

Child Abuse in Sport

**Critical
Perspectives**

Edited by
**Mike Hartill
Bettina Rulofs**



**Research in the
Sociology of Sport**

**VOL
25**

CHILD ABUSE IN SPORT

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT VOLUME 25

CHILD ABUSE IN SPORT: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY

MIKE HARTILL
Edge Hill University, UK

AND

BETTINA RULOFS
German Sport University Cologne, Germany



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

Mike Hartill is a Professor of Sociology and Sport at Edge Hill University and the Director of the Centre for Child Protection and Safeguarding in Sport (CPSS). Mike has conducted research into child abuse in sport for over 20 years. Recent projects include the VOICE Project – a collaboration between eight European countries focused on the experiences of victims of sexual abuse in sport – and the multi-national prevalence study CASES (Child Abuse in Sport: European Statistics), both funded by the European Union. Mike acted as the child protection in sport expert for the English Football Association’s independent review into allegations of child sexual abuse in football led by Clive Sheldon KC. Mike also works with many organisations including charities and sport governing bodies.

Bettina Rulofs is a Professor of Diversity Studies at the Institute of Sociology and Gender Studies at the German Sport University in Cologne. Her work focuses on social science-based approaches to diversity, gender and inequality issues in sport and, based on this, in particular on research into violence and discrimination in sport. She has conducted research into safeguarding and the prevention of sexual violence in sport for many years. One of her recent studies was conducted on behalf of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse in Germany and focused on survivors’ reports on child sexual abuse in sport.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Natalie Barker-Ruchti is an Associate Professor in Sport Management and Sport Coaching at Örebro University, Sweden. Her research focuses on how elite sport participation shapes youth athletes, particularly within women's artistic gymnastics. In her most recent project, she examines gymnasts' experiences of speaking out about abuse within the #gymnastalliance movement. Currently, Natalie resides in Switzerland, where she is employed by the Swiss Olympic Association to contribute to the implementation of the Ethics in Sport project.

Peter Donnelly is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto. He is the founding Director of the Centre for Sport Policy Studies (1999–2021) and was a Professor in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education, University of Toronto. His research interests include sport politics and policy issues, sport sub-cultures, children's rights in sport and mountaineering (history). He has published numerous scholarly articles on these and other topics. His books include: three editions of *Taking Sport Seriously: Social Issues in Canadian Sport* (1997; 2000; 2011), and *Inside Sports* (1999) and the first and second Canadian editions of *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies* (both with Jay Coakley, 2004, 2009). Peter Donnelly was the Editor of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* (1990–1994), acting-Editor of the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (2004–2006) and the *President of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport* (2001).

Inger Eliasson, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Education at the Department of Education, Umeå School of Sport Sciences, Umeå University, Sweden. Her research interests lie within socialisation and upbringing in children's sport, children's rights, abuse of children in sports and gendered and generational issues of sport coaching.

Michelle Jones received her doctorate from the Department of International Politics at Aberystwyth University. Her PhD was funded by the ESRC and examined whether the presence of children in theatres of armed conflict can have implications for British military operations, and the attitudes and practices of British soldiers. Michelle has been awarded a Winston Churchill Fellowship where she worked with Canadian Military Veterans to better understand how veterans can use their lived experience to provide pre-employment training to serving personnel. She now works with research institutes, charities, national militaries and universities on projects involving people with specific lived experiences and promoting the importance of lived experience in research. She has a specific interest in qualitative research methods such as narrative inquiry and in-depth interviewing techniques for sensitive subject areas including in the fields of military studies, mental health and sexual violence.

Gretchen Kerr, PhD, is a Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto, Canada. In addition to numerous scholarly publications on athlete maltreatment, Gretchen authored Canada's first national prevalence study of maltreatment among national team athletes and contributed to the development of the *Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment*, a policy mandated for all national sport organisations in Canada.

Ellen MacPherson, PhD, is a special projects officer in the Office of the Vice-Provost, Graduate Research and Education at the University of Toronto, Canada. Ellen researches social behaviour in sport and online contexts, as well as the provision of safe, healthy and developmentally appropriate sport environments for all participants.

Claudia Pinheiro is an Assistant Professor in the field of Sociology of Sport at the University of Maia in Portugal, and she is also a Researcher at the Life Quality Research Centre (LQRC-CIEQV). Her work includes some published articles and book chapters focusing on violence and abuses in sport using figurational sociology as a theoretical framework.

Laura G. Purdy is a Senior Lecturer in Sport Business at Liverpool John Moores University, UK, and a Senior Researcher in the Institute of Educational Research (ETI) at Valutas Magnus University, Lithuania. With a research focus on the working conditions of elite and professional coaches and athletes, her recent projects focus on welfare, education, representation and advocacy of coaches and athletes in diverse European professional sport contexts.

