



Centre for Learning in Child Protection

The experiences of children participating in organised sport in the UK

Anne Stafford
Kate Alexander
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NSPCC 
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.

Background

- About the Centre for Learning in child Protection
- About the study:
 - Three year study funded by NSPCC
- Aims
 - Address a gap in knowledge about harm to children in specific settings; in this case sport
 - Investigate maltreatment and negative experiences children might face in sport settings in the UK
 - Provide information to assist in keeping children safe in sport

Rationale

- Knew about the benefits to children of sport participation – health, well-being - less about the negatives
- Increasing knowledge about harm to children in other settings – home, the street, bullying at school - less about the negatives experienced by children in sport
- Knew something about negative experiences of young elite athletes - less about negatives experienced by generality of young people participating in sport

Methods

- Literature review
- Online survey of students in HE and FE across the UK
 - Young adults/students (18-22) asked to reflect back on their experiences of organised sport as children (up to 16) - 6,000 returns
- In depth telephone interviews with young people identified through the survey (89 interviews)

The presentation

- Emotional harm
- Self harm
- Body image
- Sexual harassment and harm
- Physical harm
- Implications

Overview of harm

Emotional harm most common

Sexual harassment and physical harm also experienced by large numbers

Gender split most surprising in sexual harm

	All	Male	Female
Emotional harm	75%	77%	74%
Sexual harassment	29%	17%	34%
Physical harm	24%	26%	23%
Self harm	10%	9%	10%
Sexual harm	3%	5%	2%
Total (n)	6060	1634	4426

Emotional harm

- Emotional harm by far most commonly reported type of harm – 75% of sample
- Most common at higher levels of competition
- Minimal gender differences
- Most common perpetrators were peers
- Coaches also involved, particularly at higher levels
 - a third of those reporting emotional harm reported that a coach was involved

Emotional harm

- Behaviours experienced
 - 79% had been criticised about their performance
 - 77% reported being embarrassed or humiliated about something
 - 66% reported being teased
 - 51% said they were shouted or sworn at



Emotional harm

- A hyper-critical atmosphere can exist even at recreational levels
- Y/P accepted that criticism about performance could be a valid part of training and were keen to stress that criticism was often constructive
- It was also experienced as unhelpful, disproportionate and counter-productive
- Interviewees at recreational level mentioned a focus on performance that was 'over the top' for the level of competition and age of athletes



Emotional harm

- Embarrassment and humiliation as a coaching tool:
 - ‘We had a competition in training ... we called it juice boy basically, just a penalty shoot-out and the loser has to wear a pretty pink helmet the next time they go on the ice. There was one occasion where the goalies were told to let everybody score except this one kid.’
- Public punishment for poor performance:
 - joining classes for younger children
 - Punishment laps



Emotional harm

- Generally accepted and expected by young athletes as 'just what happens in sport':
 - 'Name calling and teasing is part of being a kid and also part of being involved in a competitive sport. If you can't deal with competition don't play'
 - 'Coaches have to push everyone hard (anyone that wants to do good). Anything verbal in sports is not emotional harm'

Body image

- Body image impacts of sport were more positive than negative
 - 88% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed how sport made them feel fitter
 - 52% agreed or strongly agreed that they liked the way sport made their body look
 - 51% agreed or strongly agreed that doing sport improved their body image

Body Image

- Diet and exercise
 - 10% percent of respondents to the survey had a special diet plan to reach their perfect weight
 - 11% had a special exercise plan to reach their perfect weight
 - 5% reported having become anorexic or bulimic



Self harm

- 10% of the whole sample reported some self harming behaviours:
 - 56% reported hitting and punching themselves
 - 55% reported scratching and tearing their skin
 - 39% reported cutting themselves
- Young men and young women reported self harming in similar proportions
- Some attributed self harming to sport
- Others reported the roots of self harming lay elsewhere - but sport could exacerbate
- Inter-relationship between self-harm, body image and rigours of competition

Self harm

- At interview, most young people linked self harm in sport to body image issues:
 - ‘Even though you are good at a sport, it doesn’t seem to matter how many medals you win, it matters what you look like...I just sort of ended up really miserable about my body image.... So I just used to cut a bit around my legs...’



Sexual harassment

- Of those reporting sexual harassment (29% of whole sample):
 - Two thirds said team mates were involved
 - A quarter also implicated coaches
 - One in five said a perpetrator was in the 'other' category

Sexual harassment

- This was the most gendered form of harm – 29% (34% young women and 17% young men)
- Mainly peers, but coaches also playing a role – directly or indirectly
- ‘Other’ category – 1 in 5 – including passers-by, spectators, in predominantly female sports, played outside – netball and hockey

Sexual harassment and harm

- (1) Non-physical harassment
 - Being subject to sexist jokes; being whistled or leered at; and having sexual comments made about your appearance
 - Described as something that could be ‘laughed off’ – but could be experienced as distressing
 - Not effectively challenged by adults involved in sport – put up with:
 - ‘Sometimes some of the spectators, the young lads, would make sexual jokes and comments when I was about 14/15 years old. This went on till about year 11. It wasn’t anything really bad but it did make me feel self conscious. The coaches knew it too and they used to tell us just to ignore it.’

