




The Olympic
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**INDUSTRY
REPORT**

FEELING SAFE IN SPORT: YOUNG HIGH-PERFORMANCE ATHLETES PERSPECTIVES ON SAFE SPORT

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Funded by: The Olympic Studies Centre.

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Gennings et al (2026) | Feeling Safe in Sport: Industry Report



MEET THE RESEARCH TEAM

Each member of the research team brought expertise and experience that helped shape the project design, delivery and analysis. We share our backgrounds and experience to acknowledge our positions and orientations as researchers shaping the study and its findings.



Dr Ellie Gennings

*Senior Academic in the Faculty of Business and Law,
Bournemouth University.*

I specialise in understanding children and young people's experiences of well-being in sport, physical activity and leisure. A key aspect of my work relates to upholding children's participation rights and considering ways in which children's expertise can be valued in research, policy, and organisational decision-making.

My research has been supported by funding from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the British Academy, including projects focused on youth voice and participation in sport and leisure. Alongside my research, I work as an academic consultant with National Governing Bodies, child protection organisations, and third-sector charities to support evidence-informed approaches to youth participation, well-being, and safeguarding.

MEET THE RESEARCH TEAM



Dr Emma Kavanagh

Reader in Sport Psychology, HCPC Registered Sport Psychologist, Loughborough University, UK.

My research centres on critically examining interpersonal violence (IV) in sport, safeguarding, and violence prevention. My work has focused on adults' and young people's experiences of abuse (including online manifestations) within the (elite) sport ecosystem, safeguarding, gender-based violence, and mental health in sport. My research is dedicated to exploring and developing effective safeguards against emerging threats to safety in sport. Focussing on early intervention and primary prevention, as well as the development of educational programmes addressing abuse in sport.

As an HCPC Registered Sport Psychologist I have extensive experience of working in high-performance environments, preparing athletes and teams for major global competitions, including the Commonwealth, Olympic, and Paralympic Games.



Dr. Rhiannon Love

Senior Lecturer at the Institute for Education at the University of Winchester, UK.

I specialise in Philosophy for Children, with its potential to support wellbeing, Primary Religious Education, and LGBTQ+ student teacher experiences. I am a strong advocate of the Community of Philosophical Enquiry (CoPE) as a qualitative research method, valuing its democratic and dialogic approach to participant-led research. I am also a Level One Thoughtful (formerly SAPERE) Philosophy for Children trainer.

I serve as Primary RE ITE Executive Member for Association of University Lecturers in Religion and Education (AULRE) and am a member of the Steering Group for Learn Teach Lead RE: Area 3. In addition, I am Co-Director of the Centre of Research for Educational Action and Theory Exchange (CREATE) at the University of Winchester and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Safe sport has become a major priority across sport policy, research, and practice. Yet recent scholarship has highlighted important limitations in the field^[1]. Much of the existing evidence is shaped by adult perspectives, has lacked conceptual clarity, and has included limited exploration of solution-focused approaches to understanding and evaluating safe sport. This project directly responds to these challenges by foregrounding youth (athlete) voice in the safe sport discourse.

The project explored athlete's lived experience of feeling safe in sport and how safe sporting environments can be fostered and maintained. A total of 160 participants contributed to the study, including 103 young athletes and 57 trusted adults (e.g., coaches, welfare officers, parents, and support staff). Athletes were UK-based, aged 15–18, and competing at national or international level, or progressing along those pathways.

This study breaks new ground in the safe sport field as the first concept mapping study conducted in safe sport research and the first to adopt a Community of Philosophical Enquiry (CoPE) approach. CoPE is a participant-centred methodology that enables young people to shape and direct the research process^[2]. Rather than imposing predefined definitions of safe sport, participants were given space to share their views on the topic. As a result, they constructed a model of safe sport grounded in youth athlete lived experience.

This report outlines the seven-dimensional model of safe sport for youth athletes. The model highlights the importance of, (1) Supportive and trustworthy coaching, (2) Physical readiness and resources, (3) Athlete agency, (4) Belonging and social support, (5) Peer support, (6) Psychological factors and (7) Safeguarding structures and processes. Together, these dimensions demonstrate that safe sport is far more than the prevention of harm. Young athletes described safe sport as an experience shaped by relationships, agency, *and* protection. The project also identified three priority areas for action to strengthen and sustain safe sport environments for young athletes (page 18).

