

# Recognising and Responding to Child Abuse in Sport

Dr Mary Woessner

Institute for Health and Sport, Victoria University

Play by the Rules Start to Talk Ambassador

**THE NEW WAY TO DO UNI**



# Acknowledgement of Country – Melbourne / Naarm



We acknowledge the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Kulin Nation who are the Traditional Owners of University land. We also acknowledge all Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and pay our respect to their culture, and their Elders past, present and future.

As we share our own knowledge practices within the University may we pay respect to the deep knowledge embedded within the Aboriginal community and their ownership of Country.

We acknowledge that the land on which we meet is a place of age old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal and that the Kulin people's living culture has a unique role in the life of this region.

# My positionality

**‘lived, loved, and learned’ experiences of diverse types of abuse in the sport context, having played a variety of sports, cared for survivors of abuse, and studied abuse in sport-Killackey, 2023**



Dr. Mary Woessner  
*Senior Lecturer/Research Fellow, Institute for Health and Sport, VU*

**Sport Involvement:**

College Athlete  
Former coach (swimming, tennis, basketball)

**Expertise:**

Safeguarding researcher

**Lived-** A person with lived experience of a type of abuse in sport

**Loved-** A person whose experience of a type of abuse in sport is via someone they are close with who has lived experience

**Learned-** A person who studies or researches abuse in sport

# Before we start, this is more than a workshop

In this workshop you will have the opportunity to connect and collectively problem solve with a diverse range of community sport members. This workshop is not about giving you all the answers, but aims to promote self-reflection, to start conversations and to think about what we can all do to make a positive impact.

Today you are a part of the change. Please take a moment now to go through this brief (3-4minute) ANONYMOUS survey. There is no way for your data to be linked to you.

## Pre-Survey

# Taking Care

Some of what we will discuss could be challenging. Perhaps you or someone you know may have experience abuse in or outside sport. Even if you have not experienced violence yourself you could be impacted by hearing/reading stories or challenging content. We encourage you to consider what you could do if feel discomfort or distress by what you hear or read.

Here are a few tips (we acknowledge Dr Kirsty Forsdike for this care package).

- Go to a quiet room away from the conference
- Go for a walk
- Get a glass of water
- Pick up a pen and some paper and start doodling (something you can hold and do to ground yourself)

-K. Forsdike



# Workshop Goals

- Improve our ability to recognise diverse types of abuse in sport and their impacts
- Work through activities to self-assess gaps in clubs/organisations' current response/management strategies (based on type of abuse)
- Gain practical guidance on responding to diverse types of abuse in sport

# Scene setting: a psychologically safe environment

Individuals feel safe to:

- (1) feel included,
- (2) to learn
- (3) to contribute
- (4) to challenge the status quo

Without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way

*Clark et al. 2020*

Inclusion safety- not once off, but continued repeated signals of inclusion/acceptance

Learner safety- safe to engage in discovery, ask questions, experiment, fail

Contributor safety- safe to participate as an active and full member of the team. This is usually an exchange "autonomy for performance."

Challenger safety- safety to challenge the status quo and generate potential conflict or instability. *Without psychological safety, intellectual conflict can turn into interpersonal conflict.*

# Scene setting: a psychologically safe environment

## Psychological safety means we can

Give and receive feedback

Ask difficult questions

Ask for help

Raise issues and concerns

Offer solutions to problems

Disagree

Admit errors

Ask for clarification



# Unique Sport Context

“Win at all [what] costs” mentality permeates through community sport

Competition focus

Huge sporting nation

Sport has a unique context wherein violent or aggressive behaviours can be (and have been) normalized (e.g. “tough love coaching”)



# Children in Sport

## What the children want:

To have fun

Friendly coaches

Be challenged to improve

Play with friends

## What the parents believe the children want:

To win

*“...for the majority of younger children, fairness, participation, and development of skills ranked above winning” Merkel 2013*



# Move Now, Move 365 Report (2023)

Figure 9:  
Young People: Concerns about doing physical activity / playing sport

Q9B. Which, if any, of the following concerns prevent you from being more physically active / playing sport more, or at all?

