

THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE CHILD SAFEGUARDING OFFICERS IN SPORTS

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Abstract. This study aims to clarify the role and responsibilities of the Child Safeguarding Officer in Sports and assess whether it has a place in Bulgarian sports organizations. A SWOT analysis was carried out to assess the situation in Bulgaria of implementing this position in sports organizations. The results show that there is a need to change our country's policies, practices, and culture regarding violence among children and youth playing sports. The introduction of this position is necessary given the provision of a safe, positive, and healthy environment for sport and ensuring the protection of children and young people.

Keywords: protection; safety; abuse; neglect

Introduction

In July 2017, the Sixth International Conference of Ministers and Senior Officials Responsible for Physical Education and Sport was held in Kazan, where an Action Plan, known as the Kazan Action Plan, was considered and implemented. This document contains texts concerning the safety and protection of children and young people during sporting activities. The document notes explicitly that physical education, physical activity, and sport need to be practiced in a safe environment with full respect for human rights. It is important to protect athletes by providing safe spaces for them to participate in sports and competitions and to protect them from abuse, misconduct, sexual and labor exploitation, traffic, and all forms of violence. Children, youth, and women are particularly vulnerable to acts of violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect, and impairment of their health and development, respectively, to trampling their fundamental human rights (Kazan Action Plan 2017).

1. Classifications of abuse

Violence can take form in belittling, humiliating, yelling, blaming, rejecting, isolating, threatening, ignoring, denying attention and support

(Gervis & Dunn 2004; Stirling & Kerr, 2008; Pinheiro et al. 2014; Mountjoy et al. 2016). It can be seen as ***non-sexualized abuse and sexual abuse*** (both of which occur in sports) amongst children and young people playing sports. It is for this reason that the position of Child Safeguarding Officer in Sports is being introduced into global practice. They must ensure a safe environment for children and young people to play sports, in which the rights and dignity of all are respected, including protecting young people from all forms of violence. In addition to protection, the Officer's activities need to be based and adjacent to the guiding principles set out in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UNESCO Convention against Discrimination in Education, the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and others, because as Mountjoy et al. (2016) point out, the roots of the cultural context of bullying and abuse can be found in discrimination based on power differentials and other social and personal factors. Proactive actions, training for prevention, raising awareness, and changing mindsets and attitudes towards violence in the name of victory are needed.

Types of non-sexualized abuse – Physical Abuse, Psychological Abuse (i.e., emotional abuse), Neglect (Table 1)

Physical abuse can be accompanied by some physical contact – punching, kicking, spitting, tripping, pushing, hair-pulling, scratching, taking belongings, etc. According to McMahon et al. (2023), physical abuse can also be Non-Contact Physical Abuse (see Table 1). This type may also be called Physical Maltreatment, which is non-accidental trauma or physical injury caused by hitting, beating, kicking, biting, burning, or otherwise harming an athlete. This may include forced or compulsory inappropriate physical activity (e.g., inappropriate training loads for age or physical condition when injured or in pain), forced alcohol consumption, or systematic doping practices (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Psychological abuse – nonverbal actions, spreading rumors, intimidation, social exclusion, manipulation, opposition, neglect, belittling of achievements, etc. (Table 1).

Neglect – The failure of parents, coaches, and all who care for children to meet the physical and emotional needs of the child. It is a failure to protect the child from danger as well as expose the child to risk (Pinheiro, 2006; Mountjoy et al. 2016).

Negligence or carelessness towards children – this is inaction on the part of parents, teachers, and coaches concerning the safety of children/athletes; deprivation of food/drinks; not allowing rest and recovery; in sporting activity, it is conducting the training process in an unsafe environment as well as using training methods that are inappropriate for age and ability (Mountjoy et al. 2016).

Violence in all its forms violates human rights and can sometimes be viewed as a criminal offense (Brackenridge 2010; ICES, 2015).