By placing young athletes at the centre of safe sport discourse, this study advances understanding of what safe sport means to those who experience it most directly. The findings provide a rights-based and evidence-informed framework for organisations seeking to design policies, interventions, and environments that are not only safer, but genuinely shaped by the voices of young people.



PROJECT BACKGROUND

Safe sport is rooted in the principle that everyone involved in sport has the right to participate in safe, inclusive, and enjoyable sporting environments^[3] and is defined as ‘a physically and psychologically safe and supportive athletic environment where participants can thrive and experience the full benefits of sport participation’^[4]. Safe sport has gained attention in response to mounting evidence of harm within community^[5] and high-performance sport settings^[6], both on and offline^[7,8], where athletes have been exposed to and directly experienced abuse, exploitation and institutionalised practices that can compromise their welfare and human rights^[5,9].

While safe sport research provides valuable guidance for promoting safe sporting environments, it is largely designed by, conducted with, and disseminated to adults. Although these findings can inform youth sport, they do not uphold children’s right to be heard on matters that affect them^[10] and therefore cannot fully represent children’s perspectives or explain how young athletes themselves understand and experience safe sport. Addressing this gap requires greater conceptual clarity around what constitutes safe sport for youth athletes, and a deeper engagement with the specific conditions, relationships, and power dynamics that structure young athletes’ participation in organised high-performance sport. As such, safe sport approaches for young athletes must centre children’s participation rights and lived experiences^[11].

Furthermore, research on safe sport often focuses on the identification of abusive practices and is reactive to such findings. It rarely focuses on what makes athletes feel safe and practices that are preventative. Young athletes bring different ways of knowing and different experiences to light^[12], enriching understandings of safe sport in ways that adult perspectives may overlook. In this sense, the participation of young people in research is not merely an addition to existing approaches but a necessary step in rethinking what safe sport is and how it is defined. In doing so, this project foregrounds youth athlete voice to better understand what safe sport means to and for them.

The project had multiple phases and multiple methods of data collection. It focused on athletes aged 15–18 within the UK performance system, competing at national or international level or progressing towards that level. The aim was to produce a practical, youth-directed framework that can support National Governing Bodies (NGBs), coaches, safeguarding leads, and sport administrators in improving policy and day-to-day practice.



METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a multi-method research design grounded in a rights-based approach. Recognising children as social actors and experts in their own lives, the research sought to foreground young athletes' understandings of safe sport.

A total of 160 people took part in the project including, 103 young athletes and 57 adults (coaches, welfare officers, parents, and support staff). Athletes were UK-based, aged 15–18, and currently competing in high-performance pathways across 28 different sports.

The project was a concept mapping study that involved a Community of Philosophical Enquiry (CoPE). Overall, there were three-phases all carefully designed and curated to place young athletes' voices at the heart of safe sport research.

The methods provided space for youth athletes to develop, discuss, and refine their own questions about safe sport.

PHASE 1: IDEA GENERATION

Participants generated a comprehensive set of statements about what makes athletes feel safe in sport by responding to a focus prompt: *"In my sport, I feel safe when..."*

PHASE 2: SORTING IDEAS

Participants analysed and organised these statements based on shared meaning and subsequently constructed a conceptual model of youth safe sport.

PHASE 3: RATING IDEAS

Participants evaluated each statement in terms of importance, occurrence, and feasibility.



PHASE 1: ATHLETES

IDEA GENERATION

A workshop was designed using a novel methodology called a Community of Philosophical Enquiry (CoPE)^[2] to inform its development. The method aimed to create space for athletes to explore their understanding of safe sport both as individuals and as a collective. Each workshop was carried out in person, lasted 90 minutes and involved completing multiple activities as individuals, in small groups and through discussions. All tasks (outlined below) aimed to ease athletes into (in)forming and sharing their opinions on safe sport and what it means to them as young athletes.

01. Creating and reflecting on a fictional athlete

This activity was designed to encourage open dialogue. In small groups, athletes created a fictional athlete, giving them a name and sport. They then reflected on what safe sport might mean for this athlete and what could support/threaten it. Each group was invited to introduce their fictional athlete to the wider group. There were no 'wrong' answers, and athletes only shared if they felt comfortable doing so.