	This applies to me A LOT	NET Applies (a bit or a lot)
I don't like doing it with strangers	21%	53%
I'm worried about others' judgement	19%	49%
I don't enjoy competing against others	18%	46%
I don't like doing it on my own	17%	50%
I am worried about verbal abuse	17%	42%
I don't think I am fit enough	17%	49%
I am worried about physical attacks	14%	39%
I am concerned about COVID-19	13%	34%

A REPORT CO-COMMISSIONED BY  
International Olympic Committee | Allianz

12-24 year old kids,  
from 10 countries  
(inc. Australia)



# What makes sport safe?

- Emotional and physical environment are equally important
- Efforts are praised regardless of performance
- Children are not forced to participate in physical activity
- Children feel safe to speak up when they feel uncomfortable  
Respectful environment (from parents, coaches, spectators and peer participants)
- Wellbeing and safety is prioritized and actively promoted

# Recognising Abuse in Sport





# ACTIVITY 1: Scenario-Does this cross the line?

"I've had a gutful of you lot! You're just hopeless! How many times do I have to show you this drill? All you do is muck around! And you're the worst Jack! That bloody mobile phone rules your life! It's no wonder you let the team down week after week. You're hopeless! And what are you smirking about Daniel? You're just as bad. I come out here week in, week out with no bloody help or thanks from anyone. I don't know why I bother. Not one of you is trying. Not one. If you get beaten again on Saturday, it would serve you bloody well right!"



# Reflections on the activity

- Consider the cost of this exchange on the individual?
- Is it ever ok? And should it be?
- Why would the child stay in sport?
- Would this behaviour be accepted or expected in any other context?

# Definition: Interpersonal Violence [abuse] (in sport)

The United Nations classifies violence as  
' ... **physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse ...** '

(United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 1989; article 19)

In sport, most researchers now agree that interpersonal violence encompasses the following categories :

- **Psychological/ neglect,**
- **Physical (harassment and abuse)**
- **Sexual (harassment and abuse)**



# What is abuse in sport?

Abuse can take many different forms and exists both in the physical and online environment:

- Overtraining/ playing against medical advice
- Tracking of individuals and enacting physical punishment/isolation
- Exclusion/isolation in groups (online or in-person)

Neglect	Psychological abuse	Physical abuse	Sexual abuse
Medical neglect	Being threatened, name calling, verbal abuse	Physically harmful initiation rituals	Sexual looks
Failure to supervise	Being ignored or excluded	Forced doping	Sexual images (receipt manufacture, transmission or forced to watch)
Not having basic needs met such as food or water	Not receiving appreciation for sports achievements	Being forced play or train while being ill, exhausted or injured	Made to undress
Educational neglect	Unrealistic high expectation pattern	Hitting, slapping, punching, pinching, biting, burning, kicking, etc.	Sexually touching
Lack of safe athletic equipment	Psychologically harmful initiation rituals	Physically harmful/painful corrections	Sexual assault
			Genital, oral, anal penetration (or attempt)
			Sexually harmful initiation rituals

*Safe Sport Allies*

# Activity 2: Severity Ranking

Harassment and abuse show itself in different types and degrees. **Where exactly the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior lies is different for everyone and can also change over time.**

This makes judging situations of harassment and abuse quite difficult. We tend to react first from our personal gut feeling. However, this is not reliable and very confusing for those involved because it is different for everyone.

This can be especially difficult for children and adolescents because they often do not yet understand this behavior and are starting to test boundaries. So, it is important to base your assessment of harassment and abuse on established criteria

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# Activity 2: Severity Ranking

Do you believe your staff/volunteers understand that all of these scenarios are forms of abuse that need to be prevented?

Do you believe you and your team members (or volunteer staff) are prepared to respond to and manage the types of abuse within the scenario?

Do you encourage the clubs to have codes of conduct/policies/resources to respond to and manage these scenarios?

Is there resistance to acknowledging that these are types of abuse?

# Activity 2: Severity Ranking

## Shouting at children can be as damaging as physical or sexual abuse, study says


**Research finds verbal abuse leaves young people at greater risk of self-harm, drug use and going to prison**

**MJA**

The Medical Journal of Australia  
*Australia's most trusted source of medical information*

