mutuality (for example, the use of partners and positioning everyone as having a role to play in safeguarding)
- Empowerment, voice, and choice (for example, shared decision-making on how to engage with content, ongoing consent)
- Cultural, historical, and gender issues (for example, tailoring to the sport context and including athlete voices).

The authors highlight that additional research on trauma-informed approaches is needed, and could be further tailored to other roles and contexts in sport, such as coaches, administrators, and grassroots.

1.4.1.3 The debate around a restorative justice approach

Like a survivor-centered or trauma-informed approach, restorative justice is a theory of justice that places the victim at the centre of the resolution model. Restorative justice is frequently used to address the aftermath of a conflict or a crime.

Rahim (2022) suggested that incorporating restorative justice in advancing Safe Sport can ensure the objectives of Safe Sport are achieved. This safeguarding approach is suggested because the principles and values of restorative justice (respect, responsibility, reintegration and restoration) appear to align with that of Safe Sport.

It's further believed that these values can be used to address non-compliance. Implementing these values on a day-to-day basis can develop greater empathy for everyone in the sport community to work in partnership to uphold the principles of Safe Sport (Rahim, 2022). In developing these guidelines, restorative justice practices can be incorporated to place the survivors in the centre of the whole process.

However, in the Canadian context, there is currently much debate regarding the effectiveness of this approach compared to a national or judicial inquiry. In a national inquiry, the government is called in to investigate cases of maltreatment (Misener & Schneider, 2023). It's encouraged by scholars after continual failing of athlete-centred approaches and upholding of Safe Sport policies by organizations (Donnelly et al., 2016). As such, national inquiry is understood as a way to ensure organizations are held accountable (Misener & Schneider, 2023).

Restorative justice is understood to be a faster alternative to national inquiry as it allows those who have been harmed to share their experiences directly with those responsible and without delay or the need to wait on government action (Kerr, 2023). It's further argued that this approach provides the opportunity for those affected to have input into the direction and culture of the sport system (Kerr, 2023).

However, those supporting a national inquiry would argue that this approach fails to hold the organizations and individuals accountable for their actions (Misener & Schneider, 2023). A national inquiry would instead send a loud and public message to those involved in sport that they are heard, valued and protected. This publicity would also send international message with the potential to set standards for sport globally (Misener & Schneider, 2023).

1.5 The evidence supporting safeguarding initiatives and approaches

As outlined by this review, there are a variety of safeguarding initiatives and proposed approaches to safeguarding for the prevention of athlete maltreatment. Despite this, cases of maltreatment continue to rise, demonstrating that these initiatives may not be as effective, accessible to organizations, or rigorously tested. For this reason, in addition to presenting safeguarding initiatives, we further explored the quality of evidence behind them.

Collectively, and as noted directly in many of the papers examined, it appears there is still limited research evidence supporting safeguarding strategies.

For example, Kerr et al. (2014) noted that none of the safeguarding websites investigated indicated being informed by theory or research, nor had they been evaluated or tested. Instead, most initiatives emerged in response to high-profile instances of athlete maltreatment. Although published in 2014, Mountjoy et al. (2022) were able to replicate these findings in a similar, more recent study suggesting that the safeguarding initiatives had still not been evaluated. Therefore, a critical gap in the research literature is the lack of rigorous evaluations of Safe Sport and safeguarding initiatives (Gurgis et al., 2024). Evaluation is an important next step in order provide greater insight into what is effective in enhancing safe sport, and can also increase accountability and transparency through reporting on uptake and efficacy of safeguarding initiatives (Gurgis et al., 2024).

Initiatives have also primarily targeted the individual and close surroundings. Few interventions have focused efforts beyond the individual and organization and looked instead to the systemic level (for example, international governance systems and culture) that influences sporting environments and behaviours. Even fewer of these interventions have been evaluated (Kerr & Kerr, 2021).

Likewise, there is limited evidence or guidelines to support approaches to safeguarding, such as “carrots and sticks,” survivor engagement, trauma-informed approaches, and restorative justice, specifically in sport settings. Though these approaches may be grounded in prominent theories and frameworks in other contexts, the effectiveness of their approach applied to the context of promoting Safe Sport has yet to be tested or evaluated in a practical setting.

Of note, much of this body of literature has been limited to developed countries and the experiences of some groups of athletes. This means findings are further restricted to the countries in which the research took place (such as Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia) and cannot be generalized to developing countries or athletes from other demographic groups, such as athletes with disabilities or 2SLGBTQI+ athletes, for example (Kerr & Kerr, 2020; Mountjoy et al., 2016). More concerning, a recent study highlighted that these groups are disproportionately affected (Gurgis et al., 2022). This further highlights the need for interventions that embody a safeguarding approach which, as demonstrated by this review, emphasize human rights such as equity, accessibility, and inclusion (Gurgis et al., 2022).