02. Individual reflection on the prompt: "In my sport, I feel safe when..."

Athletes individually completed the prompt on sticky notes as many times as they liked. Reflecting on their own experiences and thoughts. The notes athletes were comfortable sharing were stuck on a wall to create a 'gallery wall'. This provided the stimulus for the next activity. This task moved from a focus on the 'other' (fictional athlete) in task 1 to a focus on the self.

03. Formulating big questions about safe sport

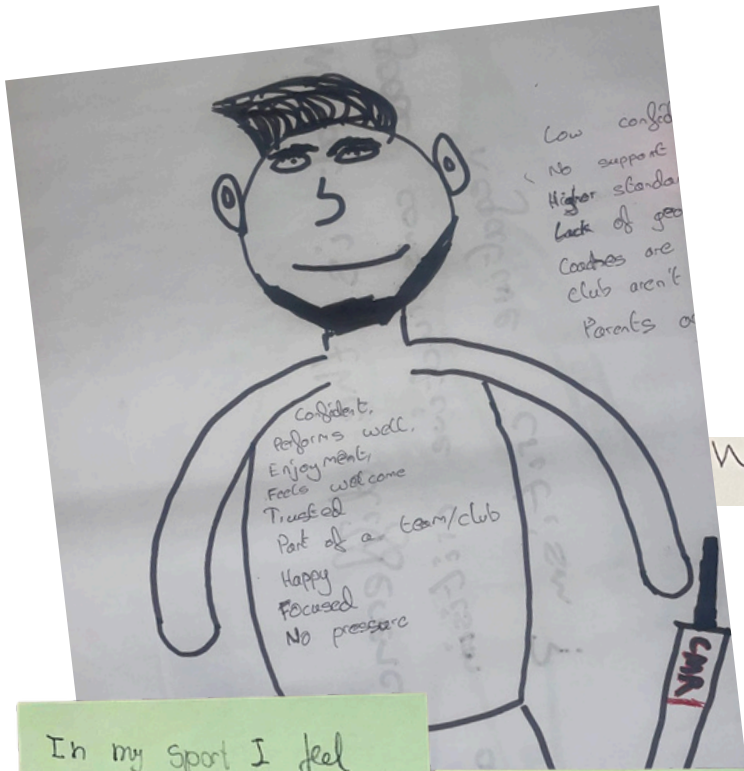
In groups, athletes created and created 'big questions' (open-ended and without clear answers) based on the gallery wall ideas. These questions reflected thoughts about being safe in sport, the boundaries of this and some of the big questions for sporting people and organisations to consider.

04. Group Enquiry

Each group was invited to introduce their question, after which athletes voted anonymously on which question they wished to discuss. The question receiving the most votes formed the basis of a whole-group discussion. Athletes then engaged in critical and respectful dialogue guided by the principles of CoPE, building on one another's ideas to develop a deeper understanding of the issues raised. Discussion was supported by short reflective activities, including think-pair-share exercises and individual written reflections, before returning to the group dialogue.

PHASE 1: ATHLETES IDEA GENERATION

This page showcases some of the artefacts created by young athletes throughout the different CoPE activities.



I do the same warm up before a game

When I have a good warm up, so I don't feel as if I'll pull a muscle or something

I feel physically capable, no injuries to stunt my progress. It shows that I'm not making

when I'm not injured.

I feel safe when my nutrition is up to my expectations.

I am fully prepared (physically)

no injuries/pain

I had a meal before match

When not injured

no small in presenting me from playing 10

Why does being valued matter?

