U.S. Center for SafeSport: Preventing Abuse in Sports

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While society at large recognizes the many benefits of sport, it is important to also recognize and prevent factors that can lead to an abusive environment. This paper seeks to combine the current research on abuse in the sport environment with the work of the U.S. Center for SafeSport. The inclusion of risk factors unique to sport and evidence-informed practices provides framing for the scope and response to sexual abuse in sport organizations in the United States. The paper then explores the creation and mission of the U.S. Center for SafeSport, including the role of education in prevention and of policy, procedures, audit, and compliance as important aspects of a comprehensive safeguarding strategy. This paper provides preliminary data on the reach of the Center, established in 2017. This data captures the scope of education and training and the increase in reports to the Center from within the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, maltreatment, sexual abuse, sport, youth sports

The U.S. Center for SafeSport (Center) is an independent nonprofit organization which is focused on ending all forms of abuse in sport, while carrying out its mission of making athlete well-being the centerpiece of the nation’s sport culture through abuse prevention, education, and accountability. This paper provides context on the issue of abuse in sport, outlining the incidence rates of sexual violence and important policy and education research specific to the sport environment. This paper introduces the Center and its efforts to create a safe environment for all sport participants.

Estimates suggest that 45 million boys and girls nationwide participate in youth sport, accounting for 60% of all United States (U.S.) youth (Noble & Vermillion, 2014). Potential benefits are vast and include enhanced self-image and educational achievement, as well as improved physical, social, and emotional health (Vella, Cliff, Magee, & Okely, 2014). At the same time, the benefits of sport can come with the potential for harm. As a place where young people can learn important skills such as teamwork, leadership, competition, and drive, our culture often overlooks the existence of abuse in sport or explains it away as an inevitable part of sport culture.

The Center advances the benefits of sport by promoting a national culture built on respect. Athletes, coaches, and team members, regardless of level of competition, deserve to participate in sports that are free of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.

Rates of Sexual Misconduct in Youth Sport and Opportunities for Prevention

Research shows high rates of sexual violence in our communities (Black et al., 2011; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). While national incidence data is not yet readily available on sexual misconduct in either elite or community youth sport in the U.S., reports in the media continue to highlight the significance of this problem. Studies using a variety of methodologies are emerging and report significant rates of sexual, physical, and emotional maltreatment of young athletes. For example, due to variations in the methods used, reported rates of sexual abuse range from 2% to 48% (Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussalli, & Tapp, 2008; Mountjoy et al., 2016) and sexual harassment rates vary between 19% and 92% (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Over time, as more uniform research methods emerge, the data related to sexual misconduct in both elite and community youth sport in the U.S. is expected to become more focused and the range of reported rates will likely narrow from the wide ranges discussed above.

While fewer studies have documented physical and emotional abuse in sport, estimates suggest they are also a significant problem. Diamond, Callahan, Chain, and Solomon (2016) reported high rates of hazing in middle school (5%–17%), high school (17%–48%), and college athletes (12%), which included 80% reporting hazing as part of sport team initiation. A United Kingdom study reported that 75% of youth are emotionally abused while participating in sport (Stafford, Alexander, & Fry, 2015). Finally, evidence suggests that athletes have been abused by coaches, sport administrators, trainers, other adults, and peers involved in sport organizations.

Sport is not immune to larger societal attitudes and beliefs surrounding sexual abuse. Parent (2011), in her study of sexual abuse disclosures in sport organizations in Canada, found many individuals in a position to report abuse harbored “prejudice, beliefs, and myths that seemed to perpetuate a culture of inaction and silence” (p. 328).

