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# PCSOS Training

## Fundamentals of Child Safeguarding in Sport

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# Module102: Fundamentals in Child safeguarding in Sport



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# What is Child Protection?

## Conceptual Framework

- Child protection, or safeguarding children in sport, encompasses all policies and practices aimed at keeping children safe from any form of abuse, neglect, and harm within sports environments.
- This concept includes not only physical safety but also emotional and psychological well-being. Fundamentally, it requires sports organizations to fulfill their legal and ethical duty of care toward children. Since the large-scale sexual abuse scandals that emerged in the 1990s, child protection has become a prominent theme in the literature (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014).
- Initially focused on individual cases of abuse, the field has gradually expanded to include the prevention of all forms of violence and maltreatment (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014; Mountjoy et al., 2016). The International Olympic Committee's concept of "non-accidental violence" defines psychological, physical, sexual abuse and neglect as the main types of harm children may face in sport (Mountjoy et al., 2016).
- Consequently, child protection represents a broad framework that encompasses not only the fun and developmental aspects of sport but also the creation of a safe environment (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

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# Types of Child Abuse in Sport: Physical, Sexual, Emotional Abuse, and Neglect

- In the context of sport, children may be subjected to four primary types of abuse: physical, sexual, emotional abuse, and neglect. Physical abuse involves intentionally causing bodily harm or damaging the child's physical integrity through practices such as excessive training. For example, a coach hitting a child as punishment or forcing an athlete to compete despite injury risk constitutes physical abuse (Mountjoy et al., 2016).
- Sexual abuse includes the use of a child for sexual gratification and may occur in sports through sexual harassment, inappropriate contact, or "grooming" by a coach or team official. Emotional abuse comprises behaviors that damage a child's self-esteem, such as excessive criticism, yelling, humiliation, threats, or intimidation. Research shows emotional abuse to be the most prevalent form of abuse in sport, with 75% of young athletes reporting such negative experiences (Alexander et al., 2011; Mountjoy et al., 2016).
- Neglect refers to the failure to meet a child's basic needs or safeguard their well-being; for example, not resting an injured athlete or withholding necessary medical support falls under neglect (Mountjoy et al., 2016). These types of abuse may occur individually or concurrently and often share psychological harm as a common denominator.
- Indeed, psychological abuse underlies and exacerbates the impact of all other abuse forms (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Sports organizations should identify all these abuse types and develop policies aimed at their prevention.

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# Child-Specific Risk Factors in Sport

- The sports environment inherently contains certain unique risk factors for children. Power imbalance is foremost among these: the authority position of coaches, administrators, or senior athletes combined with children's conditioned obedience can create fertile ground for abuse (Mountjoy et al., 2015).
- Particularly in high-performance sports, intense competitive pressure and a "win-at-all-costs" culture normalize unhealthy practices such as overtraining and competing despite pain, thereby jeopardizing children's physical and psychological health (Mountjoy et al., 2015). Research has revealed that bullying, hazing rituals disguised as tradition, or excessive discipline can be tolerated in sports organizations, thus fostering an environment that nurtures abuse (Mountjoy et al., 2015).
- On an individual level, children with disabilities, highly successful (elite) athletes, or those from disadvantaged social backgrounds are particularly vulnerable groups, and studies indicate they are more susceptible to abuse in sport (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

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# Risk Assessment: Institutional and Individual Level Analysis

- Effective child protection in sports organizations begins with a proactive risk assessment. At the institutional level, a club or federation must analyze all aspects of its operations to identify potential risk areas.
- For example, privacy-sensitive areas in training facilities, travel and accommodation arrangements, as well as volunteer and staff recruitment processes should be reviewed to detect possible hazards to children at every step (International Safeguards for Children in Sport, 2014).
- Many international standards recommend that sports organizations regularly conduct risk assessments related to events, transportation, and lodging, and implement measures to minimize identified risks (International Safeguards for Children in Sport, 2014).