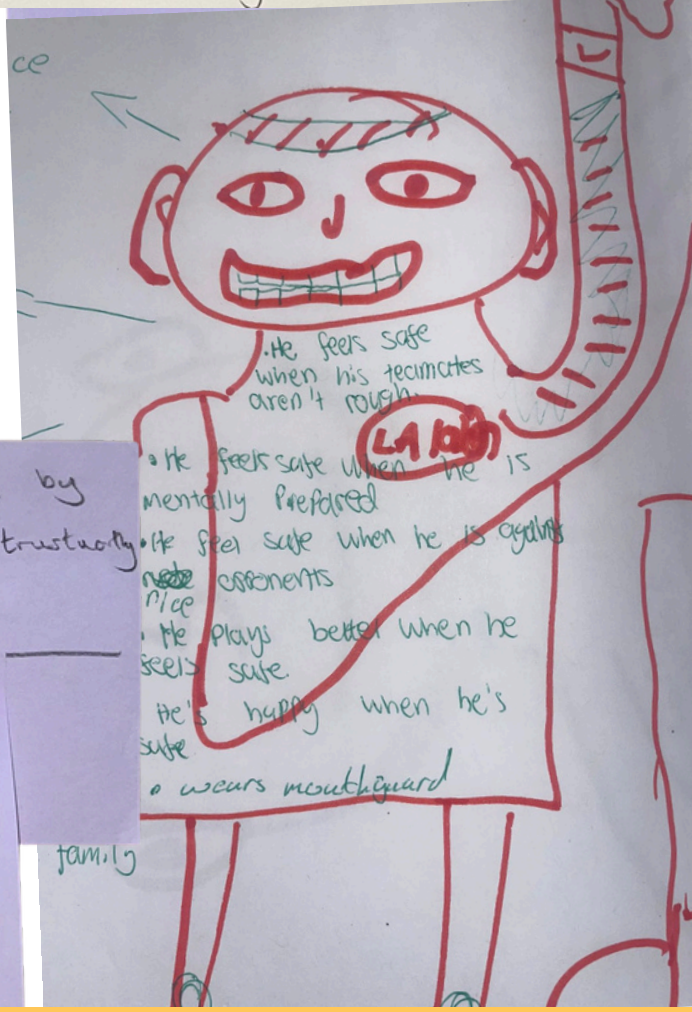
In my sport I feel safe when I am able to trust my coaches when talking to them about certain topics or areas of weakness.

I feel safe when I trust my team

Surrounded by good ^{and} trustworthiness teammates

When I'm around people I trust and can clearly communicate with

When: I feel like my team & coach believe I trust me on court.





PHASE 1: ADULTS IDEA GENERATION

Adults completed phase one in an online concept mapping platform called GroupWisdom. They responded to the prompt:

“In my child (athlete’s) sport, they feel safe when...”

They were asked to complete the prompt from the perspective of what helps young athletes feel safe, rather than from an adult-only viewpoint. They could complete the prompt as many times as they liked.

Concluding Phase 1:

Responses to the prompts *“In my sport, I feel safe when...”* and *“In my child’s (athlete’s) sport, they feel safe when...”* generated 446 statements.

These statements were reviewed and refined by:

- Splitting statements that contained more than one idea.
- Combining repeated ideas into a single statement.
- Removing statements that were not relevant to the research focus.
- Checking for duplication with a critical friend.

This resulted in 121 clear statements, which were then uploaded to the online concept mapping software, GroupWisdom.

All other data collected during the athlete workshops was used to provide context and elaboration on the concept mapping.



YOUTH ATHLETE SAFE SPORT STATEMENTS

Examples of the statements generated during Phase 1 are presented below. A total of 121 statements were uploaded to the GroupWisdom platform. Collectively, the statements reflected issues relating to the self, relationships with others, the environment(s) in which youth athletes train and compete, and organisational features that promote safe sporting experiences.

I play confidently

I am having fun

My coach's reactions are predictable

I am not teased or picked on by my peers

My coach does not yell at me

Competitors' behavior and language is not abusive

There is a healthy amount of pressure

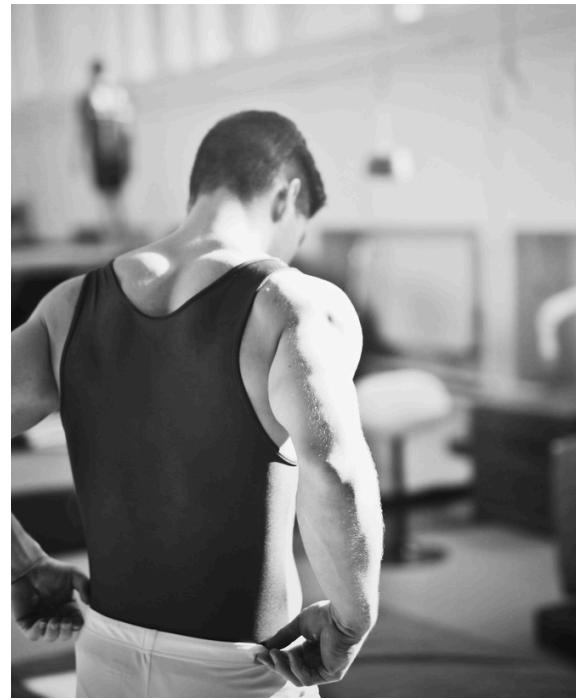
I am protected from social media

I am encouraged to win, but it is okay if I lose

PHASES 2 & 3: SORTING & RATING

Phases 2 and 3 were completed via the online concept mapping platform, GroupWisdom. After refining statements generated from phase 1, there were 121 clear statements remaining.

