

**Contents**

[Abstract](#)  
[The Report](#)  
[Comments](#)  
[Bibliography](#)

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**Protecting children from violence in sport: a Unicef Report**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This review focuses on what has been referred to as 'violence' used against children taking part in activities connected with sport in a number of countries around the world. Suggestions for standard definitions of 'sport' and 'violence' are given, as are examples of practices that show that the perpetrators of this 'violence' are not limited to any particular person or sport. Recommendations for, amongst other things, further academic research, data collection, monitoring, education and training in a number of areas regarding abuse of children connected with sporting activities are also made. This an interesting report, with the potential to be a foundation stone for more discussion on the values adults place on the participation, and use, of the children they encourage to participate in sporting activities.*

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**KEYWORDS**

Children, Sport, Violence, Unicef, CRC.

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**THE REPORT**

*Protecting children from violence in sport: a review with a focus on industrialized countries.* 1  
(Unicef 2010) was recently published by the Unicef Innocenti Research Centre. The Report is supported by the governments of Italy, Norway and Sweden, as well as the Swiss Committee for Unicef, and draws together primarily English language references on the issue of violence against children in sport in industrialized Western countries. Identified as one of its limitations, the Review notes that there are, 'large gaps in the knowledge base...in...North and sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean' (p.iii). Nevertheless, enough research had been carried out up to the end of 2007 to make it apparent that violence towards children in sport is not confined to any one particular country or any particular sport; nor is it perpetrated by any particular type of person.

Divided into four chapters, the Review begins with an introduction that sets out the 2  
background as to why sport matters to children and a brief history of the intervention of the United Nations (UN) in such issues. Included here are the definitions of sport and violence that have set the parameters of the review. The definition of violence is the same as that used in Article 19 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC):

[All] forms of physical or mental violence, injury and abuse, neglect, negligence treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse while in the care of parents(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child (box 1.3, p.3).

In addition, the definition used by the World Health Association (WHO) is drawn on in order to 3  
include a wide range of behaviours and injuries that might occur during a child's participation in sport:

[The] intentional use of any physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood or resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation (WHO 2002).

For the purposes of this Review:

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[Sport] is defined as all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness,

mental well being and social interaction. These include play, recreation, casual, organised or competitive sport, and indigenous sports or games' (box 1.4, p.3).

This very wide definition is further broken down to make clear that while, '[s]port involves 5 rules or customs and sometimes competition', play on the other hand, 'is any physical activity that is fun and participatory. It is often unstructured and free from adult direction. Recreation is more organized than play and generally entails physically active leisure activities' (box 4.1, p.3).

Chapter 2 covers the evidence of violence against children in sport with examples of media 6 reports of harmful practices in children's sport coming from Japan, India, the United States, Mexico, China and Israel (box 2.1, p. 8). These examples also show that the perpetrators of the violence are not limited to any particular person or position. For example, in Japan, in a case of death in suspicious circumstances in sumo wrestling, no-one is identified as being at fault; in India on the other hand the harassment and sexual exploitation of female cricketers was carried out by the team manager. A report from Mexico notes that the fact that there is no minimum age for bull fighters has, ' engendered an impassioned debate over whether bullfighting is a noble art that preserves Mexican heritage or a barbaric spectacle' after a 14 year old torero was gored by a 900lb bull. Further, in China, a father was accused of child abuse after his eight year-old daughter ran, 'over 2,000 miles to celebrate the 2008 Olympics'.

Bullying and hazing is covered briefly, as are physical maltreatment, drugs and alcohol, 7 emotional and psychological abuse, discrimination, violence against children with disabilities, child labour and trafficking; the employment of children in the making of sports equipment has also been included in the definition of 'violence'. The Review also suggests that coaches can be as neglectful to a child's needs as can parents and carers. Indeed, it becomes apparent from the quotes of child athletes that coaches are also held responsible for the majority of cases of sexual exploitation perpetrated against them (boxes 2.3, 2.4, pp.14-15). The research's limitations on violence in sport are again noted, and:

[M]any of the studies reported...do not distinguish...between grades of violent behaviour...[and] some do not differentiate between child athletes (under 18 years old) and adult athletes; some use legal definitions while others adopt everyday norms as threshold measures; and some do not differentiate on the basis of gender (p7)

Chapter 3 ' ... considers anti-violence measures in sport from the global to the local level' 8 (p17), and begins by noting that:

[w]hile the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child set out principles pledging protection of all adults and children against violence, there is no universal agreement about the most effective measures to prevent violence, either in or beyond sport. (p17)

Also noted is that : 9

[f]ailure to acknowledge [the] many roles [into which a child fits] and a singular focus on a young person's sporting identity can exacerbate the tendency to overlook his or her rights as a child, especially in the intensively competitive environment of elite sport (p17).

