Child protection in sport - known as 'safeguarding' in the UK since about 2004 - became an issue long after many other social themes (disability, gender and race equity, social inclusion/exclusion and so on) but seems to have risen up the social policy agenda in sport very quickly. This Ruff Guide aims to set out some of the main themes and issues relating to the subject and to point out conflicting viewpoints about it that are found in both academe and sport practice.

What is it?

Child abuse is usually described under four major categories: sexual abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse and neglect. Some people add a fifth category - bullying. Linked terms are discrimination, harassment and hazing (the latter referring to abuse initiation rites).

Abuse is abuse, regardless of legal thresholds. So, whilst children (those under 18 years of age) do attract special privileges in law it is arguably the case that ALL athletes, regardless of their age, deserve the same rights and protections. Indeed, in Australian sport, the term 'member protection' has been adopted to denote that everyone in sport deserves the same treatment.

The use of the word 'child' has also presented other difficulties for sport managers and policy. For example, disabled people in sport have often been labelled as 'vulnerable' and covered by generic 'children and vulnerable people' policies.

'Child protection' is generally accepted as referring to systems (policies, procedures, designated welfare officers, codes of conduct and so on) designed to prevent child abuse. When the UK government adopted a nationwide framework for children called *Every Child Matters* (ECM) that specifies five outcomes for all children, the phrase 'child protection' was replaced by 'safeguarding'. Safeguarding is meant to bring about a much more proactive approach to children's services which will not only prevent harm but also guarantee the five outcomes. ECM applies to all sectors involved in children's services, including sport.

When did sport start paying attention to this issue?
Policy interest began around the early 1990s after the arrest and conviction of several high profile sports coaches, not just in the UK but also in Canada, Australia and elsewhere. Research activity was slower to develop, partly because the topic was so challenging for many gatekeepers in sport who were reluctant to allow researchers to collect data. Some, especially coaches, at the elite end of sport have been especially reluctant to accept the need for child protection. They argue either that CP is a matter for children/beginners or that that risks arise only from strangers (‘stranger danger’). On the contrary, the research evidence shows both that the risk of abuse is higher as one goes up the sport development ladder, and that children are at greater risk of abuse from those close to them than they are from strangers.

In many ways we should not be surprised by the arrival of this theme on the sport development landscape since the young make up the majority of active sportspeople. Also, wider socio-political forces outside sport were at play in the 1980s and 90s that brought attention to child abuse (e.g. widely reported scandals that tested social work systems) and children's rights (e.g. the publication of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989). Academic debate about the so-called 'risk society' (Ulrich Beck) added to interest in risk management and sport also became the subject or risk-related scrutiny in a host of areas such as law and liability, rights and child protection.

Some people think that the whole child protection system has become too bureaucratic. The process of checking the criminal records of anyone working or in a volunteering role with children (through Criminal Records Bureau and the soon-to-commence Independent Safeguarding Authority) has been perhaps the most controversial requirement of child protection provision. In sport it has caused upset (e.g. among long-serving and loyal volunteers), delays (e.g. in appointing seasonal sport workers) and expense to all concerned. Some sport clubs have even disbanded their junior sections to avoid compliance with the strictures of the CRB and because they regard the 'big' brother' surveillance systems associated with child protection as simply too onerous. We should not forget, however, that sport teachers and coaches also have an important role to play in identifying children who may be suffering abuse in other settings, such as at home, school or in their communities. Training such people to recognise signs of possible abuse and to refer these to the appropriate authorities is a wider contribution that sport can make to child protection in society.

Child protection will always be contentious. Achieving a balance between leaving children free (thus risking abuse) and imposing restrictions (thus constraining them and others) is a constant challenge for sport developers.
What is child protection research all about?

The earliest studies on child abuse arose from feminist critiques of exploitative gender-power relations in sport and therefore focussed on sexual abuse. Since then, studies on other forms of abuse have been published and their impact has been increased by coverage in the mass media. For example, there is widespread evidence of hazing in North American sport and there is also evidence that emotional abuse is likely to be the most prevalent form of abuse in sport.

Some scholars criticise feminist academics who cross the science/advocacy boundary and who have both conducted research on child abuse in sport and lobbied for better protective systems. Others think that children are over-protected in modern society (such as sociologist Frank Furedi, who calls them 'cotton wool kids') and call for children to be released from the shackles of protection systems that they argue serve adults' anxieties (Cohen's notion of the 'moral panic') and social control rather than children's best interests. But ponder this ... is a moral panic an excuse for doing nothing?

Feminists and pro-feminists alike have defended their stance as advocates of social change and regard this as entirely consistent with their scientific and epistemological stance (creating knowledge that informs and helps to transform power relations). Differences of view about the politics of research in this field of sports development can probably never be resolved but should always be informed by good scientific enquiry and evidence.

Which countries lead the world in this field?

The UK is probably the world's leader in sport development policy for child protection but has yet to produce a prevalence study (that describes the size of the problem of abuse in sport). Survey-based studies have been conducted in Canada, the USA, Australia, Norway, Belgium and the Czech Republic but each took a different approach so it is difficult to make genuine cross-cultural comparisons. Interestingly, data from a survey in South Korea have recently come to light that show alarmingly high levels of abuse in youth sport (almost 80% of the young people surveyed had experienced physical violence and 74% sexual harassment or abuse in their sports).
In the UK, the establishment in 2001 of the NSPCC/Sport England Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) marked a watershed in child protection services in sport. The CPSU introduced mandatory national standards for NGBs as a condition of grant aid and is about to issue a national Call for Action to improve the buy-in of all sport agencies to its safeguarding work in sport.

Australia has a well-developed territory-wide protection system in place that draws heavily on two sources: first, the excellent Australian Sports Commission ethics programmes and, secondly, the territory-specific child protection and social work services outside sport. Canada - a country with a long history of liberal democratic social policy - has also been a front runner in developing athlete protective services in sport.

How does child abuse research contribute to sport development?

One of the most urgent needs in this field is for research on abuse and protection within the many sport-for-development projects currently being used by governments as part of their overseas aid programmes. Such programmes have proliferated in post-conflict communities and areas suffering natural disasters. In such settings, sport has frequently been imported as a social panacea: aside from the accusations of neo-colonialism that this has drawn it also means that projects have often not been 'safe-washed', in other words that no welfare planning has been undertaken or implemented. In such circumstances it is all-too-easy for abusive practices to be perpetrated which undermine any alleged social and economic benefits. Fortunately, UNICEF has recognised this situation and commissioned a series of reviews of the evidence about violence against children in sport that will be used to inform their future sport programmes.

How can sport development students find out more?

The CPSU's website includes several pages on the do's and don'ts of research and also carries reference lists.

All students should follow the advice here in order to keep within ethical boundaries.
Resources

[see CPSU research website pages for more books and a list of journal articles in addition to the related documents that we provide for this Ruff guide - see top of this page.


Furedi, F. and Bristow, J. (2008) Licensed to Hug: How child protection policies are poisoning the relationship between the generations and damaging the voluntary sector.
We are grateful to Professor Celia Brackenridge for this **Ruff guide to child protection in sport**. Currently at Brunel University,
Professor Brackenridge is considered the World's foremost authority on child protection in sport, writing and researching in the areas of child protection, sexual exploitation, and women in sport.