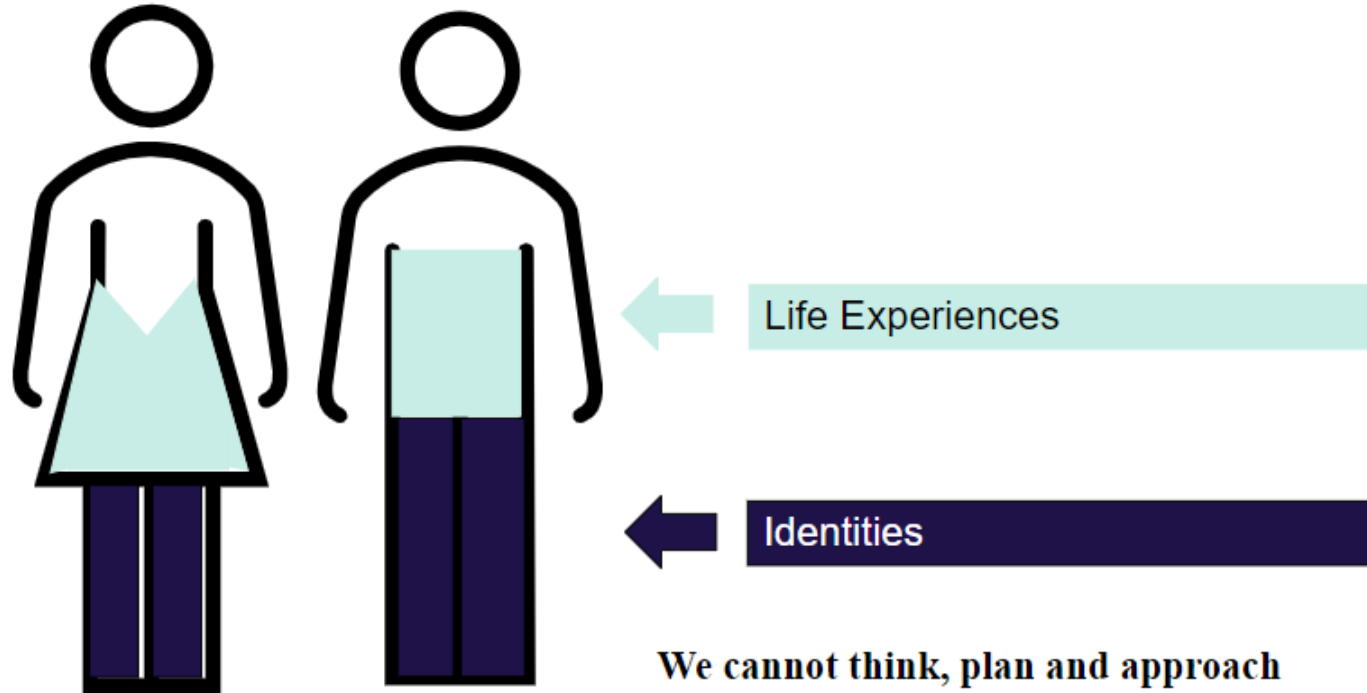
Research |  Open Access |  

### **The association between child maltreatment and mental disorders in the Australian Child Maltreatment Study**

James G Scott , Eva Malacova, Ben Mathews, Divna M Haslam, Rosana Pacella, Daryl J Higgins, Franziska Meinck, Michael P Dunne, David Finkelhor, Holly E Erskine, David M Lawrence, Hannah J Thomas

First published: 02 April 2023 | <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51870> | Citations: 6

# People are not blank slates



**We cannot think, plan and approach experiences in a way that suggests they happen in isolation.**



# Frequency of violence against children in Australian sport (2022)

Available access | Research article | First published online August 9, 2022

Psychological, Physical, and Sexual Violence Against Children in Australian Community Sport: Frequency, Perpetrator, and Victim Characteristics

[Aurélie Pankowiak, PhD](#), [Mary N. Woessner, PhD](#), and [Alexandra G. Parker, PhD](#) [View all authors and affiliations](#)

[Volume 38, Issue 3-4](#) | <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221114155>