Participants were invited to sort and rate the statements online.



02. SORTING

Athletes and adults were invited to group the statements generated in phase 1 into categories of shared meaning via the concept mapping platform, GroupWisdom.

The purpose of this activity was to explore how participants understood and structured the statements relating to when young athletes feel safe in sport. By grouping statements according to perceived similarity, participants revealed the relationships they saw between ideas, enabling the development of a concept map that reflected their collective conceptualisation of the topic.

This formed the basis for a model of safe sport for youth athletes.

03. RATING

Athletes and adults were asked to provide feedback on all of the statements generated in phase one in relation to:

- How often they occur,
- How important they are,
- How feasible they might be to implement.

The purpose of this task was to add further insight to the concept map by identifying priority areas for action, as well as areas where further research may be needed.

This rating exercise was completed via the concept mapping platform, GroupWisdom.

KEY FINDINGS

- A seven-dimensional model of safe sport was produced from the ideas generated in phase 1 and the sorting exercise in phase 2.
- Young athletes described safe sport through everyday experiences of coaching, belonging, and relationships, not only through protection from harm.
- Fear of judgement is a major challenge for young athletes. The strongest priority areas centred on confidence, the management of mistakes, managing and coping with criticism, and dealing with negative reactions from adults.

The priority areas were rated as highly feasible to improve, suggesting that meaningful improvements to athlete experience are possible through changes in culture and behaviour.

A MODEL OF SAFE SPORT FOR YOUTH ATHLETES

Participants organised responses to the prompts “*In my sport, I feel safe when...*” and “*In my child’s (athlete’s) sport, they feel safe when...*” into seven distinct categories, which were subsequently labelled by the research team.



Figure 1: A Youth-Led Model of Safe Sport for Youth Athletes

The proximity of dimensions reflects the strength of their conceptual relationships. For example, Safeguarding Structures and Processes is positioned close to Supportive and Trustworthy Coaching, reflecting the way some of the statements within these dimensions were sorted together. This is illustrated by statements such as “Coaches show an understanding of safeguarding” and “There is accountability for bad behaviour in adults (e.g., coaches and parents)”. In contrast, Safeguarding Structures and Processes is positioned further from Belonging and Social Support, reflecting less overlap in how participants grouped statements across these dimensions.

Importantly, Agency occupies a central position in the model, reflecting its strong connection with all other dimensions, as it was frequently grouped alongside statements across multiple dimensions.



A MODEL OF SAFE SPORT FOR YOUTH ATHLETES

Each dimension of the model is described alongside the top three statements ranked highest in terms of average importance. The dimensions are presented in order of perceived importance, from highest to lowest.

01. Supportive & Trustworthy Coaching

Athletes placed the greatest importance on coaching relationships. They valued coaches who provide individual feedback, show fairness and honesty, and build trust in this critical relationship.

*“I am given individual feedback from my coach that helps me improve”
“My coach is honest”
“My coach treats me fairly”*

02. Physical Readiness & Resources

Athletes want to feel physically prepared for performance. This included feeling ready for performance due to warming-up and having no injuries and having access to resources such as suitable equipment and sports kit.

*“I know the rules”
“I am physically prepared”
“I have suitable equipment”*

03. Agency

Athletes want to be listened to, understand and navigate their development pathway, and have the ability to play freely. They also identified that it is important for them to know what behaviours are acceptable from other athletes.

*“I am listened to”
“I can play freely”
“I understand the talent pathway I am on”*

04. Peer Support

Athletes placed emphasis on positive peer-to-peer relationships in sport. Having a strong sense of belonging with their teammates was important for athletes' sense of safety. They want to be around peers that they feel comfortable speaking to, who are supportive and who challenge them to improve.

*“I am comfortable speaking to my teammates”
“People I am with challenge me to improve”
“My teammates are supportive”*



A MODEL OF SAFE SPORT FOR YOUTH ATHLETES

Each dimension of the model is described alongside the top three statements ranked highest in terms of average importance. The dimensions are presented in order of perceived importance, from highest to lowest.

