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# PCSOS Training

## Children's Rights and Ethics in Sports

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# Module101: Children's Rights and Ethics in Sports



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# Child Protection – A Social and Legal Obligation

- Protecting children in sports is not only an ethical responsibility but also a legal requirement in most countries.
- Sports federations and clubs are obligated by both national sports regulations and general civil and criminal laws to ensure the safety of children.
- Cases of abuse or neglect are subject not only to internal disciplinary measures but also to legal and judicial sanctions. Therefore, child safeguarding is both a social duty and a legal mandate.

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# The Concept of Children's Rights and Ethics in Sport

- Children's rights are universal entitlements that all children inherently possess, encompassing the rights to life, development, protection, and participation. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child aims to safeguard children's physical and psychological integrity and to ensure their full and equal participation in society (UNICEF, 2016).
- Sport, while contributing to children's physical, mental, and social development, also carries specific risks where children's rights and safety may be threatened. Therefore, children's rights acquire special importance in sporting environments and—when combined with an ethical framework—prioritize the best interests of the child (David, 2005).
- Children's rights and ethics are not only aspirational in sport, but they also form a binding framework for all stakeholders. Protecting children's rights in sport requires full compliance with relevant legal regulations.

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# PCSOS Certification Scheme

- This training module has been developed in full alignment with the Safe Environment in Sport certification scheme.
- All terminology and approaches used in the training reflect the definitions and requirements of this scheme.
- Key concepts include: Safe Environment, Child Safeguarding, Risk Assessment, Code of Conduct, Reporting, Monitoring, and Inclusion.

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# Dynamic Risk Analysis

- Dynamic risk analysis is the ongoing process of assessing and updating the safety of children in the sports environment.
- Risks are re-evaluated at the start of each season, event, or when new practices are introduced.
- Clubs and federations must regularly analyze emerging threats and changing conditions, ensuring compliance with local legislation and international standards.
- This approach is critical for minimizing risks and implementing proactive safeguarding measures.

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# Risks and Dangers Faced by Children in the Sports Environment

- It is important to remember that risks are not static but dynamic and evolving.
- To be effective in child safeguarding, risks must be continually reviewed, and new risks must be addressed promptly as they arise.
- Risk management should be considered a dynamic process, in line with legal regulations and ethical standards in sport.

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# The Concept of Children's Rights and Ethics in Sport

- Ethics in sport is founded on core principles that favor right and fair conduct. Integrity, fairness, respect, and responsibility stand out as indispensable ethical values in sport (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021).
- Ethical behavior means not only that athletes but also coaches and administrators set a positive example for children and uphold their rights.
- Because sport's social impact can leave lasting impressions on children, acting in accordance with ethical principles is vital to ensure they reap maximum benefits from sport without harm (Lang & Hartill, 2014).

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# The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Its Reflections in Sport

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most comprehensive international instrument safeguarding children's rights. Adopted in 1989, the Convention rests on four fundamental principles: the rights to survival, development, protection, and participation.
- These principles guarantee not only children's survival but also their free development and active societal engagement (UNICEF, 2016). Article 31 specifically emphasizes children's rights to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, artistic expression, and participation in cultural life and the arts—including sport.

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# The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Its Reflections in Sport

- The reflection of children's rights in sport necessitates that sporting environments be safe, inclusive, and supportive for children. According to the Convention, children's participation in sport must be voluntary, and they must never be subjected to coercion or pressure (David, 2005).
- The best interests of the child must be paramount in sport, and all forms of abuse, neglect, and discrimination must be prevented. National and international sport policies require that children's rights be observed at every stage of sporting activities.

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# The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Its Reflections in Sport

- Sporting federations and clubs bear significant responsibilities in implementing the Convention. Coaches, administrators, and volunteers must act in accordance with child-rights legislation and ethical codes.
- Moreover, valuing children's opinions and including them in decision-making processes helps to root a rights-based approach in sport (Lang & Hartill, 2014). Active participation empowers children and supports the development of their self-confidence.

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# Ethical Conduct and Decision-Making in Sport

- Ethical conduct is a fundamental responsibility for all participants in sport. Coaches and administrators working with children, in particular, serve as role models through their attitudes and behaviors. Ethical conduct requires acting in ways that protect children's health, safety, and welfare—even under competitive pressure (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021). Research shows that unethical practices can lead children to disengage from sport or suffer psychological harm.