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# Risk Assessment: Institutional and Individual Level Analysis

- At the individual level, risk analysis is conducted for both children and adults working with them. The specific needs of children (e.g., disability, age, maturity) are evaluated to predict which children may be more vulnerable.
- Similarly, background checks and reference verifications are performed for coaches and volunteers to assess their suitability to work with children (Mountjoy et al., 2015). This multilayered analysis allows structural gaps within the organization (such as the absence of protection policies or weak supervision) to be identified, while also anticipating risks present in particular settings (e.g., one-on-one private lessons) or individuals (e.g., untrained coaches).
- The results of the risk assessment form the basis for developing written child protection policies and procedures. By continuously updating risk analyses, sports organizations can take proactive steps to safeguard children and prevent problems before they arise.

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# Early Warning Signs and Intervention Methods

- Recognizing early signs of child abuse is critical to preventing lasting harm. Behavioral changes are among the most important warning signals: a previously willing and cheerful athlete suddenly becoming reluctant to attend training, showing anxiety, or implying fear of a particular coach may indicate potential abuse.
- Signs of emotional abuse in children include excessive withdrawal, depressive moods, sudden outbursts of anger, or regression to younger behaviors. Early indicators of physical abuse include unexplained injuries, frequent complaints of pain, or bruises the child tries to conceal.
- Children subjected to sexual abuse may exhibit increased sexualized language or knowledge inappropriate for their age, or show excessive fear or dependence toward a specific adult.

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# Early Warning Signs and Intervention Methods

- There are also early warning signs of grooming in sports environments: for instance, a coach consistently favoring one child, giving special gifts, isolating the child from peers, or developing overly familiar relationships with the child's family may represent manipulative grooming strategies (U.S. Center for SafeSport, 2021). Clubs and families must remain vigilant in such cases.
- When early warning signs are detected, intervention procedures must be implemented without delay. The first step is to take the concerning behavior or disclosure seriously and immediately report it to the designated child protection officer or management within the organization (NSPCC CPSU, 2025). At the club or federation level, pre-established reporting protocols should be activated: these protocols specify who must be informed, when to contact external authorities (e.g., police, social services), and how to ensure the child's immediate safety.

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# Child Protection Officer and Committee Structures

- Structural accountability mechanisms must be established within sports organizations to ensure children's safety. Appointing a Child Protection Officer (also known as "Safeguarding Officer") is recognized as an international best practice. This individual is a specialized staff member responsible for preventing risks to children and appropriately responding to any violations within the club or federation (FIFA, 2022).
- For example, FIFA states that one of the primary aims of appointing a child protection officer is to create a binding ethical code and child protection policy for the institution and to oversee their implementation (FIFA, 2022).
- Child protection officers usually receive specialized training, are skilled in communicating with children, and are knowledgeable about the legal procedures to follow in cases of suspected abuse. For this role to be effective, the officer must have sufficient authority within management and be recognized by all members.

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# Child Protection Officer and Committee Structures

- Additionally, it is important to establish child protection committees or boards within sports organizations. These committees, comprising multiple experts (e.g., administrators, coach representatives, psychologists or social workers, parent representatives), carry out functions such as developing and reviewing child protection policies and assessing reported cases.
- For instance, when an abuse allegation arises, an independent disciplinary board or safeguarding committee should review the case and ensure a fair process. Research shows that organizations lacking such structures have a higher risk of child protection measures remaining merely on paper (Vladova, 2023).
- SWOT analyses conducted in some countries highlight the critical need to introduce the child protection officer position in sports organizations to provide children with safer and more positive environments (Vladova, 2023). In conclusion, whether in the form of a single officer or a committee, internal safeguarding structures clarify responsibility, enhance accountability, and strengthen the culture of protection.

