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The experiences of children participating in organised sport in the UK (Short paper)

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“I really think at that age there should not have been that much pressure. I should have been a child.”

Young woman: district level gymnastics, local level equestrian sports

The experiences of children participating in organised sport in the UK

Headline findings

- Overall, participating in **organised sport is a positive experience** for most children and young people. However a **negative sporting culture exists**, is accepted as 'the norm' and is perpetuated by peers, coaches and other adults.
- Young people in the study reported **widespread emotionally harmful treatment** (75%) and **unacceptable levels of sexual harassment** (29% of all respondents). Clothing and body image are key issues within sport contexts particularly around puberty and warrant further attention. Self-harm was reported equally by both boys and girls (10%). Reports of sexual harm featured at a low level (3%).
- **Peers** were the **most common perpetrators** of all forms of harm reported in the research, **coaches sometimes condoning this or failing to challenge it effectively**. **Coaches** were the **second most common perpetrators** of harm with their role in harm increasing as young athletes advanced through the competitive ranks.

This short paper distills key themes from the research report *The experiences of children participating in organised sport in the UK* (Kate Alexander, Anne Stafford, Ruth Lewis. June 2011). This research was commissioned and funded by NSPCC and conducted by researchers at The University of Edinburgh/NSPCC Centre for UK-wide Learning in Child Protection (CLiCP).

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NSPCC 
Cruelty to children must stop. **FULL STOP.**

1. Overview: What is this study? Why did we do it?

This study is concerned with children's safety within the community setting – in particular, children and young people's experiences of organised sport¹ in the UK. While the family is the setting for most maltreatment and abuse of children, physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse, are all experienced outside the family in other settings (Cawson et al). Given the number of children and young people engaged in organised sport in the UK (Sport England) it is important to examine negative and harmful experiences of children in this setting.

The benefits to children of participating in sport are well known and documented and include enhancement of self confidence and self-esteem, physical and mental health, and well-being (Scottish Executive, 2003). Research examining the range of negative experiences that may be faced by children across sports and at all levels of participation is limited, as is research in the UK focusing on children's and young people's views about these experiences.

This study was commissioned to **provide additional information about the nature and range of these negative experiences and harms**. The three year study (2007-2010) included two main elements: an online survey of over 6000 students² (aged 18-22, self-selecting sample) exploring their experience and retrospective views of participating in organised sport as children (up to 16yrs); and, 89 in-depth telephone interviews with young people who identified themselves in the online survey as having experienced some harm in sport and were willing to be interviewed.

¹ Organised Sport: Organised sport was defined in the study as sport that is voluntary, takes place outside school hours and includes an element of training or instruction by an adult. It did not include PE and informally arranged sport such as 'kick-about's with friends. It did include extra-curricular sport at school, for example playing in the school team or being part of a club, based at school but taking place outside ordinary PE lessons.
² 73% female; 27% male; with most young people from a slightly higher social-economic group than the population as a whole.

While not a prevalence study, given the large sample size, a vast amount of data has been gathered that **provides important information for those involved in decision making in sport**, particularly to **assist in the development of policy about child abuse in sport**.

The young people participating in this research were reporting on their experiences which, in the main, took place prior to new national standards and frameworks³ being established in each of the four nations. This implies a need for further research to determine the impact of these standards and frameworks.

2. Findings: What did we learn? OVERVIEW

In the main, **young people painted a positive picture of sport participation**. However sitting alongside the considerable benefits of participating in sport were **a range of more negative and harmful experiences**. Overall the study highlights worrying levels of emotionally harmful treatment and unacceptable levels of sexual harassment. It highlights that most of the harm experienced by participants was non-physical (verbal bullying, negative comments, being shouted at, humiliated etc.). Both physical and sexual harm was reported – in only a very small number of cases was this at levels that would be considered 'serious sexual or physical abuse'.

While experience of harm **occurs at every level of sport**, there is a tendency for it to increase with level of participation. To a great extent all of these experiences tended to be **accepted as normal** by young people and 'just what happens in sport'. It provides some

³ The Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) (established in 2001) is a partnership between the NSPCC, Sport England, Sports Council Northern Ireland and Sports Council for Wales. Its counterpart in Scotland is the Child Protection in Sport Service, a partnership between Children 1st and sportscotland. These organisations work with governing bodies and other organisations to minimise risk to children in sport. An important output of these partnerships has been **the development of national standards or frameworks for each of the home nations, setting out good practice in safeguarding and protecting children in sport**.
http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/cpsu/cpsu_wda57648.html

evidence of a sporting culture which accepts and condones disrespectful and negative treatment among young people and between young people and coaches.

Table 1: Experiences of various types of harm in main or second sport, by gender

	All	Male	Female
Emotional harm	75%	77%	74%
Self harm	10%	9%	10%
Sexual harassment	29%	17%	34%
Sexual harm	3%	5%	2%
Physical harm	24%	26%	23%
Total	100%	100%	100%
Total (n)	6060	1634	4426

EMOTIONAL HARM, BODY IMAGE AND SELF HARM

Disrespectful and emotionally harmful treatment of young people was common in children's experiences of sport in the UK. For some this included being criticised about performance in ways that could be disproportionate or unhelpful, being humiliated, teased, sworn at or bullied. While it occurred mainly between team mates and peers, a third of those reporting it said coaches were involved, either participating directly, or indirectly by creating an ethos where such behaviour was condoned or not effectively dealt with.