Gerd Marie Solstad is a Sociologist, employed at the Department for Youth Research at Norwegian Social Research, Oslo Metropolitan University. She holds a PhD in Sport Science from the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences. Her research interests include critical theory, organised sport and sexual violence.

Kari Stefansen has a PhD in Sociology and works as a Research Professor at Norwegian Social Research, Oslo Metropolitan University. Her main research areas are sexual violence in youth and parenthood and social class. She is the co-editor of the book *Rape in the Nordic countries. Continuities and Change* (Routledge, 2020).

Sophie Wensel is a PhD student in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto, Canada, where she also earned her MSc in Kinesiology. She completed a BA majoring in Psychology from the University of British Columbia, and she is a former professional dancer with experience in Canada and Germany. Her research focuses on maltreatment and the development of safeguarding measures in ballet and organised dance contexts.

CHILD ABUSE IN SPORT: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES – AN INTRODUCTION

Bettina Rulofs^a and Mike Hartill^b

^a*German Sport University Cologne, Germany*

^b*Edge Hill University, UK*

In 1986, Celia Brackenridge told the *Annual Conference of the British Association of National Coaches* that ‘it is only a matter of time before cases of negligence or abuse are brought to the wider public view’ (Brackenridge & Lyons, 1986, p. 6). Brackenridge’s groundbreaking research and activism was met with much denial and minimisation of the problem, as well as personal criticism. However, alongside a small group of international colleagues, this work led to the establishment of a new stream of research within sport scholarship. Almost 40 years later, there have been many developments in research, policy and practice, focused on the abuse and exploitation of children and athletes in sport and its prevention. International attention on this issue has never been higher, as more cases of child abuse in sport have emerged across the globe over recent years.

This is where this book comes in, providing differentiated insights into the dynamically developing field from a sociologically informed perspective. Since the earliest research in this area, the attention to abuse and exploitation of children and athletes within sport scholarship has expanded considerably. Simultaneously, the policy landscape has also changed significantly. From isolated pockets of policy development in the late 1990s and early 2000s, often prompted by reports of non-recent sexual abuse, prevention has become a focus of policy development in many countries and involves activity at the highest levels of international sports governance. Nevertheless, even in national contexts with well-established and well-regarded safeguarding frameworks, athletes (and parents) increasingly come forward to report recent abuse within sport settings. In the few instances where they have been established, independent inquiries have identified institutional failings (e.g. Sheldon Report of sexual abuse in football in England and Wales; Sheldon, 2021) and found abuse to be endemic within some sport environments (e.g. the Whyte Review of gymnastics in the United Kingdom; Whyte, 2022). Given this

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dynamic landscape, a volume that critically reflects on this field, its trajectory and contemporary developments within it is timely.

In her seminal text, *Spoilsports* Brackenridge (2001) observed that ‘it is never possible to divorce [personal experiences and consequences of abuse] from their social and cultural contexts’ (p. 42). Therefore, this book compiles theoretically informed, sociological analyses of abuse and exploitation of children in sport that critically interrogate the social and cultural terrain in which these interpersonal violations occur.

The purpose of the volume is to elucidate deeper understanding of the problem of child abuse in sport and the various responses to it, both academic and policy-based, through theoretically informed discussion. The book attempts to achieve this through a critical sociological approach informed by various distinct theoretical perspectives (such as gender theory, post-structuralism, constructivism, figurational theory, sociology of childhood, socialisation theory) that provide the conceptual tools to problematise the practice and administration of youth sport as well as the academic analysis of it.

Authors engage critically with extant scholarship, policy development and recent events, while drawing on theoretical concepts and/or empirical data. The book tries to delineate the concerns, questions, debates and approaches (theoretical and methodological) within the critical and sociological study of abuse in youth sport and identifies areas of commonality and distinction with other disciplines and within sociology, in relation to this field of inquiry. Therefore, the book can serve as an essential resource for sociology of sport students and researchers in this field, providing original contributions to knowledge that will also appeal to those working within this rapidly growing area of sport scholarship and administration.

SCOPE AND CONCEPTS

The book is concerned with the problem of child abuse in sport, which is inextricably linked to violence. The concept of violence is complex and subject to ongoing debate. Whereas traditional or minimalist conceptions focus on physical violence, we apply a broader understanding of the concept that takes ‘account of the wider contexts of social relationships in which violence occurs’ (Ray, 2011, p. 24). With regard to these ‘wider contexts,’ as sociologists, we are particularly interested in the power structures of sport in which violence against children is embedded. Therefore, authors in this volume employ approaches and concepts from sociology that help to reveal and interrogate these structures.

The terms ‘abuse’, ‘exploitation’ and ‘maltreatment’ are frequently employed to describe harm to children. In correspondence, Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) states that the child should be protected from:

(...) all forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.