05. Psychological Factors

Young athletes want environments where they can focus on performance while it is acceptable to make mistakes. They outlined that having fun and feeling confident and motivated in these environments was important.

*“I am focused on improving performance”
“I am motivated”
“I play confidently”*

06. Belonging & Social Support

Athletes want to be around people whom they trust and who value them. There was an emphasis on family support and pro-social behaviours from those within their support networks, such as adults who do not shout or berate them or others during competition.

*“My family supports me”
“I am around people I trust”
“I am a valued member of the team”*

07. Safeguarding Structures & Processes

This dimension included standard safeguarding processes and practices as important aspects of safe sport. It also included a focus on accountability and action such as adults being held accountable for bad behaviour, care being provided for athletes when they are injured, and having safe equipment.

*“There is care for me when I am injured”
“Umpires/referee are fair”
“Equipment is safe to use”*

PRIORITY AREAS

To identify priority areas, responses to the prompts *“In my sport, I feel safe when...”* and *“In my child’s (athlete’s) sport, they feel safe when...”* were assessed based on their frequency of occurrence, perceived importance, and feasibility of implementation.

The table below presents statements rated as above average in importance but below average in occurrence, indicating key priority areas for future action.



STATEMENTS	MEANING
<p><i>“I play confidently”</i></p> <p><i>“It is okay to make mistakes”</i></p> <p><i>“Parents don’t shout negatively from the side lines”</i></p> <p><i>“I am not judged”</i></p>	<p>Taken together, these findings suggest that many young athletes experience concerns about judgement, criticism, and the consequences of making mistakes.</p> <p>Organisations should prioritise creating environments where athletes feel confident and able to make mistakes without fear of negative reactions; this appears to be a key component of safe sport.</p>
<p><i>“I have no injuries”</i></p>	<p>Injury prevention and broader athlete welfare should remain central priorities. Young athletes do not view injury as an acceptable or inevitable part of participation and value environments that actively support their physical welfare alongside performance development.</p> <p>Organisations should consider athlete’s well-being with their well-becoming^[13], and create cultures that prioritise long-term health over short-term performance gains.</p>
<p><i>“There is accountability for bad behavior in adults (e.g. coaches and parents)”</i></p>	<p>Safe sport requires clear and visible accountability when adults behave inappropriately.</p> <p>Organisations should ensure that reporting mechanisms, behavioural expectations, and disciplinary processes are understood, trusted, consistently applied and feedback on the process/outcomes are shared with athletes.</p>

These statements were all also rated as highly feasible to improve. This suggests that there are numerous impactful opportunities to improve young athletes’ experiences in sport.



CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to foreground youth voice in safe sport research. In doing so, a youth-initiated and youth-directed model of safe sport has been developed through a novel participatory, multi-method approach that moves beyond developmentalist assumptions about children's capacities and position them as active contributors and decision-makers in the research process. Too often, safe sport is talked about in policy and practice without directly reflecting the thoughts and opinions of those most affected. This research helps address that gap by working directly with young people to develop a model of safe sport based on their lived experiences.

The result is a seven-dimension model of what safe sport looks like when it is working well. Rather than focusing only on preventing harm, this model highlights some of the conditions that actively help young athletes feel safe and able to thrive. This includes (1) characteristics and relational aspects of supportive and trustworthy coaching; (2) psychological factors relating to athletes' affect, behaviors, and cognition; (3) physical readiness and resources relating to health and preparedness for competition and training; (4) a sense of belonging and social support within the wider sporting environment; (5) peer support from teammates and friends; (6) conditions that enable athlete agency, including opportunities to make choices and be heard; and (7) safeguarding structures and processes.

This model can be used to inform policy, coach education, programme design, and safeguarding practice across sport. Importantly, it supports a shift in thinking, from simply preventing harm to actively creating positive, safe sporting environments.

Ultimately, this project provides a practical tool for moving beyond compliance-based safeguarding and towards sport environments where young people can genuinely feel safe, supported and able to develop.



NEXT STEPS

This project provides a practical framework for improving safe sport environments for young high-performance athletes. There is a clear opportunity for organisations and individuals to use this model to review current practice and shape future athlete experiences in sport.