## Number of respondents



N= 886

## Residence

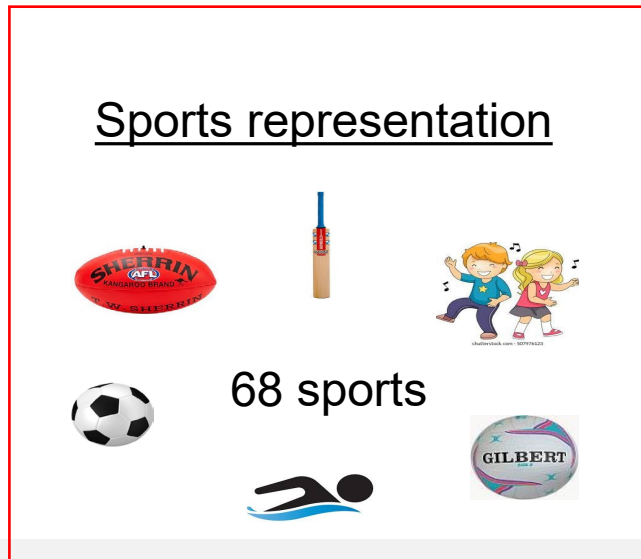


VIC: 35%  
NSW: 24%

## Gender



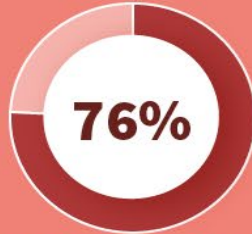
## Sports representation





# TYPES OF VIOLENCE EXPERIENCED

Psychological / Neglect



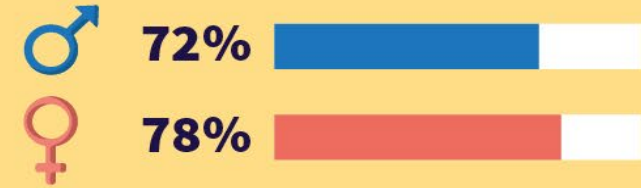
Physical



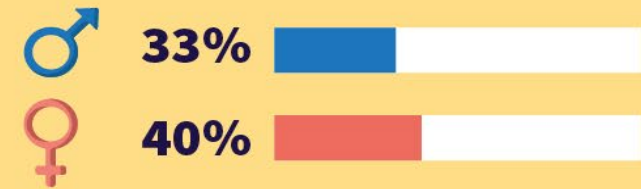
Sexual



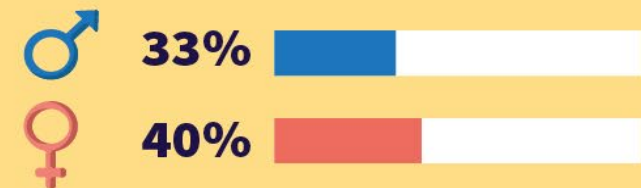
## Main gender differences:



## Sexual violence



## Sexual harassment



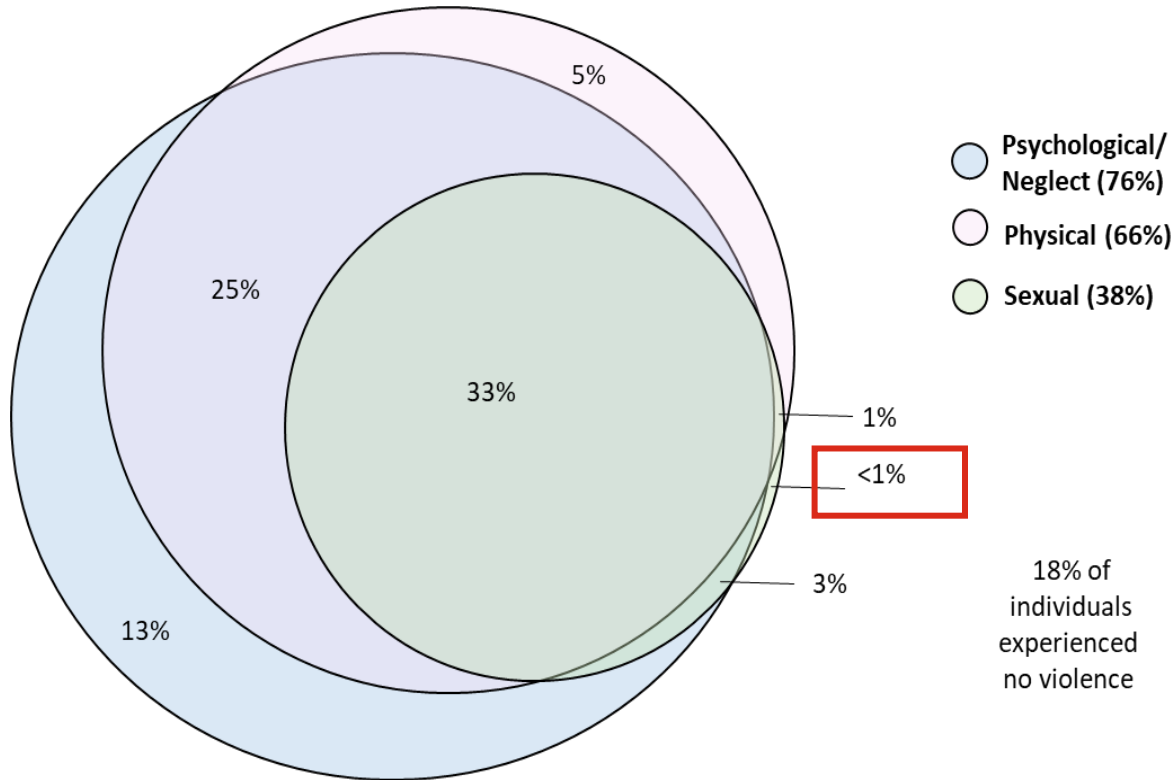
Pankowiak, A.\*, Woessner, M. N.\*, et al., (2022). Psychological, Physical, and Sexual Violence Against Children in Australian Community Sport: Frequency, Perpetrator, and Victim Characteristics. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221114155>





