

FEPSAC position statement on safeguarding athletes in sport

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ABSTRACT

Through the publication of this position statement, FEPSAC aims to continue with its commitment to quality and safe sport experiences through the promotion of safeguarding in sport, a responsibility collectively shared by both group and individual members of the organisation. In this paper, we provide a brief overview of the academic research on interpersonal violence (IV) and safeguarding in sport in a European context, focusing on safeguarding athletes. The position statement further includes recommendations and practical guidelines that will equip readers with knowledge and processes for recognising and responding to IV in sport. Through enhancing safeguarding literacy among FEPSAC members, we aim to inspire and empower both neophyte and more experienced practitioners in sport and exercise psychology toward fostering safer sporting relationships, spaces and practices.

Purpose of this statement

The purpose of this FEPSAC Position Statement (PS) is to summarise current knowledge on interpersonal violence (IV) and safeguarding in sport in the European context, and propose recommendations to FEPSAC members and the sport psychology community. The recommendations predominantly focus on applied sport psychology practitioners, however sport, performance and exercise psychology educators, researchers, and associations can also benefit from the information and guidance within the paper. The PS represents a commitment toward safeguarding education for neophyte and experienced specialists in applied sport psychology as key agents of safe sport spaces and experiences. In doing so, the PS will begin with providing a brief overview of the recent academic research on IV against athletes with a focus on the European context. We then share practical guidelines and recommendations to equip readers

with knowledge and processes for recognising and responding to IV in sport in order to enhance their knowledge and confidence on the topic of safe sport.

As a European umbrella organisation, FEPSAC recognises the diversity within its membership, in particular with regards to legal and cultural differences. It also recognises that the development and implementation of safeguarding mechanisms and policies may vary significantly from one country to another, therefore this PS does not include examples from specific countries. Instead, in recognising and respecting the diversity of the European context, within this PS we aim to create a baseline for our membership with regards to the understanding of IV in the context of sport, and provide practical recommendations, which can be adapted based on each member's cultural and legal frameworks.

In order to prepare this PS, the lead author, with the approval from

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FEPSAC managing council, invited a diverse panel of co-authors based on research specialisms, practical experience, and geographic diversity across the European context. The Expert Panel is comprised of sports and exercise psychology practitioners, sport scientists, specialists in the IV and safeguarding, and academic researchers in IV.

Understanding interpersonal violence and safeguarding

The World Health Organisation’s (WHO) World Report on Violence and Health recognises IV as type of violence, defined as, "the intentional use of 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 of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation." (Krug et al., 2002, p. 6). IV against athletes has received increasing attention in academic research and across global media (Constandt et al., 2024). Cases of IV against athletes worldwide have resulted in an increased emphasis on the importance of athlete protection and safeguarding and fostering safe and supportive environments. While there has been a propensity to highlight specific characteristics of perpetrators of abuse, there is now a greater recognition of environments that have enabled harm to proliferate and of sporting systems that have been (and at times remain) tolerant of IV. Therefore, the current body of knowledge reports on a global pattern of IV against athletes in sporting contexts ranging from community through to high performance sport (Kavanagh et al., 2021). Further it acknowledges how the actors from across systems, organisations and governance of sport can increase individual vulnerabilities for experiencing IV.

Safe sport pertains to “the provision of a physically and psychologically safe and supportive athletic environment where participants can thrive and experience the full benefits of sport participation” (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024, p. 2). While there has been an emphasis on the protection of children in sport (Council of Europe, 2019), in this PS we stress that it is imperative to safeguard the experiences of *all sport participants* regardless of age and to ensure that sport experiences are characterised by safety and integrity. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) defines safeguarding as “all proactive measures to both prevent and appropriately respond to concerns related to harassment and abuse in sport as well as the promotion of holistic approaches to athlete welfare” (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024, p. 1). In addition, whilst this PS has a main focus on IV against athletes, it is important to stress that *anyone* in sport can experience IV (e.g., coaches, referees, parents and other sport actors), and therefore benefit from applying safeguarding practices. FEPSAC as the European Sport Psychology Federation, recognises IV as a significant problem in the realm of sport and reinforces the importance of “personal, competitive and organisational integrity” (Revised EU Sport Charter, 2021, p. 5). A socio-ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1999) has been adopted throughout this PS to showcase the complexity of IV and the multiple levels upon which it can be influenced and experienced.

Types and prevalence of interpersonal violence

Inconsistencies in the terminology used by researchers studying IV in sport have hindered efforts to fully recognise, address, and compare findings across studies. In this position statement, we adopt the terminology proposed by the IOC in their consensus statement on IV and safeguarding in sport (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024, also see for a comprehensive description of types of IV, definitions and associated behaviours) that is aligned with the widely accepted World Health Organisation’s definitions by Krug et al. (2002). Please refer to Table 1 for a brief description of the main types and manifestations of IV in sport. To facilitate reader understanding regardless of one’s familiarity with the term IV, throughout this statement we also use IV’s layman’s terms, harassment and abuse (see Mountjoy et al., 2016)

The prevalence of IV in sport and its detrimental impact on athlete

Table 1
Terms referring to types of interpersonal violence towards athletes in sport (adapted from Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024).