These attitudes can create an environment in which victims cannot disclose the violence (Stirling & Kerr, 2009; Toftegaard-Nielsen, 2001). In this environment, victims may feel tangible barriers to reporting misconduct and abuse such as threatening further harm or retaliation (Brackenridge, Fasting, Kirby, & Leahy, 2010). The victim may also perceive intangible barriers due to the power held by the abuser and other authority figures, such as a fear of being disbelieved or a belief that the case will not be handled confidentially or effectively (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001; Kirby, Greaves, & Havinsky, 2000). As a result, the limited data available...
on the incidence of abuse in sport is further compromised by the
culture of silence created in sport organizations. For example, it is
typically female athletes who are targeted; however, sexual harass-
ment and abuse of male athletes is considered vastly under-reported
(Parent & Bannon, 2011; Mountjoy et al., 2016) and sexual harass-
ment and abuse of transgender athletes even more so (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Consideration needs to be given to the vulnerability of in-
dividuals with a disability to experience abuse while participating in
sport. As with other marginalized groups, individuals with disabil-
ities are considered at greater risk for various forms of abuse,
including sexual and emotional abuse (Breiding & Armour, 2015).
The 2009 Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report on Crime
Against People with Disabilities found that “youth ages 12 to 19
with a disability experienced violence at nearly twice the rate as
those without a disability” (Rand & Harrell, 2008; p. 2). The same
study found individuals with a disability were shown to experience
rape and sexual assault at more than twice the rate of individuals
without a disability. According to Kirby, Demers, and Parent (2008)
there is a paucity of research on sexual abuse and violence in sport
directed toward athletes with disabilities, yet there is reason for
concern given the presence of the same risk factors in the sport
context that leads to a higher risk of maltreatment in general (e.g., a
reluctance to report harassment and abuse due to limited options for
participation and concerns about being believed).

Importantly, the continuum of youth sport programs represents
one of the largest and most promising vehicles for preventing child
sexual abuse, maltreatment, and injury in the U.S. with the potential
to reach over 45 million children and their parents. The “volunteer”
nature of almost all youth sport, while sometimes a challenge to
implementing training and best practices, ensures the daily involve-
ment of many parents as coaches and organizers and offers an
opportunity to educate an unprecedented number of parents regard-
ing prevention.

Need for Education in Prevention

The literature on abuse prevention shows a serious gap in knowl-
edge and awareness of sexual misconduct and abuse, and how these
issues can present themselves in sport (Brackenridge et al., 2010;
Parent, 2011). This lack of awareness and training is experienced at
all levels, from sport administration, coaches, parents, and athletes
(Brackenridge et al., 2010).

If the majority of a coach’s coaching philosophy comes from
an interpretation of their experience in the sport (Cushion, Armour,
& Jones, 2003), the inclusion of abuse prevention training as part of a
coach’s professional development can assist in changing
the perspectives of a coach at an individual level. The literature
supports the benefits of increased education on abuse prevention,
including education on bystander intervention, which illustrated
an increase in action after observing misconduct (Cares et al.,
2015). As coaches spend so much time with their athletes, they
are well positioned to notice signs of abuse and uphold athlete
protection policies. Brackenridge et al. (2010) suggest including
abuse prevention training as part of the coach accreditation process,
making it a de facto mandatory training. Sport organization staff,
volunteers, and administration should also have a base level of
knowledge to be able to appropriately respond to the signs of and
disclosure of abuse.

At the parent and athlete level, this gap in knowledge can
partially be traced to few public resources in this area (Brackenridge
et al., 2004; Cense & Brackenridge, 2001; Parent & Demers, 2011).

With this lack of awareness also comes limited understanding on
where parents or athletes can go should they need to make a report
(Brackenridge et al., 2010). Education and training may also prove
beneficial in helping children experiencing abuse. In improving
abuse education at the youth level, sport organizations help to
reduce the stigma and have more open conversations at an early age
(Cense & Brackenridge, 2001).

Developing and Implementing
Policies and Procedures

A critical early preventative measure for sport organizations is the
development and implementation of effective policies (Young &
Wendit, 2017). When considering the scope and complex issue of
sexual violence in sport, it is even more important to have policies and
practices based in evidence and data, and to evaluate these
safeguards for efficacy (Boocock, 2002; Brackenridge & Rhind,
2014).