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# A Holistic Approach to the Roles of Families and Clubs

- In safeguarding children in sport, collaboration between families and sports clubs, along with adopting a holistic approach, is essential. Child protection is not limited to measures taken solely by clubs; it also requires the active involvement of parents and families.
- As the first-hand observers of their children's sporting experiences and those who maintain strong communication with them, parents play a crucial role in identifying potential issues. Therefore, clubs should inform parents about child protection policies and give them a voice in the process.
- For example, when a club implements a new child protection rule—such as not leaving children unattended after training—it should communicate this to parents and seek their feedback.

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# A Holistic Approach to the Roles of Families and Clubs

- A holistic approach means that club management, coaches, athletes, and families operate with a shared understanding. International best practices recommend that clubs adopt the principle of “stakeholder engagement,” establishing open channels of communication among families, coaches, and children.
- For instance, in some countries like the UK, clubs organize child protection seminars for parents, enabling them to learn both the club’s expectations and their own possible roles. Families have the right and responsibility to hold clubs accountable for child protection (NSPCC CPSU, 2025). This encourages clubs to be more transparent and responsive.

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# Protecting Children in Digital Environments

- In today's era of digital communication, safeguarding children in sport extends beyond physical spaces and must also encompass online environments. Communication between coaches, athletes, and club staff frequently occurs via social media, messaging apps, or email. If not properly managed, this can create new risks for children.
- For example, a coach repeatedly messaging an athlete from a private phone or contacting them privately on social media may lead to boundary violations and potential abuse (U.S. Center for SafeSport, 2021).
- It is known that abusers use digital platforms to communicate secretly with children and have access to them at any time of day (U.S. Center for SafeSport, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for clubs to establish digital communication protocols.
- Best practices recommend that coach-athlete messaging be kept as transparent as possible—such as through team group chats or with parental knowledge—and that one-on-one private communications be avoided (NSPCC CPSU, 2025).

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# Protecting Children in Digital Environments

- Similarly, cyberbullying may target children among athletes or originate from fans. For instance, a young athlete being mocked, excluded, or insulted on social media by peers after a performance can negatively impact their psychological health.
- Clubs should educate their athletes about appropriate online conduct and guide them to treat each other with respect. Online privacy is another important consideration: unauthorized sharing of photos of child athletes or disclosure of personal information (such as address details linked to competition lists) on the internet can have undesirable consequences.
- Hence, many organizations require parental consent before using children's images and strictly prohibit publishing them alongside contact details (NSPCC CPSU, 2025).

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# Protecting Children in Digital Environments

- Technical measures should also be taken to protect children in digital settings. Clubs must monitor official social media accounts to promptly remove abusive comments and block offending users when necessary.
- Additionally, children and their families should receive online safety training covering topics like strong password usage, limits on sharing personal information, and risks associated with communicating with strangers online.
- In some countries, e-safety agencies (e.g., Australia's eSafety Commissioner) run specialized programs in the sports sector to raise awareness about digital threats children may face.

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# Protection Measures for Disabled and Disadvantaged Children

- Child protection programs must include measures tailored to the needs of children with special requirements or those in disadvantaged situations. Research shows that disabled children face a higher risk of abuse and neglect compared to their non-disabled peers.
- Similarly, in the sports context, disabled athletes may be more vulnerable to perpetrators due to their dependency on caregivers and communication difficulties (Mountjoy et al., 2016). For example, documented cases include emotionally abusive behaviors such as repeatedly yelling at a hearing-impaired athlete or physically intervening with a visually impaired athlete in situations where they cannot defend themselves.
- Therefore, sports organizations should ensure that coaches and staff in environments with disabled athletes are especially vigilant and receive targeted training programs. Coaches working with disabled children must understand appropriate communication methods according to the type of disability and be able to recognize potential signs of abuse. For instance, it is important to distinguish between stress reactions and abuse responses in an athlete with autism.