Type of Interpersonal Violence	Suggested Definition	Examples of manifestations in sport
Sexual violence *** Includes sexual harassment	Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting including but not limited to home and work (Krug et al., 2002, p. 149) The different forms of sexual violence can occur both online and in person (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024, p. 1326)	Sexual violence can include verbal (non-contact) e.g., Making unwanted sexual comments/remarks to an athlete (e.g., about body, appearance, sexual life; Offering rewards or favours in exchange of sexual encounter); Non-verbal (non-contact) e.g., unwanted sexual glances or intrusive sexual glances); Physical (contact) e.g., Unnecessarily and deliberately touching an athlete (not instruction related), Unwanted physical contact (e.g., touching an athlete in an indecent way, attempted or forced kiss, fondling); Online sexual violence e.g., Comments and posts that express a desire to engage in sexual acts or proposed sexual acts with an athlete, sending inappropriate or offensive messages to an athlete via social media (e.g., texts with a sexual connotation, sexually explicit photo)
Psychological Violence (Also referred to as emotional abuse)	Psychological Violence involves the regular and deliberate use of a range of words and non-physical actions used with the purpose to manipulate, hurt, weaken or frighten a person mentally and emotionally; and/or distort, confuse or influence a person’s thoughts and actions within their everyday lives, changing their sense of self and harming their wellbeing (SafeLives, n.d) In sport, it could also take the form of non- physical actions that could cause physical or psychological harm to the athlete (Fortier et al., 2020) Psychological violence could occur online and offline in different forms (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024, p. 1326)	Psychological violence can include humiliating or ridiculing an athlete, making demeaning comments, embarrassing, insulting or belittling, using hurtful words or terms, name calling, body shaming (criticizing an athlete’s body or weight). These can occur on online platforms also.
Physical Violence	Physical violence is an act attempting to cause, or resulting in, pain and/or physical injury” and “Physical violence includes beating, burning, kicking, punching, biting, maiming or killing, or the use of objects or weapons. (Council of Europe, 2025) Threats of physical violence	Physical violence can include punching, kicking, slapping or shaking an athlete, threatening them or hitting them with equipment, throwing items at an athlete.

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Table 1 (continued)

Type of Interpersonal Violence	Suggested Definition	Examples of manifestations in sport
Neglect	can occur online and offline in different forms. Neglect includes a failure to provide [a vulnerable athlete] with an adequate standard of nutrition, medical care, clothing, shelter or supervision to the extent that the health or development of the [athlete] is significantly impaired or placed at serious risk. A [vulnerable adult athlete] is neglected if they are left uncared for over long periods of time or abandoned. (Adapted from UNICEF, 2025)	Neglect can include failure to attend to a person's physical, emotional, medical or educational needs, failing to ensure their safety or paying a lack of care or attention to their needs.

The table provides examples but is not exhaustive, please see [Tuakli-Wosornu et al. \(2024\)](#) for a comprehensive breakdown of definitions of IV in sport.

well-being have been extensively reported ([Ohlert et al., 2021](#); [Parent & Fortier, 2018](#); [Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020](#); [Sølvberg et al., 2022](#); [Vertommen et al., 2016](#)). To orientate the topic with the European context of FEPSAC, studies conducted across Europe (see [Table 2](#) for a detailed breakdown) highlight that sexual violence (including sexual abuse and harassment) are the most researched forms of IV, with prevalence estimates ranging from a minimum of 2 % to a maximum of 55 % of athletes having experienced such behaviours at least once ([Chroni & Fasting, 2009](#); [Fasting et al., 2010, 2014](#); [Greblo Jurakić et al., 2022](#); [Hartill et al., 2023](#); [Jolly & Decamps, 2006](#); [Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023](#); [Marsollier et al., 2021](#); [Ohlert et al., 2018, 2020, 2021](#); [Peltola & Kivijärvi, 2017](#); [Schipper-van Veldhoven et al., 2022](#); [Strandbu et al., 2023](#); [Sølvberg et al., 2022](#); [Timpka et al., 2018, 2021](#); [Vertommen, 2016](#); [Vertommen et al., 2022](#); [Kavanagh et al., 2020](#)). The prevalence of physical violence in sport varies between 4 % and 53 % ([Hartill et al., 2023](#); [Marsollier et al., 2021](#); [Ohlert et al., 2021](#); [Peltola & Kivijärvi, 2017](#); [Schipper-van Veldhoven et al., 2022](#); [Stafford et al., 2013a](#); [Vertommen, 2016](#); [Vertommen et al., 2022](#)), while psychological violence estimates range from 21 % to 75 % ([Hartill et al., 2023](#); [Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023](#); [Marsollier et al., 2021](#); [Ohlert et al., 2021](#); [Peltola & Kivijärvi, 2017](#); [Schipper-van Veldhoven et al., 2022](#); [Stafford et al., 2013b](#); [Vertommen, 2016](#); [Vertommen et al., 2022](#)). Bullying in the sport environment has received less attention, with reported prevalence ranging from 10 % to 61 % ([Baiocco et al., 2018](#); [Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023](#); [Marracho et al., 2021](#); [Strandbu et al., 2023](#); [Vveinhardt and Fominienė, 2022](#)). In the European context only one study has examined neglect in sport, reporting a prevalence of 37 % ([Hartill et al., 2023](#)). Finally, though online abuse has been acknowledged in the context of sport ([Burch et al., 2023](#); [Kavanagh et al., 2020](#); [Kavanagh et al., 2023](#)), there remains a lack of studies specifically investigating its prevalence. The wide range of prevalence estimates can be explained by the use of varying definitions and operationalisations of the different types of IV (e.g. lifetime experience or recent exposure), the variety in recruitment and sampling techniques, the variety of population studied (e.g. differences in age, gender, level of competition), and by differences in applied research methodology. However, despite variations in prevalence estimates, empirical evidence consistently shows the presence of different forms of violent behaviours in sport and highlights the need for undertaking measures to ensure a safe sporting environment.

Mechanisms of IV, or how IV can be expressed vary, and can include but are not limited to acts of direct contact, indirect or non-contact, acts of omission, and/or online manifestations. Types of IV (neglect, psychological, physical, sexual) can occur in isolation but also co-occur with other forms of violence, adding to the complexity of the experience.

Table 2

Number of studies, and minimum and maximum prevalence estimates per type of harassment and abuse.