Most young people reported that the impact of participating in sport on their **body image** had been positive. However, for young people going through puberty, the focus on the body in sport can lead to complex and difficult issues. Young women often described general self-consciousness about their bodies which was intensified by sport clothing – short gym skirts, leotards and swimming costumes were frequently mentioned. This kind of self-consciousness could also affect boys. Revealing sports clothing and an emphasis on weight and diet can, for a minority of young athletes, lead to emotional and physical harm. Coaches had a role in directly setting diet and exercise plans, in scrutinizing and being aware of young people's weight and

appearance, in not understanding the possible effect of this behaviour on young people's developing identities, and in not challenging a culture where being the perfect weight and having the right appearance was highly important to young people. 11% of participants had a special exercise plan to reach their perfect weight, 5% reported having become anorexic or bulimic – issues more common in performance sports such as gymnastics and dance.

An equal proportion of boys and girls (10%) reported some experience of **self-harm** in their main or second sport, although the specific self-harming behaviours differed by gender. Some attributed the onset of these behaviours entirely to sport, for others the roots of self-harming lay elsewhere, but took on a particular flavour in the context of sport. For almost all those reporting self-harm at interview, there was an association with negative self and body image. Some attributed these behaviours to the pressures of training and competition, where self-harming could provide a feeling of control for some young people in situations where they felt powerless.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment was the second most common form of harm reported in the survey, experienced by 29% of respondents. Most of this was non-physical sexual harassment (sexist jokes, being whistled or leered at, etc.) and two thirds of it came from peers. Coaches were also perpetrators (21% of those experiencing sexual harassment in their main sport) as were spectators and passers-by. Some people could 'laugh off' sexual harassment but others experienced it as undermining and difficult. Sexualised bullying was a relatively common occurrence in some sports, notably rugby, football and to some extent swimming. This may be a particular problem for young gay people. On the whole coaches and others adults did not deal with sexual harassment effectively.

The most common of the physically harassing behaviours was 'having your space invaded'. Some young people mentioned feeling uncomfortable when they were touched by coaches during instruction. They felt this could be done in a rather disrespectful way often without seeking young people's permission. Several young people reported incidents which made them feel uncomfortable and confused (at the time, and for some, in retrospect) about whether something inappropriate had occurred or not.

SEXUAL HARM

Most of the sexual harm reported in the survey took place in the form of sexualised behaviour between boys, mainly involving exposing and flashing between peers. While at this time this was shrugged off by young people as 'boys being boys', on reflection it could be viewed differently, with young people expressing the view that more could have been done by adults involved in their sports to prevent it happening.

PHYSICAL HARM

Most of the physical harm reported by participants related to being **forced to train while injured or exhausted**. Young people in this study threw light on the way children come to accept a culture where training through discomfort, injury and exhaustion is seen as normal. Sometimes coaches were unaware of the effect of overtraining, with young athletes unable to speak up. Young people also reported some **aggressive and violent treatment**. Coaches were sometimes responsible. Mainly this was punitive, born out of frustration or anger when dissatisfied with young people's performance. More commonly, aggressive and violent treatment came from peers and took the form of physical bullying in the context of the physicality of sport – some of this being accidental, but there were also reports in team sports of balls and other sporting props being used to deliberately harm others. Many felt that physical aggression was to be

expected in sport and was accepted as part of what happened in sport, but sport also provided a more physical context for bullying with sports such as rugby and football sometimes providing the pretext for deliberate tripping, pushing and more serious violence.

3. Key themes and implications

KEY THEMES

- There was **a widespread acceptance of all forms of harm** as normal and 'just what happens in sport'. Behaviours which would have been intolerable in other settings such as adult work places or school were often accepted as normal and condoned in sport. Young people in the research repeatedly highlighted a sporting ethic which accepts as normal a culture of bullying, humiliating treatment, sexualised behaviour and of training and competing through exhaustion and injury.
- **Peers were the most common perpetrators** of all forms of harm reported in the research. Coaches were the second most common perpetrators; and were also highlighted by young people as failing to effectively handle cases of peer-to-peer harm.
- The research raises important issues about the **inter-relationship between sport, and body image, diet and cultures of excellence**; as well as the manner in which negative sporting cultures are perpetuated.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The implications of this study are currently being explored. An initial discussion paper has been drafted which takes into account the ongoing work around standards in sport in the UK and begins to highlight key considerations for shaping and implementing policy, as well as areas that warrant further research.

For more information

READ

Full report: Alexander, K., Stafford, A. & Lewis, R., 2011. *The experiences of children participating in organised sport in the UK*. London: NSPCC.

Summary report: Alexander, K., Stafford, A. & Lewis, R., 2011. *The experiences of children participating in organised sport in the UK: summary report*. London: NSPCC.

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