



Safeguarding Children and Youth in Sport

Position and Recommendations
of ENGSO Youth



Background

Physical education and sports are important to ensure the healthy development and well-being of children and young people. Participation in sports brings joy, a positive attitude towards life and develops healthy habits for all. It boosts self-esteem and creates a sense of belonging. Through sport, children and youngsters develop motor skills, learn important values such as tolerance, integrity or fair-play and make friendships for a lifetime. If used in the right way, sport can contribute to their education, personal/social development and well-being in general. Sport is also widely recognized as an engine of social inclusion of youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Despite of all positive social and personal aspects of participating in sports and physical activity, some minors are affected by negative experiences. Like in any other arena involving a close personal relationship and authority relationship toward children, a sporting environment may also sometimes expose them to particular risks. Various studies show that children and youngsters can be subject to different forms of violence in sport, which can lead to lifelong consequences on their emotional, physical and psychological health and personal development. Sexual harassment, physical violence, verbal abuse, bullying and neglect are just a few examples that can deeply affect minors' participation in sport activities. Youngsters from disadvantaged social backgrounds (with different cultural backgrounds, economic and educational obstacles, physical or mental disabilities) can be particularly affected by these incidents. Furthermore, elite youth athletes often suffer from eating disorders, body image issues and self-harm because of distorted expectations connected to their participation in sport.

Until the early 2000s very few European sports organisations had put in place systems and structures to respond to complaints about the misleading and unlawful behaviour of adults or other young people. Over the past decades, victims of all forms of violence in sport have started to make their voices heard and responded to. At European and national levels, a number of initiatives have influenced the education of sports leaders, coaches and staff to recognize and implement strategies within their organisations with the aim of creating and maintaining child safe cultures. However, like many other institutions with a duty of care to children and young people, sporting organisations have not been immune to the failures of policy, procedures and systems to protect children from abuse and exploitation by coaches, administrators and other participants. **At ENGSO Youth, we firmly believe that any club or institution that offers sports or sport-based activities to minors has a responsibility to safeguard them and make sure they all are kept safe from harm. It is the shared responsibility of the European sports movement to secure a safe and enjoyable environment for all children.** These rights are also enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Sexual violence in sport

Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child defines violence as „all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse.“ The sexual realm of human experience is closely associated with many social taboos. Therefore, whilst sexual behaviour, disposition and orientation perhaps represent the most intimate and profound expressions of a person’s identity, they can also represent an aspect of significant vulnerability for all individuals. Available data suggest that about 1 in 5 children in Europe are victims of some form of sexual violence and that about 80% of abusers are within the child’s circle of trust[1]. Sexual violence against children and minors can take many forms: sexual abuse within the family and important adults circle, child pornography and prostitution, corruption, solicitation via Internet and sexual assault by peers.

With regards to the sporting environment, a study conducted in the UK in 2009 reported that 29% of the sample of athletes representing all competitive levels had been sexually harassed (34% of females and 17% of males) while 3% had been sexually abused (5% of males and 2% of females)[2]. Vertommen’s research involving 4000 adults who had participated in sport as children in Belgium and the Netherlands revealed that 14% had experienced sexual violence (17% female, 11% male)[3]. Rulofs’ study found that one third of German squad athletes have experienced some form of sexualised violence in sport. One in nine German athletes experienced severe sexual violence, such as sexual assault and rape.[4] Clearly, the challenge is huge and shall be tackled at the European level.

Concerning sexual violence, it appears that in particular elite young athletes are more likely to be assaulted than their lower level counterparts. Studies also show that girls are more likely to be sexually abused in sports than boys, while in 98% of the cases the perpetrators were male [5]. Another important aspect is interpersonal violence that has been mostly experienced by minority groups. For instance, the study led by Vertommen showed that LGBT athletes face a higher level of childhood violence than their heterosexual peers. Secondly, this study also confirms the findings that physical and mental disabilities are associated with an increased risk of childhood sexual and physical violence. Thirdly, although the difference was small, the respondents with an ethnic background different from the Dutch and Flemish populations also showed increased exposure to physical and sexual violence.

[1] The Council of Europe 1 in 5 Campaign: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/sport/start-to-talk>

[2] Paulo D. (2005) Human Rights in Youth Sport: A critical review of children’s rights in competitive sports, Routledge, London and New York

[3] Vertommen, T. et al. (2016) Interpersonal violence against children in sport in the Netherlands and Belgium, in Child abuse and neglect, 51, 223-236.

[4] Rulofs, B. (2007) Prävention von sexualisierter Gewalt im Sport - eine Analyse der bisherigen Maßnahmen in NRW. In Rulofs, Bettina (Ed.), „Schweigen schützt die Falschen“. *Sexualisierte Gewalt im Sport - Situationsanalyse und Handlungsmöglichkeiten* (pp. 19 - 30). Düsseldorf: Innenministerium des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen.