# Results

## Frequencies of Interpersonal Violence in Australian community sport



### Key Takeaway:

Only 18% of people had **never** experienced violence in sport.

33% had experienced all forms.

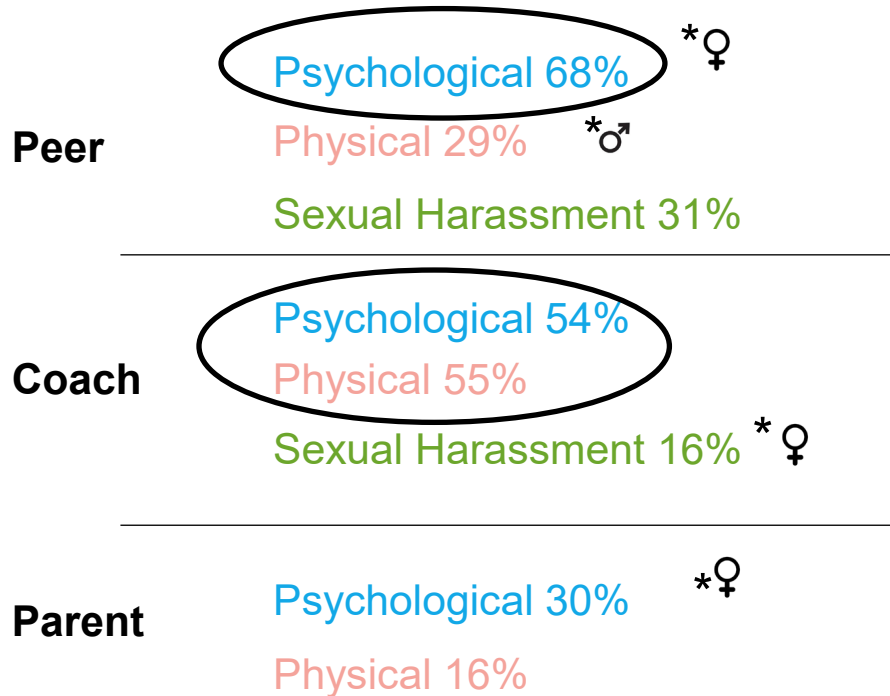
Less than 1% had experienced sexual abuse in isolation

Panowiak and Woessner et al. 2022





# Perpetrators of violence



*“There was definitely a large culture of bullying. Like, as a form of it was definitely perceived as like, hyper competitiveness. And there was a point where it got to not for me, but for other people in the sport, where it got to the point where like a couple of girls ended up in like the psych ward for like mental breakdowns and stuff like that.”*  
 -Emily, 22yrs, WA

*“I had to have about 18 months off sport because I had to have surgery corrective surgery on my knee, all because he [the coach] wanted me to play [injured in] the grand final and I felt like I had to”.*  
 -James, 30yrs, NSW

Panowiak and Woessner et al. 2022

# Responding to Abuse in Sport



# Activity 3: Case Example- What would you do?



## Case 1: Arthur

Fernando and Jonathan are youth coaches at the local sports club. They are well liked and trusted and spend a lot of time with the young sport participants. Because of this, they hear a lot of stories. One such story is about Arthur, a 14-year-old sport participant. Apparently, Arthur is systematically being excluded and not invited to social activities organized by his teammates. He does not know this because his teammates have a WhatsApp group without him in it. Fernando and Jonathan also heard that the teammates occasionally hide Arthur's clothes and belongings in the locker room while he is taking a shower. They also all agree to not speak to Arthur, and sometimes give him a push, a shove, or a punch during training. On the field, Arthur gets made fun of and sometimes tackled viciously. Fernando noticed that Arthur is becoming more and more withdrawn lately.