# Protection Measures for Disabled and Disadvantaged Children

- The concept of disadvantaged children includes various groups such as those socioeconomically deprived, ethnic minorities, immigrants, or refugees. When children from these groups gain access to sport, they often rely heavily on the opportunities sport provides (e.g., scholarships, social inclusion), which may reduce their likelihood of reporting abuse.
- For example, a child from a low-income family who participates in a club on scholarship might fear losing their chance to play if they report mistreatment by a coach. Clubs should establish safeguarding mechanisms to reassure children that making complaints will not jeopardize their opportunities.
- Additionally, children facing cultural or language barriers (such as refugee children) should receive special support to help them adapt to the sports environment and express any concerns. Where necessary, interpreters or culturally sensitive mentors should be appointed to ensure these children feel safe and supported.







# Monitoring, Reporting, and Development Strategies

- The effectiveness of child protection policies is directly related to the robustness of monitoring and reporting mechanisms. Sports organizations should regularly track and evaluate the protective measures they implement. For this purpose, a status report on child protection activities can be prepared at the end of each season or at regular intervals.
- This report summarizes trainings conducted, reported cases, actions taken, and their outcomes, and is presented to management and stakeholders. Thus, the club or federation gains an objective overview of areas where it has succeeded and where improvements are needed. International standards emphasize that the “measurement and evaluation” step is integral to enhancing the success of child protection systems (International Safeguards for Children in Sport, 2014).
- For example, one of the eight principles of the International Safeguards for Children in Sport is the regular review and evaluation of practices (Mountjoy et al., 2015).





# Monitoring, Reporting, and Development Strategies

- Regarding reporting, both internal and external reporting processes are important. Internal reporting begins when stakeholders such as coaches, athletes, or parents raise a concern with club management.
- To ensure this process is safe and accessible, clubs should provide multiple channels: written complaints, online forms, anonymous reporting boxes, or direct meetings with the child protection officer may be used. When reports are received, they must be recorded and managed confidentially.
- For cases that cannot be resolved internally or involve criminal elements, external reporting mechanisms come into play; at this point, police, social services, or independent bodies such as SafeSport are notified.
- For instance, if a serious harassment allegation is made against a coach, the club must conduct its disciplinary investigation while fulfilling legal reporting obligations. Every step of the case management process should be documented and monitored by senior management. This enables identification of system failures or delays.





# Monitoring, Reporting, and Development Strategies

- Within development strategies, continuous improvement is aimed for based on monitoring data and lessons learned from reports.
- For example, if a club's evaluation reveals that athletes hesitate to report abuse, it may conduct trust-building workshops with athletes or promote anonymous reporting options to change this. Similarly, if reporting indicates that a particular sport (e.g., wrestling, a contact-heavy sport) experiences more issues, targeted additional training and preventive programs are developed for that discipline.
- Periodic repetition of training is also part of development strategies: child protection education should not be a one-time event but planned as an ongoing process at regular intervals. This ensures that new staff and athletes receive training, while existing members refresh their knowledge.







# Internal Operations: Development of Policies and Procedures

- For an effective child protection program, sports organizations must establish clear and actionable policies and procedures. These policies guide all stakeholders by formally documenting the organization's commitment, principles, and expectations regarding child safeguarding.
- The first step is to develop a comprehensive child protection policy document with the support of senior management. This document clearly states the organization's commitment to children's rights, definitions of abuse and neglect, examples of unacceptable behaviors, and sanctions to be applied if policies are violated (International Safeguards for Children in Sport, 2014).





# Internal Operations: Development of Policies and Procedures

- In addition to the policy, detailed procedures must be developed. Procedures are step-by-step guides describing what actions should be taken in specific situations.
- One of the most critical procedures is the reporting and intervention protocol: it outlines who and how to report suspected abuse or policy violations, and how investigations should be conducted.
- Similarly, emergency procedures (e.g., how to handle suspected neglect if a child is seriously injured during training) must be defined. A well-prepared procedure document acts as a reference guide for club members in times of need.