Type of IV	Number of studies	Minimal estimate ¹	Maximal estimate	References
Neglect	1	37 %	37 %	Hartill et al. (2023)
Psychological	9	21 %	79 %	Hartill et al., 2023 ; Marsollier et al., 2021 ; Ohlert et al., 2021 ; Peltola & Kivijärvi, 2017 ; Stafford, Alexander & Fry, 2013 ; Schipper-van Veldhoven et al., 2022 ; Vertommen, 2016 ; Vertommen et al., 2022 ; Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023 ; Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023 ; Baiocco et al., 2018 ; Marracho et al., 2021 ; Vveinhardt and Fominienė, 2022 ; Strandbu et al., 2023
Bullying (including one study on 'past year' occurrences)	5	10 %	61 %	Hartill et al., 2023 ; Marsollier et al., 2021 ; Ohlert et al., 2021 ; Peltola & Kivijärvi, 2017 ; Schipper-van Veldhoven et al., 2022 ; Vertommen, 2016 ; Vertommen et al., 2022 ; Stafford, Alexander & Fry, 2013
Physical	8	4 %	53 %	Hartill et al., 2023 ; Marsollier et al., 2021 ; Ohlert et al., 2021 ; Peltola & Kivijärvi, 2017 ; Schipper-van Veldhoven et al., 2022 ; Vertommen, 2016 ; Vertommen et al., 2022 ; Stafford, Alexander & Fry, 2013
Sexual	19	2 %	55 %	Hartill et al., 2023 ; Marsollier et al., 2021 ; Ohlert et al., 2021 ; Peltola & Kivijärvi, 2017 ; Schipper-van Veldhoven et al., 2022 ; Vertommen, 2016 ; Vertommen et al., 2022 ; Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023 ; Marsollier et al., 2021 ; Ohlert et al., 2021 ; Peltola & Kivijärvi, 2017 ; Schipper-van Veldhoven et al., 2022 ; Stafford et al., 2013a ; Vertommen, 2016 ; Vertommen et al., 2022
Of which sexual harassment	5	6 %	55 %	Kaski & Kinnunen, 2023 ; Fasting, Brackenridge & Knorre, 2010 ; Fasting, Chroni & Knorre, 2014 ; Greblo Jurakić, Ljubicić & Bojić-Ćaćić, 2022 ; Ohlert et al., 2018 ; Ohlert et al., 2020 ; Timpka et al., 2019 ; Chroni & Fasting, 2009 ; Jolly & Decamps, 2006 ; Sølvberg et al., 2022 ; Timpka et al., 2021

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Table 2 (continued)

Type of IV	Number of studies	Minimal estimate ¹	Maximal estimate	References
Of which sexual abuse	3	3 %	8 %	Čačić, 2022; Chroni & Fasting, 2009; Timpka et al., 2019; Jolly & Decamps, 2006; Timpka et al., 2021
Of which 'past year' occurrences of sexual violence	2	10 %	14 %	Strandbu et al., 2023; Sølvsberg et al., 2022

Some forms of IV such as child sexual abuse can be preceded by grooming (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005; Mountjoy et al., 2016; Owton & Sparkes, 2017). In the context of sport, grooming was originally recognised and defined by Brackenridge (2001) as a process “by which a perpetrator isolates and prepares an intended victim” (p. 35). To gain access to and control over athletes (physical or psychological), adult acquaintances can employ grooming practices, which are not aggressive, violent, abusive, or illegal in and of themselves, yet altogether constitute a process that can lead to damaging experiences of abuse (for review and real-life grooming example, see Chroni & Kavoura, 2022a). Mechanisms of abuse have in many ways evolved and/or have been augmented with the advent of online technologies (Kavanagh & Mountjoy, 2024). Early literature was based and built on in-person, direct and/or indirect experiences of abuse. Today, the expansion of online access to people through technology has changed the mechanisms employed. As an example, bullying which may have been time or context bound has changed with the advent of online technology. There are no boundaries to cyberbullying and permanent digital content can be reviewed, re-read, and shared at any time having a significant impact on the experience (Mountjoy & Kavanagh, 2025). Online environments can add complexity to what historically was carried out face-to-face and therefore experienced in a particular place, space, or time.

Perpetrators of interpersonal violence

To understand the presence of IV in sport, an examination of the perpetrators is an essential part of the problem. Perpetrators can be of all genders but there is evidence of more male perpetrators for physical and sexual violence (Fasting et al., 2013; Sand et al., 2011; Vertommen et al., 2017). While research has tended to focus on IV within the coach-athlete relationship with the coach as the primary perpetrator, it is now widely accepted that one of the most reported relationships in which IV can occur is between peers, especially when it concerns psychological violence (Hartill et al., 2021; Pankowiak et al., 2023; Vertommen et al., 2017).

More broadly it is now recognised and accepted that anyone can be a perpetrator and/or target of sport-related IV. Direct and indirect IV experiences may involve peer-athletes, parents/guardians, press, sports fans/spectators, managers and members of the athlete health and performance interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary team, of which the specialist in applied sport psychology is a key member (Burns & Collins, 2023; Kerr et al., 2020; Pankowiak et al., 2023; Ríos et al., 2022; Schinke et al., 2024; Vertommen et al., 2022). While research-based knowledge has increased, in-depth scientific analyses of characteristics, interpersonal dynamics, and applied theories of offending in sport remain largely absent from sport research (Vertommen et al., 2022). Except for Finkelhor’s (1984) four stage precondition model of grooming, there remains relatively little crossover from (sexual) offending literature into safe sport research. Scientific evidence on aggression and (non-)sexual offending aetiology, risk assessment, and relapse offending has only been sporadically implemented and tested in a sport context (Vertommen et al., 2021). The lack of application of such theories into

the sport setting leave this an important focus for future research.

Consequences of interpersonal violence

The experience of IV in sport may have significant and far-reaching consequences, having an impact on individuals, their families, their entourage, and the sports organisations and communities where they occur. Firstly, they can result in physical and psychological problems in the affected person. Physical abuse can lead to immediate injuries which are often observable to the naked eye, affecting an athlete’s health, well-being, short- and long-term performance. The psychological toll can be substantial, with athletes experiencing anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and a diminished sense of self-worth—all of which can go unnoticed for a significant period of time (Parent et al., 2022; Willson et al., 2023).