The definition thus emphasises that the safeguarding of children is not limited to the prevention of physical violence but encompasses the well-being of children in other areas as well, such as mental health and sexual integrity. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of protecting children in dependent relationships. A very similar definition is given by the [World Health Organization \(1999, p. 15\)](#):

Child abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power.

Once more, the definition places particular emphasis on forms of harm against children that take place in the context of relationships in which children have been placed under the responsibility of adults and which are generally characterised by power and dependency. Relationships in families, schools, boarding schools and also in sport are often structured by generational orders that reinforce a hierarchy between adults and children. When adults in such structures use their position of authority to harm and humiliate children, this is abuse. Closely linked to the concept of interpersonal violence, various categories of violence come into view here: physical, emotional and sexual violence as well as neglect ([WHO, 1999](#)).

Against this background, this book focuses on violence and abuse against children in sport and, in particular, examines the structures of abuse from a sociological perspective. While the volume refers specifically to violence and abuse against children, we acknowledge that everyone (no matter at which age) should have 'the opportunity to take part in sport in a safe, secure and healthy environment' ([European Sport Council, 2021, Art. 1](#)). Many of the aspects and findings described in the book thus relate to the fundamental right of all people in sport to experience sport free from violence and discrimination. However, we see a particular need to protect young people in dependent relationships in sport and reflect upon the critical aspects of vulnerability of children when they are, for example, exposed to power relations within sport, dependencies and the specific structures of volunteerism, as well as elite and high performance sport.

The scope of our book is limited, as it primarily addresses research conducted in countries of the 'Global North.' Despite our efforts to include the perspectives of researchers from the 'Global South', we did not succeed. This may be attributed to the fact that both sport sociology as a discipline as well as the research on child abuse are still less prevalent in these countries, but it may also be due to our limited networks, which still do not include a sufficient number of researchers from these regions. So, in this book, we speak from a certain perspective and acknowledge that there is considerable scope for further development. It is our hope that the contributions in this volume will prove of interest to the entire international community and that the book encourages international dialogue. It is our conviction that the problem of child abuse in sport can only be combated through global and joint action.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

This book has been compiled by a team of international experts in the field of child abuse research, who have contributed their insights from a range of sociological perspectives. The book examines a number of forms of violence and the various stages of safeguarding, including prevention, intervention, disclosure, investigation and reconciliation.

In the first chapter, *Peter Donnelly* examines the ‘work-like’ structures for children in sport. He notes that many children engage in extensive training in sport at an early age and often spend more time with adults engaged in sport than with their parents. In particular, he challenges the autonomy of organised sport, which often evades external control. The concluding section of the chapter makes a case for exempting children from the autonomy of sport organisations and for establishing recognition of children as a protected class in sports.

Claudia Pinheiro employs figurational sociology to analyse violence against athletes, specifically exploring how violence and abuse in sport tends to become normalised. By placing a strong emphasis on the interdependence of individuals and their actions within social networks, the chapter particularly emphasises how abuse in sport is influenced by the relationships and interactions between athletes, coaches and other actors, such as medical staff, peers and parents.

In the third chapter, *Sophie Wensel, Gretchen Kerr and Ellen MacPherson* argue that safeguarding as well as the research on maltreatment in sport has to develop more nuanced, context-specific approaches. To achieve this, they base their analysis on the recognition that childhood and child maltreatment are socially constructed, and they extend the focus from sport to dance and draw both parallels and distinct differences between these two areas.

Based on a survey of high school students in Norway, *Gerd Marie Solstad* explores how unwanted sexual attention in sport can disrupt youth’s engagement in the activity of sport and threaten their sense of belonging. The chapter identifies different types of sexual violation experiences in youth sport that are gendered in their structure with the result that the diversity of participants is narrowed and youth sport is further aligned with the values and practices of elite sport.

Inger Eliasson investigates the experiences and effects of emotional abuse directed towards young athletes in Swedish non-elite sports. The chapter is theoretically grounded in the new sociology of childhood and examines children’s perceptions and comprehension of the manner in which negative emotions emerge from emotionally abusive interactions during sports practice and the subsequent consequences for the child.

Gymnasts from around the globe have publicly spoken out about their experiences of abuse in sport. This is where *Natalie Barker-Ruchti and Laura G. Purdy* start with their chapter on how (former) athletes in Gymnastics experience the process of reporting abuse and maltreatment. Based on the so-called *pixie model* of women’s artistic gymnastics, they discuss a culture of fear, control and silence that prevents gymnasts from reporting their experiences. Finally, they draw up recommendations that enable the reporting of abuse and maltreatment.

Bettina Rulofs focuses on the relevance of systematic inquiries into child abuse and reveals how they can contribute to the process of reconciliation on a collective and individual level. Drawing on organisational theories explaining the silence surrounding wrongdoings and based on the concept of transitional justice, this chapter argues that inquiries bear within them a critical momentum that can generate a relevant impulse for the development of sport into the direction of safeguarding.