# Internal Operations: Development of Policies and Procedures

- Recruitment and selection procedures should also be designed from a child protection perspective: steps such as criminal background checks, reference letters, and probationary period observations become standard to ensure suitability of personnel working with children from the outset (Mountjoy et al., 2015).
- Codes of conduct (ethical codes) for coaches and volunteers are commonly implemented. These codes provide concrete do's and don'ts—for example, “Never insult an athlete” or “Never be alone with an athlete in the changing room”—to clarify expectations. Disciplinary processes for code violations should be predetermined.





# Internal Operations: Development of Policies and Procedures

- After policies and procedures are developed, their dissemination and training are crucial. All club members (management, technical staff, athletes, and parents) should be informed about these documents and, where possible, provide written acknowledgment.
- For example, the child protection policy can be distributed and explained during parents' meetings at the beginning of the season; detailed training can be provided during coaches' orientation. These documents should also be easily accessible (e.g., on club notice boards, websites).
- Policies and procedures are not static; they must be updated based on experience and new information (International Safeguards for Children in Sport, 2014). Therefore, a review schedule (e.g., annually) should be established and revisions made as needed.





# The Role and Necessity of the Safeguarding Officer

- The Safeguarding Officer is a specialized position required by sports legislation in many countries and federations.
- This officer is the primary person responsible for child protection, overseeing reporting, risk assessment, and emergency response.
- While the job description may vary across jurisdictions, the core aim remains to prevent risks and provide prompt, effective intervention when necessary.







# Implementing Safeguarding Across Cultures and Economies

- Implementing child safeguarding programs is possible and essential across all cultural and economic contexts. No religious, cultural, or financial difference should be used as a justification to avoid safeguarding standards.
- **In Catholic, Muslim, or other communities:** Fundamental child rights are universal. Safeguarding policies can be developed in cooperation with local stakeholders and adapted to cultural sensitivities.
- **In economically poor areas:** Effective protection can be ensured with low-cost, simple measures—volunteer officers, community-based monitoring, and local guidance.
- **For migrant, refugee, or minority children:** Interpreters, intercultural mediators, or community leaders can help overcome language and cultural barriers. Adapting international models (IOC, FIFA, Terre des Hommes, etc.) requires cooperation with local actors.





# Localizing International Safeguarding Standards

- Globally accepted child safeguarding standards can be flexibly adapted to the social structure and resources of any country.
- **FIFA and IOC** models have proven effective when tailored to local legislation in different nations.
- **Sport Integrity Australia** and **NSPCC CPSU** offer best practices that inspire implementation, especially in developing countries. Localization requires adapting training materials linguistically and contextually, maintaining ongoing communication with local stakeholders, and raising community awareness. In summary, child safeguarding programs embody universal values and are applicable across cultures.







# Key Organizational Models and Bodies

- Some of the most exemplary federations and organizations in the field of child safeguarding include:
- **FIFA** (<https://www.fifa.com/about-fifa/organisation/safeguarding>): Mandates a safeguarding officer in each club and enforces a detailed code of ethics.
- **IOC – International Olympic Committee** (<https://olympics.com/ioc/safeguarding>): Requires all member federations to appoint a Safeguarding Officer and establish a child protection committee.
- **Sport Integrity Australia** (<https://www.sportintegrity.gov.au/>): Sets an example with its comprehensive safeguarding, ethics, and reporting systems.
- **WHO – World Health Organization** (<https://www.who.int/initiatives/child-maltreatment-prevention>): Leads the global development of child safeguarding standards.
- **Terre des Hommes** (<https://www.tdh.ch/en/program/child-protection>): Provides field-based child protection programs worldwide, including sport.
- **U.S. Center for SafeSport** (<https://uscenterforsafesport.org/>): Oversees the implementation of child safeguarding standards across all sports in the USA.
- **NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU – UK)** (<https://thecpsu.org.uk/>): Develops guidance, monitoring, and training programs for sports organizations in the UK.





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