Specifically, experiences of sexual violence often lead to a range of physical, cognitive, and emotional consequences (Barker-Ruchti & Varea, 2023; Timon et al., 2022). Those affected by sexual violence may experience immediate physical injuries, sexually transmitted infections, and gynaecological problems, as well as severe psychological issues mentioned above, that can even result in suicidal tendencies (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024). Sexual violence can disrupt one’s sense of safety and trust, affecting relationships and making it challenging to establish healthy connections with others. These health consequences underscore the importance of providing support, therapy, and medical care to survivors of (sexual) abuse, as early intervention and ongoing assistance are critical in mitigating the long-term health effects of such trauma (Ehring et al., 2014; Mountjoy et al., 2022; Stirling & Kerr, 2010).

In general, IV experiences can also disrupt an individual’s educational and career aspirations, limiting their opportunities in these areas. In some cases, athletes may choose to retire prematurely due to the experience(s) and/or trauma, which is a loss for the athletes themselves, and also a loss of talent for the sport communities (e.g., Mountjoy & Edwards, 2022). Other long-term consequences of abuse in sport on athlete mental health include substance use disorders, depression, anxiety, loss of self-esteem, distorted body image, eating disorders, self-harm, suicide (Gervis & Dunn, 2004), post-traumatic stress disorder and dissociative symptoms (Fasting et al., 2002).

For sports organisations, when cases come to light, they can result in reputational damage which can have a direct impact on investments and sponsorship, fan support, and participation rates. Legal consequences may also arise, as organisations can face lawsuits and financial penalties for failing to adequately address abuse. Recently, Shoemaker and colleagues (2024) monetised the causal effect estimate of severe IV experiences in children’s sport on future subjective wellbeing and found significant collective loss for the society based on calculations of 9672 euro per person in annual income loss. The long-term, extensive impact of severe IV appears to extend far beyond physical and psychological health harms.

Risk factors from an ecological perspective

There are numerous recognised risk factors for IV across the levels of the socio-ecological framework. Some personality characteristics can place individuals at risk, for example, higher level of conformity to sport ethic norms, conflict avoidance, low-self-esteem (see McGee et al., 2024). For those on early sport specialisation pathways high prevalence rates of IV have been reported amongst young elite athletes (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2021; Vertommen et al., 2022). There is also a greater recognition of intersectional risk, including elevated risk for athletes with a disability (e.g., Tuakli-Wosornu & Kirby, 2022). Sport is a sector that is further recognised to be a less inclusive, welcoming, and safe environment for people who identify as LGBTQIA+ (lesbian/gay/bisexual/trans-sexual/queer/intersex/asexual+) (Denison et al., 2021; Fitzgerald, 2021; Rutland et al., 2022). Discrimination can

be experienced at the micro-level by individuals or groups yet is influenced by broader macro-level or societal issues. As such racism, ableism, sexism, misogyny, and heterosexism can uniquely define the (un)equal and (un)safe experiences of athletes in sport (Gurgis et al., 2022), with systemic discrimination posing a significant threat to individual and collective welfare.

While individual risk factors are essential to recognise, such a focus places the emphasis on people with lived experience of IV rather than the recognition of other enabling factors which can perpetuate the presence of IV in sport and increase vulnerability for experiencing IV in sporting spaces. Such risks operate in Bronfenbrenner's (1999) meso and exosystem levels and are underpinned by cultures or norms of a particular context or environment. Recent research has focused on the systems, organisations, and governance of sport and how these structures inadvertently allow opportunities for perpetrators of IV in sport and therefore increase individual vulnerabilities. Dodd et al. (2023) refer to these as enabling factors that perpetuate the presence of abuse in sport at all levels. Such factors include but are not limited to: the presence of institutional harm and organisational tolerance of abuse (Roberts et al., 2020); organisational climates that legitimise cultures of control and silencing of impacted persons (Seanor et al., 2023; Chroni & Kavoura, 2022b); barriers to disclosure (Woessner et al., 2023); informal and poorly defined procedures for constructing consent within sport (Channon & Matthews, 2022); the unending effort to conform with the sport ethic (Demers et al., 2023); and dominant narratives like win-at-all-costs surrounding what it takes to be successful in sport that reinforce performance at the overall cost of welfare (Coker-Cranney et al., 2018; Kavanagh et al., 2022).

Dodd and colleagues (2023) report how actors from across sport systems, including governing bodies, sports clubs, and organisations, can enable IV. Acts of IV therefore are not just individual acts perpetrated against victims. Instead, each example of abuse perpetrated inside sporting spaces brings into question more systemic sporting practices as institutional forms of IV. In these environments, human rights and safeguarding principles are often overlooked (Solstad and Strandbu, 2019; Roberts, 2020) enabling abuse to occur (Adams & Kavanagh, 2020; Kavanagh et al., 2020). These risk factors are examined more closely in the cultural diversity section.

Online environments are increasingly recognised for the risks they can pose to individual and collective safety, both in sport and beyond. In many ways, online worlds mirror face-to-face environments; therefore, abuse which is present in physical spaces can be replicated in and/or augmented by online environments (Kavanagh et al., 2022). Yet to date, research has predominantly focused on IV through social networking sites (e.g., TIK TOK, Instagram, X) often targeting high profile individuals such as athletes, officials, and sports pundits (e.g., Kavanagh et al., 2019; MacPherson & Kerr, 2020; McCarthy, 2022). The experiences of others in the sporting entourage are less understood, yet anecdotal accounts demonstrate how coaches, officials, sports medical practitioners and sport scientists have been targets of online violence linked to their job role.

More broadly, Reardon (2023) refers to a perfect storm of contemporary factors that can contribute to a mental health crisis in sport, including the impact of technology and a 24/7 world on (athlete) mental health. While Margot et al. (2024) suggest that increased availability and use of social media coupled with the potential associated mental health sequelae warrants critical attention to address data gaps and to develop safeguards for athletes. Simple steps include having more open conversations around online safety in sport, understanding the risks of online spaces and sharing knowledge on positive adoption and usage of online platforms. As Kavanagh and Mountjoy (2024) suggest, IV often doesn't just manifest in person or online. Instead, in the modern sporting world it occurs on a continuum between these spaces. Therefore, an understanding of the impact of online environments and our increasing reliance on interaction within them, must be present in discussions surrounding safe sport while more broadly online manifestations of IV

must be included more clearly in sport safeguarding strategies.