Sexual harassment and harm

- In interview respondents frequently linked clothing to sexual harassment and issues of embarrassment about appearance and body image especially at puberty and adolescence:
 - 'I mean it's probably harmless, but again, when you are at that delicate age, it can be very intimidating. When you're out practicing in your skirt and there's boys from the school going past, or from other schools and they're whistling and making comments. I'm quite a shy person and I found that really, really embarrassing.'

Sexual harassment and harm

- (2) Physical sexual harassment:
 - Having your space invaded
 - physical contact that made you uncomfortable
 - being touched in a way that made you uncomfortable,
 - having a massage or rub that made you uncomfortable
- Having space invaded was by far the most common
- Active physical harassment much rarer - but some discomfort about being touched by coaches during instruction: could be done disrespectfully:
 - 'I didn't like how they would grab you to show you how to do something. I hated that. I suppose they needed to do that. ... But I didn't like it and felt that they should have asked me first before just grabbing or touching me. I was a coach after I left school and we were taught how to show children to do something without touching them. And we were told always to ask first if we wanted to touch a child to show them something.'

Sexual harm

- 3% of sample reported some sexually harmful behaviour
- Mainly took the form of 'exposing' or 'flashing'
- Mainly peers – and more common among boys than girls
- Ineffectively challenged by adults
 - Dealt with in a 'pack it in lads' kind of way
 - Much of it shrugged off as 'boys being boys'
 - Some distressing
 - Some reflecting back felt it should have been challenged
- There may be particular issues for young gay athletes – instances of distressing sexual bullying
- A few more serious reports
- A number of abuse of trust incidents

Physical harm

- Physical harm of young people in sport also common (24% of the whole sample)
 - Mainly team mates and peers
 - One third of those reporting it said coaches involved
 - coaches overtake peers as perpetrators at elite levels
 - Most common was being forced to train on when injured or exhausted (54%)



Physical harm

- Excessive training and training through injury and exhaustion
 - Prior research – how young people in sport are inculcated into a culture and sport ethos where overtraining and training through injury are seen as acceptable and the norm
 - This study - how children at all levels of competition come to accept a culture where training through discomfort and injury is normal
 - 'If you were injured, you weren't allowed to stop. The coaches would guilt me into continuing. They would say things like, if you leave you'll affect the numbers of the sides...They'd tell me I was letting the others down.'

Physical Harm

- Tended to accept and expect this treatment as normal part of sport
- However, this could be experienced differently in retrospect:
 - ‘I remember at the time I just kind of thought ah well I’ve broken my arm like the day I got my plaster and the first thing that happened was I was measured to get my jacket adjusted’
 - ‘I remember hurting my neck a bit and playing the front row. At no point should I have been allowed to play on, even if I felt ok to do so.’

Physical harm

- Aggressive and violent treatment by peers rarer
- Could be concealed as part of physicality of sport
- Could take the form of part of a pattern of bullying:
 - ‘I was running and one guy hit me with his elbow right on the bridge of the nose. It was deliberate.’
 - ‘In team practice, the same group of girls...were often the opposition team and they would purposely hit you. It was only our group that they did it to... It made me feel scared. I was worried if they were going to do something to me off the pitch or after school.’

Physical harm

- Aggressive and violent treatment from coaches also rare
- Punitive
 - ‘She would go round and, you know, if we couldn’t quite reach the floor then she’d be there pushing us down. And I actually quite enjoyed the pain which was very strange but it was like. I couldn’t do the splits, therefore I obviously wasn’t good enough and therefore I required punishment.’
- Accidental/deliberate?
 - ‘Oh, my instructor didn’t just threaten to hit me with the same whip as the horses. I think she caught your leg on purpose.’

To conclude

- Sport is generally a very positive experience for children
- Harm occurs at every level of sport but there is a tendency for it to increase with level of participation
- Peers are the most common perpetrators
- Emotionally damaging experiences are commonplace
- Sexual harassment and sexualised behaviour an issue
- Acceptance and expectation of these behaviours by children involved

Implications

- Children's rights approach
- Highlights the need to build on what young people themselves report as positive about sport participation – social aspects, meeting other young people
- The need to promoting a positive sporting and coaching ethos
- Addressing peer to peer harm
- Examining the interrelationship between body image, self harm and the pressures of competition – clothing