



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

Prepared by the Sport Information Resource Centre (SIRC)

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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 is this side of sport that contributes to instances of maltreatment (Kerr et al., 2014). 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 1000 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. What types of safeguarding initiatives and approaches exist in sport?
3. What quality of evidence do we have to support these safeguarding initiatives and approaches?

Search strategy

For this review, SIRC searched 2 primary databases: Google Scholar and SPORTDiscus. 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.

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.

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).

First, there is an absence 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 is 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 the second 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 Safeguarding initiatives in sport

1.2.1 Safeguarding case studies

1.2.1.1 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.

1.2.1.2 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 and fitness, water safety, and acts as a developmental pathway for sports like competitive swimming, synchronized swimming, and water polo.

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 health 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 four 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 trainee's, 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.

1.2.2 Studies of publicly available athlete protection initiatives

Two studies have explored the content and delivery of publicly available athlete protection initiatives (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 two 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, 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).

1.3 Proposed approaches to safeguarding in sport

1.3.1 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 is 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).

1.3.1.1 Survivor engagement strategies

Another proposed approach to safeguarding involves engaging survivors of maltreatment in the development of safeguarding initiatives (Gattis & Moore, 2022; Mountjoy 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 et al. (2021), 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 is 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 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 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 is important that survivors are not asked for a testimony only, tokenized, or communicated to in a paternalistic way.

It is recommended that engagement occur in 4 phases: Pre-engagement, invitation, collaboration, and follow up (Mountjoy 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 et al., 2022; Gattis & Moore, 2022).

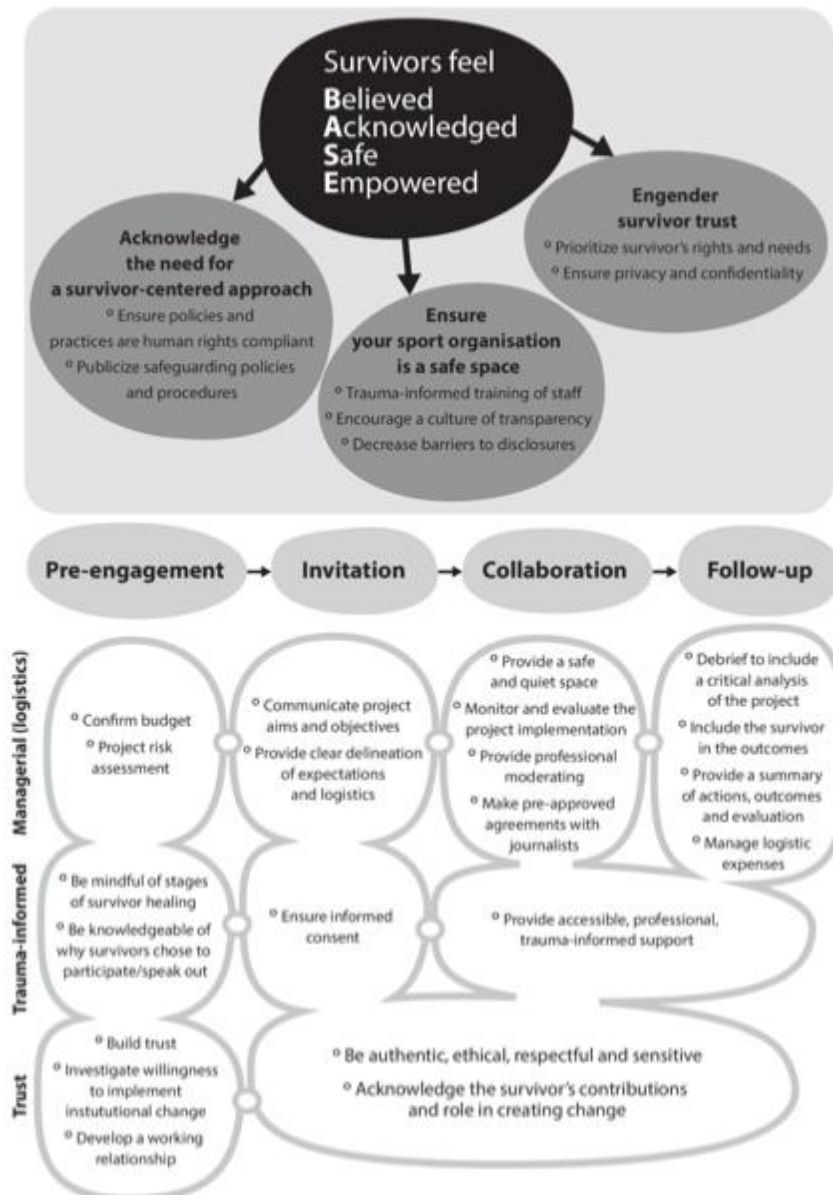


Figure 1. The BASE acronym and phases of survivor engagement (Mountjoy et al., 2021).

1.3.1.2 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 is 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 is 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 is 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).

1.4 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) was able to replicate these findings in a similar, more recent study suggesting that the safeguarding initiatives had still not been evaluated.

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, 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 athletes of all ages, abilities, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds (Mountjoy et al., 2016). This means including more research that investigates Safe Sport and safeguarding in sport in countries with limited data and with target populations that include a wide range of demographic groups. 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).

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. However, these 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 is likely that variations will exist in understandings of what Safe Sport is. As a result, it is 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.

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 is recognized as the most promising strategy for enacting change (Gurgis et al., 2023; Kerr et al., 2014). At the same time, there are practical issues like failing to enforce Safe Sport policies and the misuse of authority that can and should be addressed (Donnelly, et al., 2016). To accomplish these objectives, it is 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. 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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