There is no one policy that, when followed, will end sexual
abuse in sport. It is important to have multiple policies and safe-
guards in place to help protect youth. For example, Parent’s sexual
abuse prevention model (2011) points to the importance of im-
plementing both preventive and resolution measures. Best practices
in these areas are universal education and awareness strategies
(Parent, 2011) in concert with well communicated policies and
procedures and codes of conduct (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001;
Parent, 2011).

The International Safeguarding Children in Sport Working
Group (2016) identified eight safeguards for policy creation in the
sport environment. These are:

1) Developing your policy
2) Procedures for responding to safeguarding concerns
3) Advice and support
4) Minimizing risks to children
5) Guidelines for behavior
6) Recruiting, training, and communicating
7) Working with partners
8) Monitoring and evaluating.

These eight safeguards mirror many existing models for child
protection in sport (Parent, 2011) and are also key focus areas
utilized by the Center.

Grooming

A major consideration in the area of policy is limiting the potential
for grooming behaviors, which are described below. Understand-
ably, a high level of trust is often placed in coaches and on the
coach-athlete relationship by parents (Brackenridge et al., 2008;
Kirby et al., 2000; Parent, 2011; Stirling & Kerr, 2009) and by
athletes (Brackenridge et al., 2008; Cense & Brackenridge, 2001;
relationship with a coach can have a great benefit to the athlete
(Crooks & Wolfe, 2007; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). That said, coaches
have historically had access to children without the barrier of
safeguarding practices, allowing more opportunities for abuse to
occur (Owton & Sparkes, 2017).

In the grooming process, the abuser typically normalizes
increasingly inappropriate behavior with their victim, progressing
from what appear to be innocent, trust building interactions to
increasingly concerning behaviors and ultimately to abusive behavior and coercion to engage in sexual activity (Brackenridge et al., 2010; Owton & Sparkes, 2017). This process often takes place over an extended period of time so as not to alert other adults and to ensure child cooperation.

To address these risks and identify potential grooming behavior, best practice athlete protection policy requires one-on-one interactions to be both observable and interruptible. Abusers create isolating environments wherein they have uninterrupted access to their victims, thus elevating the risk of child sexual abuse (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001; Kirby et al., 2000; Parent, 2011). Research by Cense and Brackenridge (2001) found locations that abusers most often use to isolate victims are: team travel situations, during massage or other training modalities, and in the home or car of a coach. Further research by Sanderson and Weathers (2019) outlines some newer considerations regarding adult and minor athlete interactions on social media platforms.

**Response to Misconduct: Making the Case for an Independent Body**

Effective response to athlete abuse and misconduct needs to focus on creating an environment where athletes, parents, and bystanders feel comfortable and are supported in coming forward to report suspicious or potentially abusive behavior early. Sport organizations have a responsibility to work to prevent abuse before it occurs, to create environments where athletes feel safe to speak up, and to respond to problematic behaviors effectively.

Sport organizations have historically handled disciplinary behavior under the level of criminality internally and without transparency (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001). It can be difficult for sport organizations to effectively manage these cases in-house due to a lack of education and training in the area of child welfare (Parent, 2011; Rhind, McDermott, & Koleva, 2014). Independent organizations can provide a level of education and training in athlete protection historically omitted from national governing body (NGB) or local affiliate staff (Brackenridge et al., 2010; Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnston, 2006; United Nations Children’s Fund, 2008).

This education is crucial, as the existing literature on sexual violence and barriers to report abuse point to the first response to disclosure of misconduct being critical for how a victim copes with their victimization (Jonzon & Lindbland, 2004; Parent, 2011; Rhind et al., 2014). Victims who receive negative reactions to their disclosure are more likely to feel the negative symptoms of their abuse (Parent, 2011).

The establishment of an independent organization to respond to cases of misconduct provides an alternative channel to victims who may be unwilling to report misconduct to their governing bodies (Parent, 2011; Stirling & Kerr, 2009) and provides an unbiased assessment of the evidence, with less political influence or conflicting interests.