Sport organisations, cultural diversity, and interpersonal violence

The importance of addressing both individual and sociocultural influences in order to holistically understand IV in sport (and safeguarding) has been advocated for a long time (Brackenridge, 2003; David, 2005; Kerr & Stirling, 2015; MacPherson et al., 2022). A core issue is the absence of common understanding on what IV and safe sport environments are (and are not). For example, in some countries the concept of safe sport might be perceived as relating more closely to training with a focus on physical spaces, anti-doping, and match fixing, as opposed to IV in sport (Chroni et al., 2023). It is evident that perceptions, laws, measures, and codes of conduct related to IV and safe sport are time- and place-bound and thus vary from one country or national sport system to another, as well as within countries and systems (Chroni, 2013; Mountjoy et al., 2015).

Instances of IV should not be seen as isolated occurrences but as part of the larger systemic problem shaped by critical organisational and sociocultural influences, such as sport philosophies, the absence of robust violence prevention measures, and the absence of enforcement and accountability by authority figures (Kerr et al., 2019). Such influences cultivate focus on the creation of environments and systems that can enable athlete integrity concerns to be met with blindness and silencing of voices. According to Kerr et al. (2019) and Roberts et al. (2020), IV in sport is a systemic issue involving multiple layers of influence beyond the presence and behaviours of perpetrators.

Kerr and colleagues (2019) situated the sport culture at the macro-system level of Bronfenbrenner's (1999) ecological-systems theory model. They highlighted the essentiality of considering the sporting culture within which the targeted athlete(s) and perpetrator(s) are situated and relate with each other. "Culture determines what is acceptable or unacceptable, important or unimportant, right or wrong, workable or unworkable. It encompasses all learnt and shared, explicit or tacit, assumptions, beliefs, knowledge, norms, and values as well as attitudes, behaviour, dress and language" (Akilapa & Simkiss, 2012, p. 490). Moreover, regarding sport and organisational culture recent research suggests that within countries, there is a blending between sport culture and national culture (Skille & Chroni, 2018). In this regard, Chroni et al. (2023) found three umbrella cultural features as prominent influences on the safe sport concept, coaching for safe sport, and safeguarding: patriarchal culture, winning-is-everything culture, and blindness and silence cultures. These cultural characteristics remain even though existing literature strongly advocates for substantive change and identifies the negative influence that these systemic cultural factors can have on remedying IV in sport and safeguarding sport participants (Kerr et al., 2019; MacPherson et al., 2022; Mountjoy et al., 2016; Sanderson & Weathers, 2019; Stirling et al., 2023). Therefore, in differing contexts, efforts to develop and implement robust safeguarding measures may be more or less difficult, shaped by the wider cultural norms of the countries in question.

While the European Union's Treaty of Functioning (2008) calls for attention to the cultural diversity of its member states, it is crucial to note that "respect for faith and culture does not mean condoning or accepting behaviours and practices that may place a child at risk of harm or neglect" (Akilapa & Simkiss, 2012, p. 492). The safety culture approach (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2021) proposes a concept for safeguarding in sport, which is an integrated approach that considers social, cultural, and institutional factors that contribute to manifestations of IV. Accordingly, the safeguarding culture is described as an intertwined combination of individual, organisational, and societal layers that represent an organisation's efforts to prevent IV for everyone.

Acknowledging the challenge of varying understandings of IV and safe sport environments in the European context, FEPSAC recognises the importance of establishing a set of shared standards among its members (individuals and organisations) regardless of their geographical

location. The priority is to protect the well-being of athletes, practitioners, and researchers. To serve this priority, we offer in the following sections some comprehensive recommendations for professionals concerning how to recognise and respond to IV, along with some guidelines for national associations in sport and exercise psychology and sport organisations on safeguarding for members of their organisations.

FEPSAC recommendations on safeguarding roles and responsibilities

As a European umbrella organisation, FEPSAC is proud of its diverse membership and takes pride in the duty of care for its members across the sport, performance, and exercise psychology disciplines. The recommendations offered in this PS should inform implementation by group and individual members in all spheres of services provided by FEPSAC members including education, research, and applied practice. These recommendations can be adapted and/or tailored to align with the respective culture of the members work-contexts as necessary and appropriate, alongside any guidelines already in place in some European countries. Member associations may use the FEPSAC recommendations and guidelines for their members as a starting point, particularly when another system of provisions is not in place in the respective country or the organisation itself.

Recommendations for group Members and sport organisations

Sport organisations and national associations in sport and exercise psychology have an important role to play in implementing a duty of care in practice, research and education, and in promoting the welfare of athletes and employees (Kavanagh et al., 2022; Wagstaff et al., 2012). Creating a safe environment in sport is key for participation, retention, and performance (Grey-Thompson, 2017). This starts with creating and fostering a culture that places an emphasis on safety and mental well-being.

Recommendation: review or establishment of a safeguarding policy

It is important to be familiar with a country's and an organisation's safeguarding policies and mechanisms for protection and remedy. In the case where an existing policy needs refining or updating, an organisation might consider aligning with the FEPSAC, IOC, and/or EU guidelines. If there are organisations without safeguarding mechanisms in place, the first step for developing such policies will be to follow the respective country's legislation (criminal and sport-specific laws) and policies, in addition to adapting the broad recommendations presented in this PS to a respective cultural and organisational context (see Table 3).