The significance of including victims/survivors of abuse within prevention strategies has recently garnered attention within the sport sector, but there is little research on such activity. *Mike Hartill and Michelle Jones* report on an initiative in the United Kingdom which aimed to provide a platform for individuals with 'lived experience' of sexual abuse in sport to design and deliver awareness-raising events for stakeholders in the sport sector. The chapter considers the challenges and potential of such activity through the reflections of those involved.

In the final chapter of the book, we (*Mike Hartill and Bettina Rulofs*) undertake a critical reflection on the current status and significance of research on child abuse. The chapter examines the genesis of research on the topic, with a particular focus on the challenges faced by individual researchers in gaining recognition for their work and the legitimacy of their contributions. Finally, the chapter considers the current status of research on child abuse and safeguarding in the context of wider sports science and sports sociology.

In summary, the book offers profound and critical insights into the problem of child abuse in sport, derived from sociologically informed perspectives and approaches. It is our hope that this work will assist in developing effective strategies for safeguarding in sport as well as inspiring new researchers.

Mike Hartill and Bettina Rulofs, May 2024.

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CHAPTER 1

CHILD LABOUR IN SPORT: SPORT, WORK AND CHILD EXPLOITATION¹

Peter Donnelly

University of Toronto, Canada

ABSTRACT

There appears to be a linear (although by no means perfect) relationship between the amount of time children spend with adults in sport settings and the harms experienced by so many young athletes. Children who are professional or national team athletes, and those in the pipeline towards professional and high performance sport, are likely to spend the greatest amounts of time with adults in those sport settings.

This chapter outlines how sport participation has become so work-like for so many children who demonstrate talent in a sport. This can reach a point where some young athletes under the age of 18, or even under the age of 16, spend more time with coaches and training for sport than they spend in school or with their parents. Critiques of the system of early talent identification/early specialisation/intensive training and competition for children are followed by a summary of the types of harms experienced by children in that system.

The specificity of sport and the autonomy of sport organisations protects those organisations from responsibility or blame for the harms experienced by children. This chapter concludes with a call to exempt children from the autonomy of sport organisations and to establish recognition of children as a protected class in sports.

Keywords: Child labour; children's rights; exploitation; autonomy of sport; youth sport

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INTRODUCTION

Every country in the world except one has pledged to uphold the 54 Articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In most societies, at all institutions dealing with children (e.g. health, education, social welfare, justice and so on), responsible adults have a legal duty of care for children and are tasked with putting the best interests of the child at the forefront of their decisions. Similarly, all companies selling products to/for children are tasked with a legal duty of care and are expected to undertake appropriate product testing in the interests of child safety. More recently, social media are under increasing pressure to introduce a legal duty of care for children and appropriate limitations on children's use of social media (e.g. [Vallance, 2023](#)).

In most societies, sport organisations are expected and assumed to demonstrate a legal duty of care for children (and adults) in their charge and to put the best interests of the child first. But, unlike other institutions and companies, they have no legal obligation to do so. Under the arcane understanding of the *specificity* of sport and the *autonomy* of sport organisations, the organisations are self-governing and independent. Originally, sport organisations were recognised as non-profit organisations, run by adults for adults in order to govern sports and organise competitions for adult *amateur* athletes. They were assumed to govern in the best interests of their members and undertake their own disciplinary procedures. These clubs and organisations were encouraged to develop 'as bodies fully independent of the public authorities' during the late 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries ([Chappelet, 2010](#), p. 7).

These assumptions still exist despite the enormous changes that have occurred in sport since World War II. Three of those major changes are interconnected and are most relevant for this chapter:

- (1) Children are now the vast majority of participants in organised sports in most countries (see, for example, [Coakley & Donnelly, 2009](#), Ch. 5, for a brief analysis of the demographic and parenting changes following WW II that resulted in a major increase in children's participation in many countries). This change has been accompanied more recently by declining adult participation in organised sports in many countries (see, for example, [Donnelly, 2024](#); [Vanreusel, 2016](#)).
- (2) While persuasive arguments have been made asserting that organised competitive sports have always been political, the more overt politicisation of sport is often linked to the Berlin 1936 Olympics, and to the Cold War (~1947–1991). Sport during the Cold War has been described as 'war without weapons' ([Goodhart & Chataway, 1968](#)) where battles between the opposing forces were fought at international sport competitions. A nation's ranking on the Olympic medal table was given great political significance, and the struggles between countries to produce medal winning athletes have been described as the *global sporting arms race* (in parallel to the race to produce even more destructive weapons by opposing forces in the Cold War) ([DeBosscher et al., 2008](#); [Oakley & Green, 2001](#)). Perhaps most surprising is