More research is needed to protect sport participants of all ages, abilities, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds (Culver at al., 2024; Mountjoy et al., 2016). This means including more research that investigates Safe Sport and safeguarding in sport in countries with limited data, with target populations that include a wide range of demographic groups, and with a broad range of participants (Gurgis et al., 2024). In addition, more focused research is needed on all

forms of maltreatment, the gendered nature of maltreatment, mechanisms of disclosures and prevention methods, Safe Sport and safeguarding advocacy and effectiveness, and athlete consultation methods (Kerr & Stirling, 2019; Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Finally, while approaches to Safe Sport and safeguarding education are continually being reviewed and improved, there is still work to be done to move from a reactive and risk-averse approach to one that is proactive, and frame individuals in positions of power as someone who can create a positive and safe culture (Adriaens et al., 2024; Battaglia et al., 2024; Culver et al., 2024; Verhelle et al., 2024). Moving beyond coaches, it's important to continue to educate a broad range of participants, including coaches, administrators, and athlete support staff (for example, Culver et al., 2024; Newman et al., 2024).

In Canada, advancements have been made through, for example, the 2019 Red Deer Declaration whereby federal, provincial and territorial sport ministers stated their commitment to the prevention of harassment, abuse, and discrimination in sport. The Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) also offers Safe Sport training, and OSIC (the Office of the Sport Integrity Commissioner) was formed as a branch of the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC) to oversee complaints, investigations, assessments, and monitor compliance by organizations to the UCCMS. In 2025, the UCCMS and Canadian Safe Sport Program will be administered by the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport. However, these initiatives have yet to be empirically evaluated.

Kerr et al. (2014) warn that if these measures are not grounded in theory and empirical data, they are unlikely to be effective in the long term. In addition, consistent definitions of Safe Sport and safeguarding in sport, as well as constructs such as abuse, maltreatment and harassment, are needed to allow comparisons across levels of sport, demographic groups, and countries (Kerr & Stirling, 2019). Without consistent frameworks and definitions, it's likely that variations will exist in understandings of what Safe Sport is. As a result, it's likely that programs, strategies, and initiatives will also vary (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021). This makes achieving Safe Sport less effective, more challenging, and unsustainable.

Conclusion

In this review, we summarized research on approaches and initiatives focused on Safe Sport and safeguarding in sport. Specifically, we explored definitions of Safe Sport and safeguarding in sport, published research examining safeguarding initiatives in sport, proposed approaches to safeguarding in sport, and the quality of evidence supporting the proposed approaches and existing initiatives focused on Safe Sport and safeguarding in sport. Although this review identified many challenges associated with the implementation of Safe Sport and safeguarding in sport, it has also demonstrated increased global awareness and action regarding matters of maltreatment and abuse in sport. The increase in research output since this review was originally conducted in 2023, including the broadening of topics and participants, demonstrates that progress is being made.

Key challenges that exist in advancing Safe Sport include the absence of generally accepted definitions or frameworks for understanding and advancing a Safe Sport culture (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021; Kerr & Stirling, 2019) and limited evidence to support the effectiveness of safeguarding initiatives, strategies and approaches in sport (Kerr et al., 2014; MacPherson et al., 2022; Mountjoy et al., 2020; Rich & Gilles, 2015). In general, responses to maltreatment in sport have

been reactive, rather than proactive. More proactive measures are needed to promote Safe Sport and intentionally gather evidence to support effective guidance and measures in the long-term.

Consistent in the literature was the notion that initiatives like training programs and workshops are not enough to cultivate Safe Sport environments (Gurgis et al., 2023; Kerr et al., 2014; Rich & Giles, 2015). In addition to these programs, a cultural change needs to occur where these initiatives are being offered (Komaki et al., 2021; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2021; Rich & Giles, 2015). Focusing on additional factors like addressing the "win-at-all-costs culture," human rights, and societal change, as well as ensuring participants from diverse backgrounds are included in the design and implementation of safeguarding initiatives are recognized as the most promising strategies for enacting change (Gurgis et al., 2023; Kerr et al., 2014). At the same time, there are practical issues such as cost, failing to enforce Safe Sport policies, and the misuse of authority that can and should be addressed (Battaglia et al., 2024; Donnelly, et al., 2016). To accomplish these objectives, it's recommended that initiatives be informed by a human rights and safeguarding lens and be offered at the individual but also at the organizational and cultural level (Gurgis et al., 2023; Kerr et al., 2014)

By summarizing this research, we highlight the importance of evidence-informed safeguarding initiatives for the effective delivery of Safe Sport now and in the future, as well as the availability of this evidence for all individuals involved in sport (for example, coaches, parents, guardians and officials). Further, we demonstrated that consistent definitions, frameworks, and conceptualizations of Safe Sport and safeguarding are needed and necessary to advance a cultural transformation of the sector (Gurgis & Kerr, 2021).

Takeaway points

- Safe Sport can be described as an environment that is respectful, equitable and violence-free, whereas safeguarding is a strategy that aims to be more proactive by taking a values- and human rights-based, athlete-centred approach to advancing Safe Sport.
- For safeguarding initiatives to be the most effective in the long term, they need informed by prevention rather than reaction, grounded in theory, and evaluated consistently.
- More research is needed to protect athletes of all ages, abilities, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds. More research is also needed on coaches, support staff and other participants in addition to athletes. This means including more research that investigates safeguarding in sport in countries with limited data and with target populations that include a wide range of demographic groups.
- There are various forms of maltreatment that are understudied and require more focused research, including the gendered nature of maltreatment, prevention and consultation methods.

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