Recommendations for specialists in applied sport psychology

Specialists in applied sport psychology play a prominent role in the protection of athletes and other members of the sporting entourage from IV, as well as protecting their well-being (Fasting, 2016). They are often the first point of contact as a trusted person working with athletes or others in the entourage (Leahy, 2010). To assist athletes (and other sport participants), specialists in applied sport psychology may need to undertake several roles including being advocates, educators, communicators, innovators and leaders in safeguarding and safe sport (see Fig. 1). Organisations often need an expert with knowledge of the risks that are specific to the sport context (Stirling & Kerr, 2010). Specialists in applied sport psychology can further take on the role of an educator to educate themselves and others on safeguarding principles, and act professionally in accordance with the ethical guidelines and codes of practice of their respective organisations. Such education can also extend to more trauma and violence-informed care (see Wathen & Mantler, 2022; Wathen & Varcoe, 2023), to ensure appropriate support is provided if an experience of IV is disclosed. Specialists in applied sport

Table 3

Action points for implementing a safeguarding policy (adapted with permission from Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2018; informed by Cvachová, 2022; NSPCC, 2023).

Action point	Description
Audit of potential threats and risks to employees/athletes in your organisation	Risks, threats, and protection measures perceived, expected or experienced by athletes and employees. Capturing the voice of everyone in the sporting ecosystem (underaged and mature athletes, employees, etc.) can be achieved via focus groups, surveys, etc.
Code of conduct	Setting up standards of behaviour, not tolerated behaviours, good practices and consequences of breaking the code of conduct.
Developing and endorsing safeguarding policy and procedures	Procedures to identify IV in practice. Mechanisms for reporting a concern. Organisational response mechanisms.
Employing designated safeguarding officers	Safeguarding officers should be independent person(s) that will deal with reports of problems, so there is trust and transparency in the process. If a member of an organisation (e.g., a coach) also holds the position of safeguarding officer, this represents a clear conflict of interest, and should be prevented. Safeguarding officers should also have a role in setting up prevention policies and practices (including education, awareness raising, and specialised training).
Safeguarding training	Education on what is safeguarding and its importance, with a focus on how to spot IV and how to report it. Such training should be available for all employees, athletes, parents, and others in the sporting ecosystem.
Staff recruitment	Employing people who are suitable to work with underage athletes. Special attention, or mechanisms, should be dedicated to the policies about casual staff – volunteers, placement students, internship holders, etc., who might not undergo an organisation's usual, thorough recruitment checks.
Legislation	Following generic legislation for working with children and young people that already exist in your national and cultural context, whilst adapting it to the sport environment.
Monitoring and evaluating	Implementing specific mechanisms to monitor compliance with the procedures.

psychology can further develop scientific evidence of safeguarding by supporting academic research in this field. Finally, they can advocate (and initiate the process) for the development of robust safeguarding policies at their organisations.

Overall, fulfilling safeguarding responsibilities requires the professional (a) to adopt a critical approach to the practice of sport, performance, and exercise psychology for research, education, and applied practice purposes, (b) to willingly initiate a process of questioning any harmful assumptions and practices occurring in the sport environment, and (c) to advance their knowledge surrounding the topic of IV and safeguarding practices within their country and work setting (e.g., signs, symptoms, impacts and solutions, policies, measures, processes, and protocols for intervening/responding).

Recommendation: regular use of reflective practice

Reflective practice and regular supervision are an important part of applied sport psychology practice, which has been widely endorsed by scholars (Anderson et al., 2004; Cropley et al., 2023; Poczwadowski et al., 2023). Knowing who you are, understanding your values, and asking yourself challenging questions about the environment you are

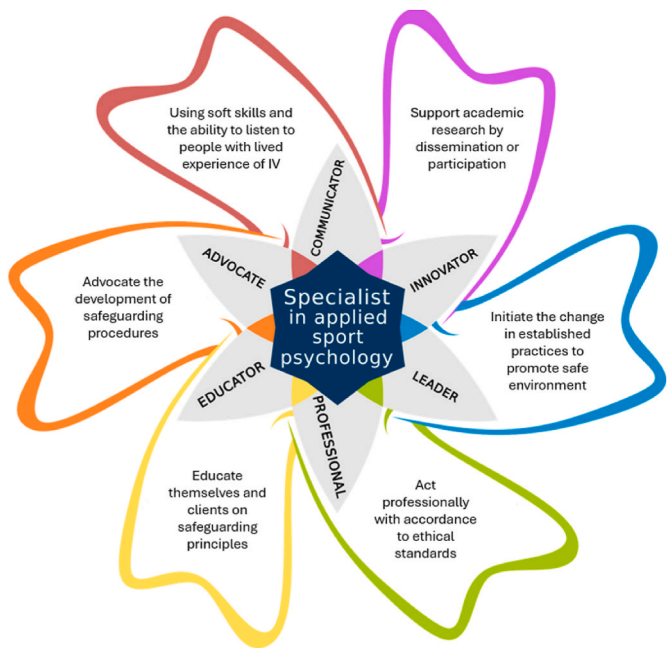


Fig. 1. A framework for specialists in applied sport psychology’s roles. Adapted from the CanMEDS Physician Competency Framework with permission of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (Frank et al., 2015). Copyright © 2015.

working in are essential aspects of applied practice and central to safeguarding those with whom you work, and yourself as a practitioner.

Practitioners can start with reflecting on their journey before becoming a specialist in applied sport psychology. Many applied practitioners come from a competitive sport background, being former athletes themselves. It is highly likely that some of their own experiences as an athlete will have shaped their opinion about IV in sport. Even if a practitioner is not coming from a former athletic background, engaging in reflective activity can still be very useful, for example, one can reflect on their cultural background or the current cultural context they are working in. Questions to guide reflection might include: How does my cultural background and upbringing shape my perception of IV in sport? What does my current cultural context prioritise more – performance or well-being? How is IV generally perceived in sport environments in my cultural context?

Reflection can also be adopted as a tool for informing practice. It is important to be prepared to ask oneself critical questions about the interventions being implemented and their potential impact on athletes or those who subsequently adopt them. Questions might include: Is everyone ready for this psychological intervention and what factors have an impact on their readiness? What safeguards might I put in place to support adjustment to an intervention? What safeguards should I put in place to ensure the continued safety for all, if I leave this environment?