[5] Recommendations on the protection of young athletes and safeguarding children’s rights in sport, Expert Group on good governance (2016). Available from: <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=groupDetail.groupDetailDoc&id=25000&no=1>

Achievements at EU policy level

The European Commission's White Paper on Sport (2007) recognised the importance of protection of children in sport, notably stipulating the importance of actions against sexual abuse and harassment of minors in sport. Consequently, article 165 the Lisbon Treaty (TFEU) involves reference for protecting the physical and moral integrity of sportsmen and sportswomen, especially the youngest. This is seen as a way to develop EU action in the field of safeguarding children in sport. In accordance with the mandate deriving from the Council Resolution on the second European Work Plan for Sport (2014-2017), the protection and safeguarding of minors in sport was one of the five issues identified as priorities in terms of sport integrity by Member States and the European Commission. An expert group on Good Governance was set up in 2015 to produce recommendations on this key topic. The report (Recommendations on the protection of young athletes and safeguarding children's rights in sport) was published in July 2016. Based on a synthesis of the available academic literature on the subject which informed the recommendations, the report concluded that minorities are already facing more challenges to engage in sports (e.g. LGBT, ethnical minorities etc.)

The EU Work Plan for Sport 2017-2020 has continued to acknowledge the importance of the issue and has identified the need for a study to gather data on violence against minors in sport and identify national practices. The Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture (DG EAC) of the European Commission commissioned Ecorys and the Thomas More University in January 2019 to undertake a mapping study addressing the topic of safeguarding children in sport. The report was published in September 2019. It gathers empirical evidence on violence against children in sport across the EU and analyses how safeguarding issues are dealt with at national and/or international level through legal instruments and policy initiatives. In the second semester of 2019, Finland's EU Presidency focus on facilitating and safeguarding access to sport for children. In November 2019, it will adopt the Council's Conclusions of safeguarding children in sport. In light of these recent EU sport policy developments, ENGSO Youth introduces the current position paper on safeguarding children in sport.

What has ENGSO Youth done so far?

Regarding social inclusion and safeguarding children and youth in sports, ENGSO and ENGSO Youth have always been sharing the opinion that "sport organisations must be a safe arena in which everyone is included". As early as 1998, ENGSO issued guidelines for Children and Youth sport that already involved Recommendations addressing sport organisations and decision makers alike.

Ever since ENGSO Youth was established, we have been actively advocating for the protection of children and youth against sexual violence in sport. Already in 2011, ENGSO Youth partnered a consortium led by the German Sports Youth entitled as **"Prevention of sexualized violence in sports - Impulses for an open, secure and sound sporting environment in Europe."** The main outcome of the project, a best practice guide was published in 2012. After reinforcing cooperation with our partners we have continued combatting sexual violence in sports within the EU project **"Sport Respects Your Rights"** (2013-15) that educated young

ambassadors in order to promote this important topic to their national sport federations.

Later on, ENGSO Youth contributed to the **“Safeguarding Youth Sport”** (2014-2015) project funded by Erasmus+, led by the Center Ethics in Sport in Belgium. The project aimed at sharing knowledge and expertise on integrity threats in elite youth sport, stimulated individual empowerment of athletes and promoted a conducive ethical climate. We continued our work within the frameworks of the Erasmus Plus co-financed **VOICE project** led by the German Sports University in Cologne. The VOICE research team succeeded in conducting 72 in-depth interviews with people who have been affected by sexual violence in sport. By listening and acknowledging the voices of those that have been affected by sexual harassment and abuse, crucial research data was generated on sexual violence in European sport.

Recommendations in relation to safeguarding children in sport

ENGSO Youth firmly believes that all children and young people have the fundamental right to enjoy sport and physical activity, free from all forms of abuse, violence, exploitation and neglect. Safeguarding children in sport is a prerequisite for creating a supportive, secure and joyful environment where children can learn, develop and **have fun**. In other words, child safeguarding provides a set of actions that help to ensure all children participating in sport have a positive experience. Decision makers, sport organisations, sport staff and volunteers all have a responsibility and duty to protect children from any negative experiences. **ENGSO Youth believes that all children regardless of their cultural, social background, physical and mental status should be equally involved, empowered and encouraged to fulfil their potential.**

ENGSO Youth strongly supports the eight guiding principles developed by the International Safeguarding Children in Sport Working Group in 2014 and the IOC Consensus Statement on Sexual Harassment and Abuse in Sport. In order to ensure proper legacy for our previous initiatives, we have aligned our recommendations with the outcomes of our previous EU funded projects, such as Sport Respects Your Rights and VOICE.