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# Activity 3- Case Study

- Example is complicated by online → in person cross-over
  - In-person conduct includes emotional and physical harm
  - Online include exclusion (tips into neglect)
- While some policies might not explicitly name all elements of every type of abuse, a response plan should be put in place
  - Response includes
    - 1/ interpersonal response to support Arthur
    - 2/ Organisational response to manage the abuse

# Activity 4: What do you think are the limitations or barriers of processes for disclosures/reporting of violence against children?

*Barriers for child*

*Barriers for the adults in receiving/actioning them*

*What does sport need to help?*

# Disclosure dynamics of children who experienced violence in sport – “How do they talk about it” ?





# Frequency of disclosure, Australian community sport

- Of the 600 who experienced **peer violence**, **35%** spoke to an adult
- Of the over 500 who experienced **coach violence**, **27%** spoke to an adult
- Of the over 250 who experienced **parent violence**, **12%** spoke to an adult



Woessner and Pankowiak et. al. 2023

# Which adult kids disclosed to

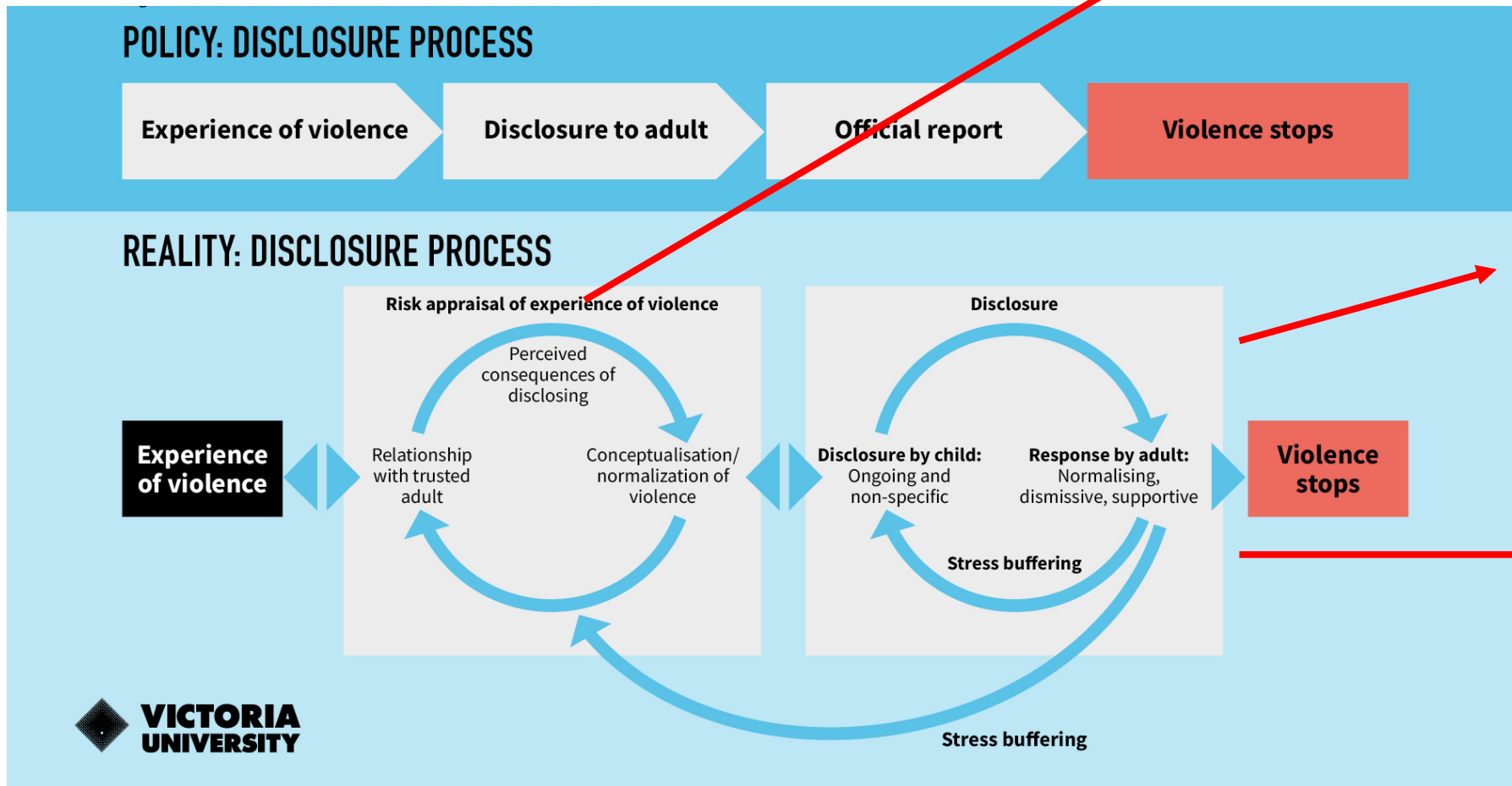
- **Parents** are overwhelming the most frequent first responder
- Girls are more likely to go to parents than boys with the exception of when it is parent violence
- Boys were more likely to go to coach or sport club manager than girls