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# Ethical Conduct and Decision-Making in Sport

- Transparency, fairness, and accountability are central to ethical decision-making processes. When making decisions, the child's best interests must be considered, and potential ethical dilemmas should be analyzed from multiple perspectives.
- International ethical codes and guidelines provide direction to coaches and administrators in this regard (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Consistent ethical decision-making contributes to the healthy development of sporting culture.

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# Ethical Conduct and Decision-Making in Sport

- In sport, ethical decisions can sometimes create a conflict between the desire for short-term success and the child's long-term welfare. Ethical guidance ensures that children's rights are protected in such dilemmas.
- The child's confidence, health, and safety must underpin every decision. This approach also strengthens sport's educational and character-building functions (Lang & Hartill, 2014).

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# Risks to Children in Sporting Environments

- Sporting environments, while offering great opportunities for children's physical and mental development, also entail certain risks. Physical risks vary according to the child's age, developmental level, and sport discipline.
- Especially in younger age groups, because the musculoskeletal system is not fully developed, inappropriate training loads, early specialization, and heavy exercises without sufficient warm-up can lead to serious injuries (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Protecting children's bodily integrity is among the fundamental ethical responsibilities of coaches and administrators.
- Developmental differences mean that not every child has the same level of physical capacity; therefore, child-specific approaches are required instead of standardized programs. Facility inadequacies, lack of equipment, and hygiene issues are also significant factors that increase physical risks in sporting environments.
- Moreover, leaving children without adequate medical supervision during training or competition can cause delays in emergency response and lead to serious health problems (David, 2005).



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# Risks to Children in Sporting Environments

- Another dimension of risks that children face in sporting environments is emotional and psychological. Children may be exposed to negative behaviors such as pressure, exclusion, and bullying by teammates, coaches, and even family members (Lang & Hartill, 2014).
- Emotional risks are particularly pronounced in environments with intense competitive pressure. Excessive pressure to win, constant criticism, humiliation after poor performance, or being ostracized from the team can cause children to lose self-confidence and become disengaged from sport. The effects of psychological abuse can, over the long term, progress to trauma, anxiety, and depression.
- Hierarchies and cliques within teams can also lead to the isolation of excluded children. Preventing children from expressing themselves, excluding them from decision-making processes, and depriving them of emotional support all contribute to the prevalence of these risks. Emotional safety should be regarded as a protection priority equal to physical safety.





# Risks to Children in Sporting Environments

- The third main area of risk to which children can be exposed in sporting environments involves social and structural factors. One of the most important elements here is the power relationships inherent in sport. The power held by coaches, administrators, and even older teammates can exert pressure on children. This imbalance of power increases the risk of abuse and neglect (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021).
- Additionally, factors such as gender, ethnic background, disability, or socioeconomic status can lead to discrimination and inequality. Limited access opportunities can result in unequal chances for child athletes. The absence of child protection policies in sports clubs or federations is one of the most significant structural problems that heighten risks.
- When awareness of child protection in sport is insufficiently developed, children's rights and safety can be easily overlooked. Therefore, to prevent risks, it is vital to develop inclusive training, clear policies and procedures, and effective supervision and monitoring mechanisms (UNICEF, 2016).

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# Types of Abuse and Neglect in Sport

- Abuse in sport means the violation of children's physical, emotional, or sexual integrity and can take many forms. Physical abuse may appear as excessive training, exercises unsuitable for the child's age and development, practices that increase injury risk, or punitive physical interventions (Mountjoy et al., 2016).
- Children who begin elite-level sport at an early age face risks of overtraining-related fatigue and chronic injury. Additionally, when coaches or other adults resort to physical punishment, they endanger children's bodily integrity.
- The long-term effects of physical abuse can include negative attitudes toward sport, permanent injuries, and psychological trauma. Scientific studies show that a significant portion of traumatic injuries in child athletes stem from inadequate supervision and overtraining (David, 2005).