Table 1. Types of non-sexualized abuse violence in sport (exerted towards children and youth amateur and elite athletes) Maltreatment type (after McMahon et al. 2023 and modified to Bulgarian cultural context and practice)

Physical Abuse	Psychological abuse (i.e., emotional abuse)	Neglect
<p>➤ Non-Contact Physical Abuse</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Involuntary participation in the training process/competition in case of and during illness and/or injury; – forced return of a sick/injured athlete to training/camp/competition; – overload/excessive loads during training, not adapted to the age and individual characteristics of athletes; – early sports specialization; – applying punishments where many exercises are performed that are not consistent with training, physical ability, timing, tasks set during the workout, etc. (e.g., number of repetitions or distance not consistent with physical ability and training); – posing a number of risky challenges to athletes that can seriously endanger their lives and health; – depriving athletes of food or rest (during training/camp). <p>Contact Physical Abuse</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Slapping, kicking, clapping, ear pulling, hitting behind the neck, etc., for breaking discipline and rules of conduct/speaking; for poor performance during practice or competition. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Neglect due to poor results/performance during training or competition; – Ridicule for poor result/performance during practice or competition; – Yelling at a poor result/performance during practice or competition; inattentively; for no reason; – Coach/parent is ashamed of athlete due to poor performance and/or problems with athlete's appearance, weight, etc.); making fun of athlete's body and comparisons to farm animals; – Public ridicule; – Belittling achievements; – Manipulation and opposition; – Spreading rumors and falsehoods about athletes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Encouraging the athlete to neglect school and concentrate/focus on training and competition; – Leaving children and youth unattended and unsupervised during the training process; – Lack of adequate judgment about the nature and magnitude of the loads and the intensity of the training, which is a prerequisite for injury; – Neglect of eating disorders; – Prohibition of meetings with relatives and friends in order not to disturb the training regime; prohibition of friendships; – Encourage poor food intake.

2. Role and Responsibilities of Child Safeguarding Officers in Sports Organizations

UNICEF reports a severe risk of child abuse in sports clubs. It stresses the need to take protective measures and to counter this trend. This problem can be addressed by implementing Child Safeguarding Officers in sports organizations (Hartmann-Tews et al. 2020). The sporting institution's moral obligation – club, federation, an organization involved in providing a sporting service, etc. – is to take care and ensure that risks of 'non-accidental violence' are minimal and can be identified and prevented (Mountjoy et al., 2016). This should be a shared responsibility for everyone at the sports club, and at the same time, it is the specific commitment of the Child Safeguarding Officer who has the lead safeguarding role. Specialist training is required to carry out their obligations and activities successfully. For the training to be successful and for those involved in this activity to be competent, the educational content, as well as the teaching, needs to be culturally relevant and culturally appropriate (McMahon et al. 2023).

Child Safeguarding Officer should:

- Create and maintain a safe environment in which all members of the sports club/team/organization can participate in sporting activities without fear or risk of harm (physical and psycho-emotional);
- Draw up a comprehensive document on the protection policy of the sports organization concerned - preventive measures, intervention, control, reporting, etc., or a so-called code of conduct for staff;
- To include, implement, and enforce appropriate policies and procedures that promote protection from harm and violence;
- Participate in the selection of new staff for the sports organization (coaching, administrative, support staff, volunteers) by checking their background and criminal record for previous recorded acts of violence;
- To supervise the training and competition process;
- To examine and verify any concerns about possible violence;
- To deal with all forms of violence, bullying, and abuse of children and young people participating in sports that may occur within the sporting organization;
- Conduct internal investigations when cases of abuse of children playing sport are identified and reported;
- To hold meetings and discussions with the children and young people of the sports organization, as well as their parents, to raise their awareness of violence - how to recognize it, how and to whom to report it, etc.;
- To train or organize training for sports organization staff, including volunteers, on child protection in sports;
- To maintain close contacts with the administration and management of the sports organization, as well as with external organizations involved in the fight against violence – sports federations, police, prosecutor's office, State Agency for Child Protection (SACP), social welfare services, municipal administrations, etc.;

- To report cases of violence and assist the authorities in taking action;
- To prevent and protect against harmful practices in the sports organization;
- Draw up an appropriate range of sanctions that can be applied where necessary;
- To promote positive experiences within the sports organization during sports and competition activities while creating a safe and enjoyable environment for all organization members.

Methodology

Objective of the study

The study aims to clarify the role and responsibilities of the Child Safeguarding Officer in Sports and to assess whether it has a place in Bulgarian sports organizations.

Research objectives:

- To review the literature concerning the role and activities of the Child Safeguarding Officer;
- To examine the role and responsibilities of Safeguarding Officers in sports clubs;
- To carry out a SWOT analysis to assess the situation in the country of implementing this position in Bulgarian sports organizations.

Results and discussion

SWOT Analysis of Using Safeguarding Officers in Sports Clubs with Young Athletes

SWOT analysis was used to formulate conclusions based on analyzing the strengths (S – strengths) and weaknesses (W – weaknesses) of Child Safeguarding officer implementation in sports organizations and the resulting opportunities (O – opportunities) and threats (T – threats) from and in the external environment (Dealtry 1994; Kotler et al. 2008).