	Peer Violence			Coach Violence			Parent Violence		
	Total (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)	Total (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)	Total (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)
<b>Parent/Carer (or another)</b>	88.4	76.7*	92.9	92.1	83.8	95.6*	67.6	80.0	62.5
<b>Sibling (&gt;18 years old)</b>	13.9	15.0	13.5	11.1	13.5	10.1	14.7	10.0	16.7
<b>Another Family Member</b>	3.2	5.0	2.6	4.0	5.4	3.4	11.8	10.0	12.5
<b>Coach (or another)</b>	44.4	58.3	39.1*	13.5	18.9	11.2	20.6	50.0	8.3*
<b>Sport Club Manager</b>	8.8	11.7	7.7	14.3	18.9	12.4	20.6	50.0	8.3*



# Disclosure as an Iterative Process

So when I was probably 16, I had a coach who would throw equipment out of like frustration. So he had a clipboard...and he would like stand up and throw it on the ground or like break it...he kind of introduced himself saying that that was how he behaved....”



...their [the parents'] perception was that the coach was being unfair when the girls were kind of excluding some of us, but their perception of the coach like throwing the clipboard or throwing equipment and getting angry, like, they weren't worried about that.

“...especially my [redacted] coach, I used to tell him things even if they were just life things [psychological abuse], and he just basically told me to suck it up and get over it.”

Woessner and Pankowiak et. al. 2023

# Responding to abuse in sport

**1/ Interpersonal response to a disclosure**

**2/ Organisational Response**

*Both should be underpinned with elements of trauma informed care*

# Trauma Informed Care

“Trauma-informed services do no harm i.e. they do not re-traumatise or blame victims for their efforts to manage their traumatic reactions, and they embrace a message of hope and optimism that recovery is possible. In trauma-informed services, trauma survivors are seen as unique individuals who have experienced extremely abnormal situations and have managed as best they could”. (Dr Cathy Kezelman)

NSW Health

## Values/Principles of Trauma-Informed Practice



Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care (2021)  
 Informed by Fallot & Harris (2009) Creating Cultures of Trauma-Informed Care

# Interpersonal response

- Witness to and *acknowledge* the child's experience- seek to understand the scale, scope and impact of the experience on the child. This listening should occur in a space that is physically *safe* (a quiet room, with a *trusted* adult [parent/carer]) present.
- Strive not to promise or guarantee a particular outcome or timeline but do provide as much detail as possible about what the next steps in the response process would entail.
- Detailed notes should be captured during the discussion
- Consideration should also be given to what support the child may need in managing the impact of the experience of abuse.
  - Resource sheets should be provided that include child-friendly mental health support options. Organisations like Beyond Blue, Orygen and Headspace all provide freely accessible support to children and young people.

# Organisation-Trauma Informed Response

**Requires:** safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and empowerment.

Trauma Informed Care:

1/ Minimise barriers to access/engage with services.  
Consider support systems outside of sport



**Transparency of procedures within Clubs**

2/ Minimise harms from the system (repeated requirements for disclosures)



**Ensure disclosures are taken in private locations with someone trusted**

3/ Provide services that offer survivors/victims hope and support, but also autonomy in their journey



**Have a list of relevant mental health support services to provide support options**

4/ Have support for the responders themselves



**Have support available for the adults/safeguarding officers who receive disclosures (team debriefing procedures)**

Phoenix Australia

# What if there is no disclosure?

There are resources that can help support parents in looking out for worrying signs or behaviours that indicate their child may be experiencing abuse in sport:

Look out for:

- Refusal to attend training
- Injuries - Particularly repeated injuries or those that were left untreated
- Subtle disclosures - a child may tell you a story of someone else being abused at sport, when they really mean themselves.
- Seeking inappropriate adult affection
- Disruptive/anxious
- School - A marked dip in school performance, or truancy, or no longer engaging in social relationships with peers (not seeing friends anymore).