**The U.S. Model of an Independent Body to Address Abuse**

As the first and only national organization of its kind, the U.S. Center for SafeSport is mandated by Congress to serve as the nation’s designated safe sport organization. With the passage of the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act (2017), the Center became responsible for developing policies and procedures to prevent the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of participants. These policies also include a mechanism that allows an individual to easily report child abuse.

The Center addresses the eight safeguards identified by the International Safeguarding Children in Sport Working Group through three overarching departments: Response and Resolution; Education and Outreach; and Audit and Compliance. The Center is unique in that safeguarding strategies are all provided under one umbrella organization and include primary prevention (before abuse is perpetrated), investigative response and individual findings of policy violations (after abuse is perpetrated), and organizational accountability (audits).

**Investigation.** The Center was established as a safe, professional and confidential place for individuals to report misconduct and abuse within the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement. The Center has exclusive authority to investigate reports of sexual misconduct within the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee’s recognized NGBs. The SafeSport Code, a code of conduct to which all NGB members are held, also covers other forms of violence: emotional and physical misconduct, bullying, harassment, and hazing. The SafeSport Code provides a universal standard of conduct for the more than 50 Olympic and Paralympic sport organizations in the United States.

The Center’s investigations are conducted by neutral, trained professionals independent from sport organizations. The Response & Resolution team have a wealth of experience and include former prosecutors, FBI, NCIS, child protection services, Title IX, victim advocates, and other fields, making them uniquely qualified to process and conduct thorough and effective investigations. Many of the Center staff have also competed and coached, and care deeply about the integrity of sport and the well-being of its participants.

The Center, founded in 2017, received 39 reports of abuse (sexual, physical, and emotional misconduct) on average per month during the first year. Beginning in early 2019, the Center received a 600% increase in reports. While research has not yet been conducted to validate reasons for this increase, two factors are likely attributed to higher rates of reporting: more than 1,000,000 people have taken the Center’s online training and have greater awareness of the reporting requirement to the Center; and new mandatory reporting requirements under federal law (outlined in the Center’s online abuse prevention training) went into effect in February 2018.

The Center maintains a national Centralized Disciplinary Database for the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement. This publicly searchable database provides information pertaining to adults who have violated the SafeSport Code since the Center’s inception in March 2017, as well as known historical disciplinary records pertaining to abuse that were received from and certified by NGBs. These historical records concern individuals who have been sanctioned or rendered ineligible for sexual misconduct policy violations. When the Center issues a decision finding an individual to have violated the SafeSport Code and sanctioned permanently ineligible, this decision has reciprocal enforcement across the entire U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement, not just one sport.

**Education.** The Center’s leadership in providing effective education on abuse awareness and prevention is demonstrated by the delivery of multi-modal educational training to over 1,000,000 individuals and in the responsibility of writing the nation’s policies to safeguard athletes from bullying, harassment, hazing, physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and misconduct. The Center serves as a
trusted resource for entities at all levels of sport from grassroots amateur sport organizations to professional leagues.

The Center’s training content is developed alongside nationally recognized experts, researchers, and leaders in youth development to ensure material is relevant to a very diverse audience. To date, the Center has developed and published 10 online training courses, with more in development. These courses are aimed at different audiences: coach and administrator, parent, and athlete. The Center’s courses are interactive and evidence-informed, which include video, interactive modules, scenarios, and pre- and post-testing knowledge as the course builds.

The initial and core SafeSport™ Trained course covers three topics: Sexual Misconduct Awareness Education, Emotional and Physical Misconduct, and Mandatory Reporting. This course is required throughout the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement by those adults who have regular contact with minor athletes. In addition to the core training, annual refresher courses are available to provide education and training on a regular basis. These refresher courses are required for sport participants in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement and are custom-built each year to provide sport participants with current trends and topics they need to keep young athletes safe in sport. Ongoing education keeps athlete safety at the forefront, and equips those adults working with youth with the skills they need to prevent abuse.