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# Types of Abuse and Neglect in Sport

- Emotional abuse in sport manifests as constant criticism, humiliation, belittling, threats, intimidation, or mockery of the child. Such negative behaviors by coaches or teammates damage the child's self-esteem and sense of self-worth (Lang & Hartill, 2014).
- The most dangerous aspect of emotional abuse is that it often goes unnoticed and continues covertly. Discrimination within the team, favoritism toward certain athletes, or punishing failure threaten the child's psychological integrity. Children subjected to prolonged emotional abuse may experience depression, anxiety disorders, and reduced interest in sport. Research indicates that emotional abuse can be as harmful as physical abuse (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021).





# Types of Abuse and Neglect in Sport

- Sexual abuse is one of the most sensitive and destructive forms of abuse, often occurring covertly and systematically in sport. It includes a variety of behaviors such as sexual touching, verbal harassment, inappropriate sharing of photos or videos, and violation of the child's private space without consent (Mountjoy et al., 2016).
- Boundary violations by coaches, administrators, or other adults in sporting contexts can transform trust into exploitation. Preventing sexual abuse requires strict oversight in clubs, security protocols, child protection training, and transparent communication policies.
- Children who experience sexual abuse may suffer intense guilt, shame, and trauma. Therefore, in suspected cases, mandatory reporting, transparency, and a protective approach are of paramount importance.





# Types of Abuse and Neglect in Sport

- Neglect in sport means ignoring or failing to meet children's needs. This can occur as insufficient provision of nutrition, rest, health support, or psychosocial support. Improper planning of training durations in relation to the child's age and development, and failure to balance school and sport, lead to neglect (UNICEF, 2016).
- Additionally, not ensuring a safe environment for the child to practice sport, not providing medical support in emergencies, or failing to meet emotional needs also constitute neglect. Neglected children may suffer burnout, physical injuries, declines in academic performance, and psychological problems.
- Developing and implementing policies that consider children's holistic development is key to preventing neglect (Lang & Hartill, 2014).







# International Child Protection Standards (IOC, UNICEF)

- International child protection standards serve as a guide for safeguarding children's safety and well-being in sporting environments. Global organizations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and UNICEF emphasize that sport must be a safe and inclusive space for children.
- The IOC's 2016 "Consensus Statement on Harassment and Abuse in Sport" assigns responsibilities to national federations for protecting children from physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect (Mountjoy et al., 2016).
- Meanwhile, UNICEF's "International Safeguards for Children in Sport" outlines principles such as children's active participation, the provision of a safe environment, and the fight against discrimination. These standards aim to protect children both at the policy level and in day-to-day practice.





# International Child Protection Standards (IOC, UNICEF)

- At the core of the IOC and UNICEF's shared approach lie prevention and early intervention. Preventive measures include providing child protection training to all sport personnel, establishing transparent communication channels, and facilitating the reporting of risky situations. Additionally, anyone working with children must undergo criminal-record checks and appropriate reference verifications (UNICEF, 2016).
- Sports clubs and federations must not let their child protection policies remain only on paper; they should actively implement them through regular training sessions, monitoring mechanisms, and opportunities for children's participation. International standards also envision children not as passive recipients of protection but as individuals with a voice in decision-making processes







# Ethical Codes and Implementation Examples

- Ethical codes are foundational documents that set behavioral standards in sport and outline rules all stakeholders must follow.
- At the international level, organizations such as the IOC, FIFA, UEFA, and UNICEF have developed ethical codes that prioritize children's safety, equality, and well-being. These codes are grounded in the principles of integrity, respect, fairness, transparency, and prioritizing the best interests of the child (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021).
- Their purpose is to clearly define acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for athletes, coaches, administrators, and other staff. Ethical codes also specify sanctions that will be applied in the event of violations.





# Ethical Codes and Implementation Examples

- Putting ethical codes into practice is critical for enhancing safety in sport and preventing harm to children. The codes recommended by the IOC and UNICEF detail the responsibilities of all personnel working with children. In practice, coaches must respect children's privacy, avoid discrimination, and immediately report any signs of abuse (Lang & Hartill, 2014).
- Additional practical measures include refraining from taking photographs or videos of children without consent, using appropriate language during training, and maintaining clear boundaries in physical contact. Ethical codes serve as core material in child protection training programs.