There are different models and tools that practitioners can use for self-reflection. One such tool is the Chartered Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences (formerly BASES) safeguarding practice barometer (Kavanagh et al., 2022). This is a helpful instrument for reflecting on the environment practitioners are working in, which can be dynamic, multi-layered, and complex in nature. The barometer is divided into three levels: individual, relational, and organisational, and is helpful for increasing practitioners’ self-awareness with regards to the climate they work in, their practice, and their personal state. Table 4 offers an example of questions that can be posed to reflect on each level, accompanied with follow up action(s). Follow up actions are key stages of a complete reflection cycle – “What?”, “So what?”, “Now what?” (Driscoll, 2007)

Table 4
Reflective questions on different levels (adapted with permission from Kavanagh et al., 2022).

Level	Questions to reflect on	Follow up Action
Individual level	Am I working in accordance with the [governing body’s] Code of Conduct? What does it mean to be ethically sound in my practice?	Familiarise yourself with the code of conduct of your governing body/ organisation/club to make sure you are working in accordance with it. Attend online/in-person webinars, courses, etc. on safeguarding praxis
Relational level	How effective are my working relationships with clients and other staff? What does it mean working in a manner that supports my clients’ well-being?	Reflect on your relationships with the client – by yourself, and using a supervisor/mentor/peer-network to make sure you support your clients’ well-being
Organisational level	Have I considered the climate of the broader culture in which I work? How do I notice or experience any change in circumstances or conflict between what I have been asked to do and the [your organisation’s] Code of Conduct? If so, to what extent did my response uphold the integrity of my profession?	Reflect on your position within the organisation. Is it possible to change this environment? Does this environment cause harm to you and your clients?

Recommendation: Strategies for prevention

Developing a safeguarding culture requires a holistic approach that functions across individual, interpersonal, and systemic levels (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). However, such a responsibility or duty is often delegated to a specialist in applied sport psychology, especially if there are no designated safeguarding officers in a club/organisation. Whilst acknowledging that this is not your individual responsibility as a specialist in applied sport psychology, there are some contributions you can make as a practitioner, and, hopefully, as a part of a wider team and/or organisation.

Specialists in applied sport psychology can undertake an educator role using interventions on the topic of IV as well as on fostering safe sport environments and relationships, which have been reported as effective mechanisms toward IV prevention. Such education can be delivered with numerous members of the sports organisations including athletes, coaches, supporting staff, volunteers, officials, and parents (Hudson, 2018; McMahon et al., 2018; McMahon et al., 2023; Walsh et al., 2015). This holistic engagement can help to encourage a safe(r) climate and culture where any type of IV is unacceptable, and where individuals are empowered to speak up if they experience this directly or witness it in the environment. While educational courses are a starting point toward collective language and understanding, there is an aspiration for safeguarding to be an embedded part of everyone’s practice across an organisation. For example, there can be regular meetings with all above mentioned actors to discuss how well their organisation adheres to safe sport culture and to capture or share practice that for example prioritises safety, inclusion, or positive and holistic development of all in the eco-system.

Recommendation: responding to incidents

At some point in your career, you might witness an incident of IV (please see Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024, for detailed manifestations of IV in sport), a client might share an experience to you, or you might hear about a concern via a third-party. In any of these cases, you have a responsibility to act. For instance, if an athlete, a coach, or any other sport participant shares an IV experience (or concern) with you:

- Be prepared to manage this conversation with professionalism and empathy
- Provide the reporting person with a safe environment and enough time to tell their story, acknowledge their bravery for sharing.
- You might want to remind them about confidentiality, but also stress the limitations of it, as in your country it might be mandatory for you to report the incident.
- Although it might be difficult, try not to make negative comments about the perpetrator, as this could be an important and influential figure in the person's life.
- Avoid asking leading questions.
- Very importantly, keep accurate and detailed notes, in case they will be used as legal evidence.
- Make sure that the reporting person is safe and is not in immediate danger.
- Refer through the reporting mechanisms of your organisation and/or country, in line with the regulations they have in place for such incidents (familiarise yourself with the procedures upon starting your job).
- Provide a treatment and recovery plan, focusing on physical, mental, social and legal support, so make sure you work with other specialists.
- If you do not have appropriate qualifications and competencies to work with people with lived experience of IV, make sure to refer them to appropriate specialists (Mountjoy & Verhagen, 2022).

The Stirling and Wheeler (2012) Model of Intervention Options is a helpful tool that can be used to support the decision-making process. There are four options: (i) report, (ii) notify, (iii) resolve informally, and (iv) encourage/support healthy practices. If you are in doubt on how to proceed, discuss these options with more experienced colleagues in your network or seek help from a trained professional.

Following this model, you will need to consider key contextual factors, such as:

- age of the reporting person,
- nature of the relationship in which the behaviours occurred/may occur,
- pattern of the harmful behaviour(s),
- ongoing risk of harm, and
- your previous intervention attempts (Stirling & Wheeler, 2012, p. 14)

You can still suspect a case of IV when observing or becoming aware of signs like unexplained injuries, a change in behaviour (e.g., trouble sleeping, aggressive behaviour, intense anger, acting out sexually, risk taking behaviours), fear of certain adults or teammates, self-destructive behaviours, a decline in performance, alcohol or drug use (for more detailed breakdown see Stirling et al., 2023). Please note, that these signs can have other explanations beside abuse and should be seen as 'red flags' that require further attention and investigation. We strongly recommend that practitioners engage in in-depth education and training on trauma and violence informed care (TVIC) to support and guide their practice and interactions with clients and avoid further harm (Dixon, 2023; Wathen & Mantler, 2022; Wathen & Varcoe, 2023).