This work also opens opportunities for future collaboration in research and practice. While there are multiple directions we would like to take this work, three key areas include.

01. Application of the model

Continued partnership with sports organisations will be essential to test, apply, and evaluate this model with young athletes in real-world settings, ensuring that safe sport approaches remain grounded in their lived experiences.

02. Methodological Training

The approach that underpinned the workshop design (CoPE) has demonstrated efficacy and could be used by safeguarding officers, coaches, and athletes to create spaces where voice is genuinely prioritised. Would your organisation or workforce benefit from training in this methodological approach?

03. Application of the Method

We are seeking collaborations with organisations who would like to know more about how to engage with youth athletes. We are interested in applying the workshop used in this project to run enquiries on more focussed topics in safe sport including athletes' experiences of online environments or experiences in para-sport.

NEXT STEPS

If your organisation is interested in applying these findings, reviewing current safe sport practice, or exploring collaborative projects in this area, further conversation is warmly welcomed.

WHERE ELSE CAN YOU HEAR ABOUT THE PROJECT FINDINGS?

Practitioner conference on 1st July organised by:



Child Protection
in Sport Unit

ann craft trust
acting against abuse

Active
Partnerships



Academic conference on 13th July organised by:



Academic Publication in progress.

Full report available through the [Olympic World Library](#).

WANT TO READ MORE?

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We thank you for reading this report and for your continued support in our efforts to contribute to keeping athletes safe.

DECLARATIONS

- All images used in this report were sourced via Canva (<https://canva.com/>).
- The copyright for this report remains with the author. All third-party materials have been appropriately acknowledged and referenced.
- This report was designed by Amy Cowd from Side Project
- This project received full ethical approval from Bournemouth University (ID: 59524).
- The authors declares no conflicts of interest
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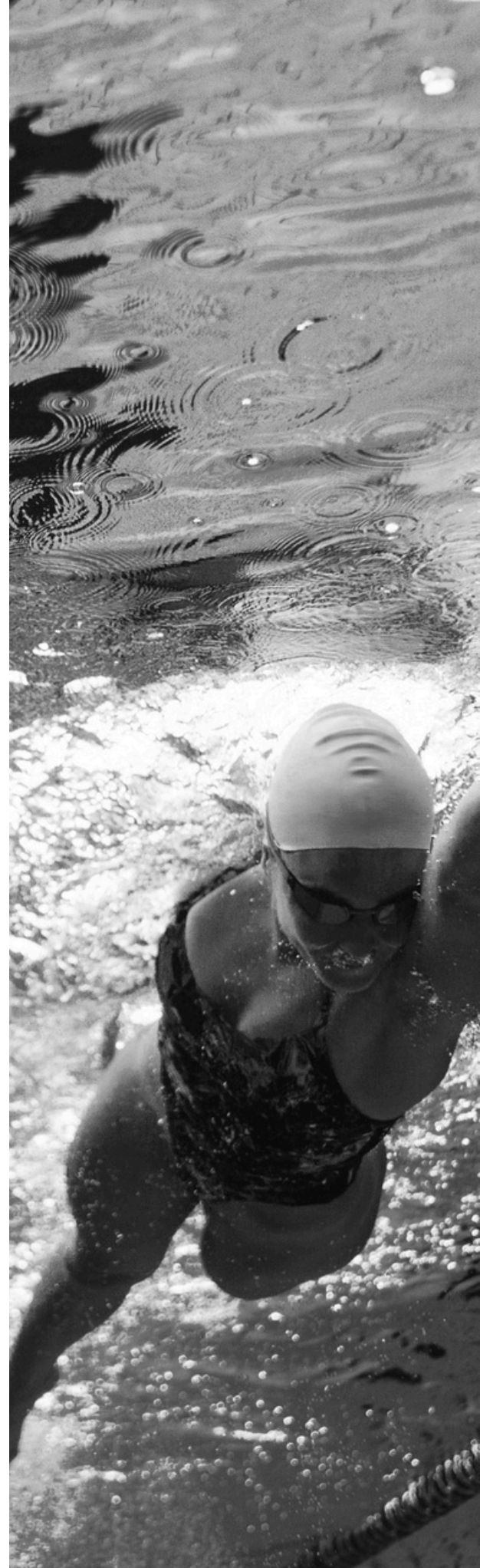
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SIDE PROJECT