When addressing the issue of abuse in sport there are several important players that can help keep athletes and participants in all kinds of sport programs safe. The Center has developed additional online resources for parents and age-appropriate training for youth to engage and inform, in order to recognize and respond to any red flags of abuse. A free online parent course introduces the Center and provides an overview of understanding sexual misconduct and abuse, creating safe environments, and resources for responding to misconduct.

Additionally, five age-appropriate 30-minute online course modules were created for Preschool through High School athletes. Each module presents games, videos and interactive exercises so that each age, children can understand safety and rely on trusted sources to report abuse if it does happen. A complimentary online parent toolkit, indexed by subject matter, provides age-appropriate content on how to identify, prevent and respond to issues of misconduct and abuse, and how to address these issues with their children and other adults in assessing safe sport environments. These courses engage the youth athlete and their parents in awareness of these issues, specifically understanding the grooming process, where to report, and exemplifying what a positive sport culture should look like.

The Center recently released an adult athlete course to help adults better understand important topics such as power imbalances, consent, retaliation, the importance of bystander intervention, and how to report misconduct. Future course offerings include mandatory reporting, and courses focused on athletes with disabilities and medical providers.

Each course provided by the Center underscores the importance of reporting misconduct, and how to do so. With the passage of federal law standardizing mandatory reporting requirements for amateur sport organizations in and out of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement, it became even more important to ensure those with a duty of care to youth athletes were aware of their reporting requirements. The Center’s online and in-person education highlights requirements of mandatory reporters and equips individuals with the tools and resources to protect youth.

**Preventing Sexual Abuse: Situational Prevention Approach.** In addition to providing online training, the Center customizes in-person trainings to address sport-specific risk factors and create a culture to prevent abuse. In 2018, the Center began collaborating with Dr. Keith Kaufman to develop a tailored Sports Situational Prevention Approach for implementation by NGs. Situational prevention focuses on environmental risks, daily and routine activities, policies, and risky situations that increase the chances of a crime or harm occurring (Kaufman & Erooga, 2016; Kaufman et al., 2018). Rooted in more than 25 years of effective community crime prevention (Clarke, 1997), situational prevention also has a strong foundation in criminal justice theory. The Situational Prevention Approach (SPA) was developed by Kaufman (Kaufman, Mosher, Carter, & Estes, 2006; Wortley & Smallbone, 2006) based on elements of Clarke’s Situational Prevention Model and then further tailored for use with youth-serving organizations (Kaufman et al., 2006).

Preventing sexual, physical, and emotional abuse within the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement involves navigating complex factors. Most prevention approaches are “content-based” and would not provide the flexibility to address this level of tailoring. Content-based prevention programs focus narrowly on single or a few specific risk areas, utilizing one solution across individuals, programs, and sites, and involve a fixed set of procedures (e.g., bystander intervention or online prevention programs for youth). In contrast, the SPA is a “process-oriented” prevention approach. It works well with a broad range of safety risks, involves tailoring each solution to the specific needs of the program and its athletes, and is highly flexible in creating solutions to effectively address safety risks. Finally, evidence suggests that most of the risk factors associated with the perpetration of abuse in the context of elite sport are “situational” in nature (e.g., isolated practices; unchaperoned travel, medical procedures, and training sessions; unnecessary, physically invasive “spotting” during training), rather than a product of individual factors (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014; Kaufman & Erooga, 2016).

The Sports SPA Project is currently in development by Dr. Keith Kaufman and supported by the U.S. Center for SafeSport, with the end goal of creating sustainable approaches for implementation by sport organizations to establish and maintain safe environments for their athletes.

**Compliance.** With input from athletes, NGs, and leading prevention experts, the Center has developed a comprehensive set of policies and training requirements to strengthen and support athlete safety. Understanding the complexities of the Olympic and Paralympic Movement and the various sports represented, the Center conducts annual audits and provides hands-on support to help facilitate implementation.