# Ethical Codes and Implementation Examples

- In implementation, some sports federations have established independent ethics committees to monitor compliance with their codes. Structures such as the United Kingdom's Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) play a key role in investigating ethical breaches and overseeing child protection measures.
- In countries like Australia and Canada, federations have developed specific policies and protocols to safeguard children's rights (David, 2005). In these nations, coaches without child protection certification are prohibited from working, and violations of ethical codes can result in severe sanctions, including license revocation.
- All these practices aim to ensure that ethical codes do not remain merely on paper but truly protect children.







# Ethical Dilemmas: Case Analyses

- Ethical dilemmas are complex situations in sport where multiple “right” or “wrong” options exist. Coaches and administrators working with children often face choices between short-term athletic success and the child’s long-term best interests.
- For example, pressuring an injured child to play in a critical match or risking a child’s health for the team’s benefit is a typical ethical dilemma (Mountjoy et al., 2016). In such cases, the principle of the child’s best interests must always take precedence.





# Ethical Dilemmas: Case Analyses

- Case analyses are effective tools for understanding and teaching ethical decision-making. The literature offers many examples, such as forcing children to train beyond their limits, imposing excessive performance pressure, or demonstrating unethical behavior as role models.
- For instance, when a coach shows favoritism toward a successful athlete, it can cause unrest within the team. Or, humiliating a child for poor performance is both unethical and a potential cause of dropout (Lang & Hartill, 2014). These examples highlight how a coach's decisions can directly impact a child's development.







# Ethical Dilemmas: Case Analyses

- Solutions include strict adherence to ethical codes and children's rights, maintaining transparent communication, and involving children in decision-making processes. Asking for children's input, striving to understand their feelings, and prioritizing long-term development over short-term gains can guide actions in ethical dilemmas (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021).
- Additionally, when faced with dilemmas, seeking support from internal ethics advisors or child protection units is important. Regularly sharing educational case analyses strengthens all stakeholders' ethical perspectives.





# Power Relations and Children's Vulnerability

- Power dynamics in sporting environments are a key factor contributing to children's vulnerability. Coaches, administrators, even older athletes and family members can wield physical and psychological power over children.
- This imbalance of power, often combined with an expectation of absolute obedience to authority, leads to children being excluded from decision-making processes. Fearing criticism or punishment, children cannot speak up, express their needs, or report problems they experience (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021).
- In closed or poorly supervised settings, the behavior of those in power goes unchallenged and violations can easily be overlooked.





# Power Relations and Children's Vulnerability

- Another factor that increases children's vulnerability in sport is the lack of positive role models. Research shows that children typically accept authority figures' directives without question.
- Children who depend on a coach or administrator may feel compelled to participate in unwanted training, hide their injuries, or remain silent in the face of unfair practices (Lang & Hartill, 2014).
- Such dependency fosters power abuse and raises the risk of maltreatment. To manage power relations healthily, education and support mechanisms are needed that teach children their rights, empower them, and help balance the power dynamic.







# Power Relations and Children's Vulnerability

- Preventing children's vulnerability requires that clubs and federations develop effective policies. To curb power abuse, they must implement clear complaint mechanisms, confidential reporting systems, and independent oversight processes.
- Coaches and administrators should receive ethics training, and environments must be created in which children can freely voice their opinions (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Enabling children to set their own boundaries and to say “no” when necessary is one of the most important factors in reducing their vulnerability.
- A participatory sporting culture helps equalize power and ensures that children's rights are effectively upheld.







# Ethical Responsibilities of Coaches and Administrators

- Coaches and administrators hold roles that directly impact children's safety, well-being, and development. Their ethical responsibilities go beyond teaching sport techniques; they also include creating a safe, fair, and supportive environment. International standards require coaches to respect children's rights, avoid discrimination, and protect their physical and psychological integrity (UNICEF, 2016).
- Coaches serving as role models is a fundamental prerequisite for children to internalize ethical principles and values. Studies show that coaches who act in accordance with ethical standards positively influence children's self-confidence, sense of responsibility, and team spirit (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021).
- Conversely, environments that tolerate unethical behavior increase children's anxiety, fear, and tendency to withdraw from sport. Key ethical duties include using protective language, avoiding violence and coercion, maintaining confidentiality, and respecting children's personal boundaries.