Examples of some of the roles child athletes live in include the 'family, peer and school, 10 relationships, sport relationships, a wider sport community and, beyond that, society in general' (p17). These headings are then subdivided, with brief but otherwise informative notes, on how each section can help, or hinder, the protection of child athletes. The chapter concludes that, '[even] in countries that are apparently ' advanced' with respect to [violence prevention by the sport community], signs remain of knowledge deficits, denial and policy inertia' (p.21).

What becomes apparent from the conclusions and recommendations in Chapter 4 is that this 11 Review has exposed the tip of an iceberg. As with other areas of life, sport has its share of violence carried out against its child participants, but a lot of it remains hidden. Much more

needs to be done in order to expose its full extent and type, and the ways of bringing the violence to an end. As well as the need for more co-ordinated research, data collection, evaluation and rights of the child in sport to be monitored by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (p.27), the Review recommends that, 'each country and sport federation needs to identify a designated authority that can link sport to wider violence prevention networks at national and international level' (p.25). More education, awareness raising and training is required for both adults and children, including learning about the CRC, so that children become aware of their rights and, '[the] personnel involved in sport are culturally informed; fully trained to recognize, prevent and deal with violence against children; and be able to prevent or respond appropriately to it, either inside or outside sport' (p.27). Along with the creation and implementation by sports organisations of ethical guidelines and codes of conduct appropriate to each sport (p.26), birth registration of all children is seen as 'critically important' as, 'knowing the precise age of the child is critical to ensuring the appropriate level of training and participation' (p.26).

## COMMENTS

This is an interesting Review and the '[s]ports researchers and child advocates [who] have made a good start in identifying the nature and scope of violence against children in sport' (p.27) are to be commended for all their hard work. They have left us with the potential for further academic research, as well as inviting discussion and action by Unicef, governments (both state and devolved), sports organisations and individuals alike. 12

For example, looking at it from a legal viewpoint, in the UK there is currently no legal definition of 'sport' and the definition used in the Review is flawed somewhat in that if 'sport involves rules or customs and sometimes competition', it cannot include play that is 'a physical activity that is fun and participatory...often unstructured and free from adult direction.' This definition contradicts itself and to be of any legal benefit much more thought needs to be put into agreeing a definition that establishes what exactly 'sport' is (Gardiner et al 2006, p.18). 13

It is also debatable as to whether the Committee on the Rights of the Child is able to monitor sport-related issues and problems in the first place. For David, 'the Committee...is an international and independent UN expert body that monitors progress made by states in implementing the Treaty' (David 2005, p.12). On the other hand, Fottrell has written that the work of the Committee is done on an almost voluntary basis and its ability to conduct its own research is almost non-existent (Fottrell 2000, p.12). Appointments to it have been reported to be subject to political considerations, which have weakened its authority and effectiveness (ISCA 2000 p.18). A consequence of this is that it is very often not in possession of information to counter any overly optimistic pictures reported by states, and it is only states that are bound by the CRC, not national or local sports organisations, or individuals. 14

The authors of the Review do admit that, '[t]he challenge of transforming the sport community into an unequivocally safe space for children - one that assures the exercise of their human rights - will take time and political will' (p.27); however, it could also take considerable time and the will of ordinary people to change attitudes and patterns of behaviour that may now become regarded as 'violent'. An ironic example here could be that of the Parliament of Catalonia, which in July 2010 voted to ban bull fighting as a barbaric and outdated practice after animal rights activists successfully argued it was cruel and unacceptable to the bulls (BBC News 2010). 15

There is also the lack of universal agreement about the most effective measures needed to prevent violence. This lack is understandable to a certain extent in that it is so much easier to establish general principles of 'rights' whilst being much more difficult to establish agreements on who or what have to accept the 'responsibilities' associated with upholding the 'rights' of others (O'Neill 2002, Williams 2009). As the authors have noted themselves, '[g]ood intentions and written policies mean nothing if they are not translated into action' (p.21) and it could be that the actions of individuals will prove to be more important in combating violence in sport than the actions of states. 16

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