Recommendation: Dedicating time to self-protection and self-care

As well as protecting clients, safeguarding practices should also address the protection of the practitioners (Kavanagh et al., 2022). In this section we discuss self-care and its importance when engaging in social and emotional work. The role of the sport psychology professional (researcher and practitioner) requires a high level of emotional labour or the management of emotion and emotional expression as a critical aspect of the job role (Grandley & Melloy, 2017). Guidelines to protect participants have been developed in some contexts (Becker-Blease & Freyd, 2006; Downes et al., 2014); however, more help is needed to

protect practitioners carrying out emotionally demanding work, whether in practice or research.

Practitioners and researchers working with sensitive cases might have emotional reactions to the stories they hear. They might not have people around them that they can share such feelings with, or they might be worried about sharing such feelings, owing to a fear of looking unprofessional (Mallon & Elliott, 2019). Self-care is a very important component of practice in support of one's general well-being (and work productivity). In applied practice, though we are aware that there is always a possibility of disclosure or witnessing IV, disclosure of such cases can be unexpected, therefore it can have a considerable impact on the practitioners' well-being.

The self-care of specialists in applied sport psychology has been a rapidly developing topic, with a focus on neophyte practitioners (Martin et al., 2023), senior-level practitioners (Quartioli et al., 2019), and sport psychology practitioners in general (Quartioli et al., 2022). These studies underscore the importance of practitioners' well-being and work-life balance, calling for greater attention on self-care for practitioners working in the field of sport, performance, and exercise psychology. Professionals in this line of work may undergo secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and/or burnout (Figley, 2002; Simionato & Simpson, 2018; Singh et al., 2020).

For both researchers and practitioners, reflective practice is once again a vital tool for self-care. This might involve keeping a reflective diary, noting your experience and emotional impact of the work you are doing, while asking yourself questions: How prepared am I to do this job? Do I have the necessary skills for it? What is my emotional readiness for such work? How do I safeguard myself (and/or my client)? In addition, peer-network and mentorship are essential self-care resources. A practitioner can consider who they can contact to debrief (formally or informally): for example, a mentor, a supervisor, a support group of other researchers, or practitioners who know the context. In this sense, it is suggested to avoid debriefing with family members to protect participants' and clients' anonymity as well as your family members from distress (Coles & Mudaly, 2010). It is recommended that researchers practice self-reflection and establish (or facilitate) peer-networks, as examples of 'communities of practice' (Farnsworth et al., 2016; Wenger, 1998, 2010), where practitioners and researchers can discuss their cases and share support as necessary. Readers of this PS are encouraged to implement these points to the best of their abilities in their respective contexts, provided there is an opportunity to do so. When this is not possible, explore the opportunity to contact researchers who have published on IV, safe sport or safeguarding outside your organisation or country and/or safe sport specialists to ask for their help and advice.

FEPSAC Recommendations for safeguarding education

Although an alarming number of specialists in applied sport psychology report that they have worked with athletes who have experienced IV in sport, many have reported that they still struggle with identifying IV and implementing appropriate safeguarding strategies (Kerr & Stirling, 2019; Stirling & Kerr, 2010). Tuakli-Wosornu and colleagues (2024) offer guidance on the manifestations of IV in sport. Below, several points are presented which are important for the development of safeguarding practices through formal education, professional training, and continuing professional development activities. Please note that the information provided in this PS is only a starting point for the development of literacy on IV and safeguarding.

Recommendation: Continuous safeguarding training

Safeguarding training, while essential as a starting point, should not be viewed as a stand-alone (or optional) module for students or practitioners in training or practice. Safeguarding training is an ongoing process which can adapt over time and through experience. There is a need to include safeguarding education in undergraduate and post-graduate programmes, as well as in accreditation and certification

training courses as a foundation for practice. This will ensure that safeguarding education is recognised as an essential competence for all practitioners and safeguarding literacy as a non-negotiable element of all professional practice.

Recommendation: Adaptation of safeguarding training to specific cultural contexts

Accessibility of training programmes for different cultural contexts is paramount. The practices developed in some contexts may not work within all, tailoring approaches to safeguarding to fit with specific cultural norms and values is a critical shift in the development and implementation of training and education programmes. Safeguarding training should be available in a variety of languages and be adapted to account for specific cultural contexts. This should not involve diluting the goals of protection from IV in its various forms but rather creating mechanisms for protection that can effectively work within specific cultural spaces.

Recommendation: Accessibility to safeguarding training

Some practitioners might struggle to access safeguarding training because of their financial status, geographical location, or/and language abilities. We encourage European and national sport federations and governing bodies to create funding dedicated to the development or translation and adaptation of safeguarding education programmes, accessible to a wide range of practitioners. Meanwhile, in the absence of national context specific safeguarding training, practitioners will benefit greatly by completing an international online training module.

Concluding remarks

This PS aims to serve as a starting point towards the development of IV knowledge, and awareness, by reaffirming the responsibility of the profession, organisations, and individuals toward the safety of all people in all sporting spaces. It remains the responsibility of FEPSAC members to develop their knowledge and competence in order to protect the athletes they work with and themselves. Such a responsibility extends to the athletes in the international, national, and local sport contexts.

All sport, performance, and exercise psychology professionals share the responsibility for working in an ethical manner that prioritises safeguarding sport participants and the self while upholding the integrity of the profession and the sports they are working in. Awareness, education, research, policy development, implementation of preventive and remedying measures, alongside monitoring and evaluation are the most prominent actions for combating IV and safeguarding all involved in sport. The practice of safeguarding relies upon a professional obligation to protect all parties from IV. Collectively, we share the responsibility to foster safer sporting spaces that enable all people to thrive. Sport, performance, and exercise psychology practitioners, researchers, educators and organisations can make a difference. Their knowledge, skills, and competence are potentially of the highest order for the prevention and remedy of IV in sport and beyond.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Anastasiya Khomutova: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Stiliani Ani Chroni:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Emma Kavanagh:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Alexis Ruffault:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Andy Miles:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Karin Moesch:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Lilybet Fontanesi:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Miguel Nery:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Tine Vertommen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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