With due respect to the achievements at the level of policy and practice, ENGSO Youth developed recommendations in order to advocate for the fundamental rights of children and young people in sports. We address these recommendations to the European decision-makers at all levels, the European sports movement and young sport leaders to speak up for the fundamental rights of their peers.

1. Recommendations for the European institutions, national governments and local authorities in charge of sport

Encourage national sport governing bodies to develop and promote child protection strategies as one of their priorities.

Create and implement appropriate legal frameworks and effective regulations in fighting against violence to minors in sport. National governments need to develop more consistent background checks on sport employees who work with children.

Foster and promote collections of scientific data also on under-studied aspects of child safeguarding in sport. Most of the studies in this field concentrate on sexual violence in sport while other aspects of child protection are under-studied. Among them, psychological abuse, peer-to-peer bullying or overtraining are important issues to tackle.

Support sport organisations in developing more effective child protection measures from the promotion of educational programmes, codes of conduct, guidelines, toolkits, campaigns, hotlines. The utilization of **monitoring tools** and instruments is necessary to oversee the effective implementation of relevant procedures.

Strengthen cooperation with international governmental organisations, such as the Council of Europe and UNICEF. From the European Commission to grassroots sport organisations there is a need for **creating partnerships** to achieve the goals of safeguarding children in sport.

Promote exchange of good practices on safeguarding children in sport in particular those facing certain difficulties or obstacles, like children and young people with physical and mental disabilities.

Raise awareness on the minimum standards of safeguarding practices in sport. There is a need to increase common understanding through communication and educational initiatives. Education of sport staff working with children and notably children from disadvantaged backgrounds (disabilities, minorities etc.) is particularly important.

2. Recommendations for sport federations and clubs

Develop a clear set of guidelines and integrate a culture of respect and the prevention of gender harassment and sexualised violence into the organisations' **policies**.

Sensitise the topic through information and awareness raising campaigns (e.g. look at the examples from Sport Respects Your Rights and VOICE projects).

Develop and implement adequate procedures for dealing with complaints and concerns (have a "First Aid Plan" in place) and to reduce the risks of children being harmed, physically, emotionally and mentally.

Develop standards for safeguarding into **recruiting processes** for coaches, staff members and volunteers, including background checks on future (and present) employees and volunteers working with minors in accordance with relevant legal frameworks.

Develop educational tools to ensure that children feel safe, heard and treated fairly. **Education and training for** coaches and other members of the organisation (volunteers,

parents, etc.) is necessary to ensure a more supportive and inclusive environment.

Identify two members (ideally male and female) as responsible people for the topic (“Child Protection Officers”, “Safeguarding Managers”).

Collaborate with other stakeholders from within and outside the sport domain (e.g. agencies responsible for child protection)

Essentially, to protect children and young people you need a:

- **safeguarding policy**
- **code of conduct**
- **preventive arrangement**
- **reporting abuse procedure and systems**
- **monitoring system**

3. Recommendations for young sport leaders aiming to develop campaigns against sexual violence in sport

Build on your creative energy and potential to create a campaign targeting young peers, use your language and skills in dealing with the topic.

Start small and use your local networks to support the planning and implementation process, e.g. experts from your local community (e.g. child protection officers, human rights activists, scientists, local politicians ..)

Listen closely to the affected young people’s stories and interests and agree democratically upon the focus of your campaign (sexual harassment, emotional abuse, physical violence, racism, homophobia etc.). You can take an example from the **VOICE** project.

As part of your campaign you can **implement** training for sport staff that focuses on human rights, different forms of discrimination and violence as well as the prevention of harassment and violence in sport. Ask for the support of a human rights activist or a child protection officer.

Look for and engage with interested youth networks and other stakeholders that can support your campaign, especially by amplifying the messages and giving visibility to your activities.

You can involve the following standards for the campaigns:

- Raise awareness for problems of discrimination and violence in sport, e.g. for sexualised violence and gender harassment
- Avoid the underlying message that a victim of sexual harassment and abuse has any responsibility for the assault
- Produce a positive, constructive and empowering perspective instead of threatening the target group
- Do not only present problems, develop ideas for their solutions
- Present good examples for a culture of respect and integrity in sport

In the light of these recommendations, ENGSO Youth welcomes the Council Conclusions of the Finnish Presidency and encourages European and national institutions, sport federations, clubs and youth sport leaders to take action and support the implementation of children safeguarding measures at all levels. It is our shared responsibility to protect children and minors from all forms of violence in sport. We believe the voice of affected young people is particularly important, decision-makers and practitioners should listen to the voice of youth in sport!