<https://www.athleterightsaustralia.org/child-abuse-sport>

# What can you do today?



Safeguarding  
in Sport



## Checklist for SELECTING A SAFE SPORTING CLUB

The information below summarises the key questions that you should be asking to ensure the club you choose for your child has a focus on keeping children and young people safe.

A well-run club will welcome your questions as they know they have a duty of care to create a safe and inclusive environment for all children and young people.

**If the answer to any of the below questions is 'no', raise your concern with the organisation's child safe officer or integrity officer (or equivalent).**

Safeguarding Questions	Yes/No
Does the club have a child safeguarding policy and child safeguarding commitment statement?	...
Is it accessible to all parents/carers?	
Does the club have a designated child safe officer, integrity officer, or MPIO?	...
Are their details promoted by the club?	
Does the club provide child friendly information to children on their rights to be safe and feel safe, including how to report a concern?	...
Does the club have other policies in place to protect children and young people?	...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Complaints procedure</li> <li>■ Photography and filming policy</li> </ul>	

- What are the consequences within the club for poor behaviour?
- Would you feel confident in how and to whom to disclose/report abuse in the club?
- Are there reporting mechanisms in place within your club for all forms of abuse?

# Safe Sport Steps

- Consider how competition is discussed in the club- is it the focus or a piece?
- Remember your role--as a parent, coach, administrator, and the extensive impact any single interaction can have on a child's engagement with sport and their wellbeing
- Be an Active Bystander- consider how you can safely call out or support those who call out behaviour that crosses a line
- Deliver the message of safesport to the club, not just once, but continually
- Consider who children can speak to- give them many options and encourage open discussions about what feels safe and what feels unsafe
- Review where the power rests within the club, and where/how to provide children a voice in those scenarios
- Consider elements such as anonymous reporting streams- not for investigations, but for learning.



# How to convince on the importance/value

- Focus on impact- both of positive safe sport behaviours and the poor behaviours on wellbeing, participation and attrition
- Take sport practitioners out of the sport environment with scenarios:
  - What if this happened in school? On a playground?
- Remember we are just starting and behaviour change takes a long time

# Resources

Child Safeguarding in Sport Induction- Sport Integrity Australia-  
<https://www.sportintegrity.gov.au/resources>

Child Protection and Safeguarding- Play by the Rules-  
<https://www.playbytherules.net.au/online-courses/child-protection-and-safeguarding-course>

Safe Sport Allies- Belgium Initiative-  
<https://www.safesportallies.eu/safe-sport-allies-materials/>

E-safety Commission-  
<https://www.esafety.gov.au/key-issues/tailored-advice/sporting-organisations-community-groups>

Commission for Children and Young People-<https://ccyp.vic.gov.au/>

# Acknowledgements

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Dr. Jennifer Hamer  
Prof Alex Parker



**INSTITUTE FOR  
HEALTH AND SPORT**



International Research Network  
On Violence and Integrity in Sport



*A thank you to all our participants over the years who have given their time and their stories. And a thank you to everyone in this room!*

# A Final Word...



## The Starfish Story

An old man had a habit of early morning walks on the beach. One day, after a storm, he saw a human figure in the distance moving like a dancer. As he came closer he saw that it was a young woman and she was not dancing but was reaching down to the sand, picking up a starfish and very gently throwing them into the ocean.

**"Young lady," he asked, "Why are you throwing starfish into the ocean?"**

**"The sun is up, and the tide is going out, and if I do not throw them in they will die."**

**"But young lady, do you not realize that there are miles and miles of beach and starfish all along it? You cannot possibly make a difference."**

The young woman listened politely, paused and then bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the sea, past the breaking waves, saying,

**"It made a difference for that one."**

*adapted from "The Star Thrower" by Loren C. Eiseley*

# Thank you for your contribution to making sport safer!

You can also contact the following help lines or online services for confidential support:

Organisation	Telephone	Website
Lifeline	13 11 14	<a href="http://www.lifeline.org.au">www.lifeline.org.au</a>
Beyond Blue	1300 22 4636	<a href="http://www.beyondblue.org.au">www.beyondblue.org.au</a>
Victorian Centres Against Sexual Assault	9635 3600	<a href="mailto:casa@thewomens.org.au">casa@thewomens.org.au</a>
eheadspace (under 26 yrs)	1800 650 890	<a href="http://www.eheadspace.org.au">www.eheadspace.org.au</a>
Relationships Australia	1300 364 277	<a href="http://www.relationships.org.au">www.relationships.org.au</a>
Family Relationship Advice	1800 050 321	N/A