The Center’s Minor Athlete Abuse Prevention Policies (MAAPP) work to standardize a baseline of care across the NGs. These policies address one-on-one interactions such as travel (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001; Massey & Whitley, 2016), athletic training modalities (Brackenridge et al., 2008; Stirling & Kerr, 2009; Toftegaard-Nielsen, 2001) and social media (Henry & Powell, 2018), limiting the opportunity for abuse to occur.

The literature points to the lack of standardized athlete protection mechanisms across sport organizations (Brackenridge et al., 2008; Parent, 2011). While a standard level of care for all children and athletes is of primary importance (Brackenridge et al., 2010; United Nations Children’s Fund, 2008), it is critical that policies and procedures are modified to specifically serve their specific environments and that leaders in athlete protection provide tools for...
sport organizations to create policies in line with best practices (Brackenridge et al., 2004; Parent & Demers, 2011). Keeping in mind the pillars to facilitate the successful implementation of sport safeguards (International Safeguarding Children in Sport Working Group, 2016), NGBs are able to tailor the baseline requirements in the Center’s MAAPP to their sport, so long as they meet the minimum requirements set out by the Center.

In 2019, the Center’s audit and compliance team completed audits of the USOPC and the NGBs’ abuse prevention policies. These audits were the first of their kind, provided a baseline for improvement, and will help the Center develop tools and resources to strengthen organizational athlete protection policies.

Evaluating Efficacy

The Center is still in its infancy, and evaluating efficacy is not a fair analysis to make on less than three years of data. However, in just under three years, the Center has begun to see improvements in athlete safety. More people than ever before in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement have taken training on abuse prevention; more Olympic and Paralympic organizations have athlete safety policies in place; and more than 4,000 reports of sexual, physical, and emotional misconduct and abuse have been reported to the Center. This standardization across NGBs in baseline training, education, and policy requirements, and regular and random audits to check for compliance accountability, will vastly improve the environment for athlete safety in sport.

The Center continues to engage expert and stakeholder feedback on the policies to continue to make improvements to the MAAPP. The Center’s team of experts works with NGBs to provide support on implementing the MAAPP and the SafeSport Code. As additional audits are completed the Center will have primary data on the gaps in knowledge and policy that continue to exist at national and local levels of sport, to meet these needs with new trainings and resources in the future.

Recommendations for Sport Organizations

Local sport organizations and organizations outside of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement can create a SafeSport environment. Athlete safety begins with an understanding that abuse can happen in sport, and that appropriate steps must be taken to prevent it.

At a minimum, all sport organizations should follow base level federal legal requirements for amateur sport organizations in the U.S. outlined in the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017: 1) report child abuse, 2) establish reasonable procedures to limit one-on-one interactions between an amateur athlete who is a minor and an adult, 3) prohibit retaliation against any individual who makes a report, and 4) offer and provide consistent training to two different groups. These two groups are a) all adult members who are in regular contact with amateur athletes who are minors and b) members who are minors, subject to parental consent. This training must cover prevention and reporting of child abuse to allow a complainant to easily report an incident to appropriate persons.

The Center can be a resource for any sport entity, from youth to professional, and has developed prevention techniques and policies, best practices, and educational programs focused on putting an end to abuse in sport. Sport organizations should regularly review their child protection policies or look to several resources to develop new policies. Organizations can create policies based on the MAAPP and SafeSport Code, found on the Center’s website at [www.uscenterforsafesport.org](http://www.uscenterforsafesport.org), and look to the eight safeguarding practices by the International Safeguarding Children in Sport Working Group for additional guidance.

Additionally, coaches should be trained on the signs of abuse and grooming behavior and ensure everyone is aware of how and where to make a report. The Center’s online trainings are available to organizations outside of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement at [www.athletesafety.org](http://www.athletesafety.org).

The Center is dedicated to changing the culture in sport. A SafeSport environment is one that understands that athlete protection is integral to sport organizations, so that individuals can realize the many benefits of participation in sport. With your help, we will build a culture of respect for all sport participants.

References


[www.uscenterforsafesport.org](http://www.uscenterforsafesport.org)