Strengths

One of the strengths is from the global practice - mechanisms and algorithms have been developed to implement Child Safeguarding Officers in Sports Organizations. They can serve as a basis for developing the Bulgarian model for their implementation, drawing on existing knowledge and experience in this direction. Foreign models can serve as a framework to create one that is culturally relevant to our conditions. Through its implementation, policies and practices can be implemented that prioritize the safety and security of young athletes and create inclusive and safe sports environments. This positive environment, in turn, promotes the overall well-being of young people.

Establishing protocols and practices that ensure the safety of children and youth participating in sports helps to create an environment conducive to sports

participation and development because it is essential to ensure the safety of children and youth participating in sports activities. In such an environment, young people can develop, succeed, and at the same time feel safe and supported.

Another strong point is the support of the Ministry of Youth and Sport and the close cooperation with the European Commission regarding the regulation and implementation of the post.

Weaknesses

One of the weaknesses is the lack of proper training and trained professionals. There are no qualified staff in Bulgaria who are responsible for the safety of children and young people during sports and sporting activities. In the event of an incident, there are no response mechanisms and algorithms developed. There is also poor awareness and knowledge (on the part of athletes, their parents and relatives, coaches, and administrative staff) in reacting to violence: Who should the victim turn to help to, and how can the victim be protected from further acts of violence, etc.

There is also insufficient knowledge of protection policies and procedures. Lack of knowledge and understanding of safeguarding policies and procedures is a serious problem, particularly in sports clubs that work mainly with children.

Another weakness is the lack of funding to employ such a specialist in sports organizations. Few sports organizations in our country, including at the level of sports federations, could afford such a financial outlay.

Our national psychology regarding violence also appears to be a weakness. Many of the types of violence listed above are not violent for many Bulgarian parents and coaches. For example, in the name of success in sports, many Bulgarian children “sacrifice” with parental and coaching consent (and often at their insistence) their good academic performance.

The opportunities and threats also arise from the strengths and weaknesses presented about the opportunities for Child Safeguarding Officer implementation in sports organizations.

Opportunities

Employing a Child Safeguarding Officer within the sports organization will improve its reputation among young people playing sport, their families, the community, and within sporting circles. The activities and responsibilities of this officer require continuous updating of knowledge, which in turn increases their competence in a range of matters, including legal and regulatory issues. Employees broaden their circle of acquaintances – collaborating with experts from different fields.

Another opportunity is developing a new scientific-practical field to be taught in higher education institutions that train sports pedagogical specialists.

As a result of the trainings, meetings, and discussions held and organized by the Child Safeguarding Officer with sports children, their parents, members of sports organizations, and volunteers, this idea is expected to change the attitudes of society and change the narrative of denial to counteract all manifestations of violence.

Threats

Given the above responsibilities of the Child Safeguarding Officer, this should be a well-trained professional. However, these professionals will need to be paid for their work. Furthermore, this is one of the biggest threats to the deployment of these professionals in sports organizations. This is an issue of debate whether sports organizations will have the financial resources and opportunities and whether these skilled employees with many responsibilities will work as volunteers without funding. This could pose a severe threat of closure to small sports clubs if they are required to have such an officer, which in turn will have a negative impact on children and young people playing sports, especially if they have no alternative to continue playing sports.

A serious challenge and threat to adequate protection from violence is the inability to recognize it, identify it effectively, and solve problems afterward. This, in turn, will hinder the prevention of existing vicious practices.

It is also possible that if the official is not of high authority and does not demonstrate self-confidence and self-assurance, his advice and recommendations may be disregarded (by abusive parents, coaches, other professionals, and staff in the sports organization, including children and young people playing sport).

Another threat is the legal framework and potential for conflict of interest – if the federation employs the official and must report a problem, this may not happen if the issue threatens to discredit the federation leadership, coaches, etc. There is also a risk of under-reporting at the sports club level – not to compromise the club and its officers etc.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a need to change our country's policies, practices, and culture regarding violence among children and youth playing sports. The introduction of the Child Safeguarding Officer position is necessary given the provision of a safe, positive, and healthy environment for sport and ensuring the protection of children and young people. Still, the introduction of the position needs to be done carefully in terms of the requirements for sports clubs. The role and responsibilities of safety officers extend beyond physical safety to include protection from violence, harassment, gossip, neglect, etc. They must create a positive and inclusive atmosphere to ensure the safety of the athletes and all members of the sports organization. To this end, the Child Safeguarding Officer has significant responsibilities within the sports organization and beyond.

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