# Inclusivity and Combating Discrimination

- Inclusivity requires that every child—regardless of gender, ethnicity, disability, or socioeconomic status—has equal opportunities. Inclusive approaches in sport provide environments where children can realize their full potential and feel valued. At its core, inclusivity is founded on respect for diversity and recognition of each child's uniqueness (UNICEF, 2016).
- Accessible facilities, adapted training programs for children with disabilities, and encouragement of participation from diverse cultural backgrounds are key elements of inclusive sport policies.





# Inclusivity and Combating Discrimination

- Combating discrimination is not only a legal obligation but also an ethical duty. In sporting environments, children may face discrimination based on gender, race, religion, or physical differences. Discrimination can lead to loss of motivation, diminished self-esteem, and exclusion from sport (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021).
- Ethical codes and child protection policies include specific provisions against discrimination. Coaches must be sensitive to children's differences and show zero tolerance for discriminatory language or practices.







# Inclusivity and Combating Discrimination

- Creating an inclusive sporting environment requires collaboration among clubs, federations, and educational institutions. To embed equality, children must have freedom in choosing their sport, receive support tailored to their needs, and be included in decision-making processes.
- All staff should undergo anti-discrimination training and be knowledgeable about children's rights (Lang & Hartill, 2014).
- Best-practice examples demonstrate that inclusive sport programs support both individual development and social cohesion. Ultimately, inclusivity and the fight against discrimination are the cornerstones of a sustainable and equitable sporting culture.







# Digital Tools and Ethics Training

- Digital technologies offer innovative solutions in sports education and child protection programs. Online learning platforms, mobile applications, digital reporting systems, and interactive content enable both children and sports personnel to become aware of ethics and child protection topics.
- Thanks to digital tools, geographical and temporal barriers are overcome, and large numbers of stakeholders can be trained simultaneously (UNICEF, 2016). E-learning modules, case studies, animations, and short videos support the presentation of ethical issues in engaging and easily understood formats.





# Digital Tools and Ethics Training

- Despite the advantages offered by digital environments, certain risks also arise. In particular, social media use requires sensitivity regarding children's personal data protection, cyberbullying, and privacy violations.
- When delivering ethics training on digital platforms, it is essential to ensure data security, transparency, and respect for children's digital rights (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021). Children must be informed about the risks they may encounter online, and clear rules of conduct for digital environments should be taught.





# Digital Tools and Ethics Training

- Making ethics training effective with digital tools involves developing interactive and participatory content. Game-based learning, virtual reality applications, and simulations help children and adults understand ethical dilemmas through lifelike experiences (Lang & Hartill, 2014).
- Additionally, online discussion groups and feedback mechanisms support participants in sharing their experiences and co-creating solutions. Regular updates to digital trainings facilitate adaptation to emerging risks and opportunities. Ultimately, digitalization is a powerful tool that enhances the dissemination, accessibility, and sustainability of ethics education.







# Sport Managers & Leaders

- Sports leaders and administrators are the primary agents in shaping organizational culture and encouraging all stakeholders to adhere to ethical principles. Leaders must play an active role in drafting, updating, and implementing child protection policies. According to good governance principles, transparency, accountability, and fairness must lie at the heart of child protection strategies (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2021).
- Administrators should establish institutional deterrents against unethical behavior, operate independent investigation and sanction processes for breaches, and ensure that all staff and volunteers receive child protection training. Through their exemplary conduct and ethical sensitivity, leaders exert a positive influence on the entire sporting environment and amplify children's voices.







# Sport Managers & Leaders

- Another crucial responsibility for administrators is to create inclusive environments that increase children's participation in decision-making processes. A participatory management approach recognizes children not only as beneficiaries of protection but also as active contributors to the development of sport (UNICEF, 2016).
- Leaders should establish open communication channels for children to provide feedback and ensure their views are reflected in policies and practices.
- They must also spearhead the creation of policies within sports organizations that prevent discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, or disability and guarantee equal opportunities. In doing so, administrators not only enforce existing ethical standards but also lead the evolution of an innovative and inclusive ethical culture.





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