



How should we ensure that children are safeguarded in gymnastics?

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Gymnastics has had multiple abuse scandals involving the USA, Australia, Europe and the UK [1]. These involve allegations of sexual abuse. In the UK, we are currently awaiting publication of the Whyte Report, an independent review looking into gymnasts' wellbeing and welfare as well as safeguarding issues [2].

A U.K. prevalence survey surveying 6000 participants in youth sports [3] – up to 75% of the individuals they studied reported experiencing emotional abuse as well sexual harassment (29%), physical abuse (24%), sexual abuse (3%). A lifetime prevalence estimate of all three types of interpersonal violence in elite athletes is about 24% with psychological abuse being most prevalent [4].

There is also an awareness that sexual abuse does not exist in isolation but thrives on a toxic and corrosive culture. In general disclosure of sexual violence is lower in sports [5] compared to reported prevalence. Within the child elite sporting environment, children are at risk because touch [5, 6] (often between children and adult males) is normalised and begins at an early age in order to help build the mechanics of the difficult skills required and in order for safety and to prevent injury. Furthermore, in many elite settings the coaches have high levels of authority and control which may be difficult to challenge, particularly if the coach is seen as being successful using their methods and regime. There is a further risk that because of a celebrity culture in which the perpetrators are emboldened by a bystander culture, where abuse is ignored and allowed to continue.

Although sexual abuse has received significant attention, there appears to be less research around emotional harm/abuse [5], particularly the more subtle forms, which can be equally pernicious and harmful especially if sustained over a long period of time or carried out by trusted authority figures. Within a sporting subculture there is some acceptance of an environment where psychological aggression (which could include bullying, constant criticism and

denigration) or coercive practices such as requiring training to the point of exhaustion are present and sometimes deemed necessary or even beneficent as enhancing performance of the athlete. Because there is often lack of evidence of malice or self-gratification on the part of the perpetrator and it may be perceived by all, including the athletes, as necessary to elicit maximal performance and success, this is often allowed to continue and can become normalised or accepted as the price worth paying for success. Even so, athletes and in particular child athletes who depend on the adults around them for psychological care, development of a healthy identity and positive self-regard can be harmed.

Children (aged under 16) in elite sport are particularly vulnerable. This is particularly true in sports like gymnastics where they typically enter intensive training in earlier childhood [5]. When they commit to intensive training from a young age, they may become solely focussed on performance in one sport whilst still unable to formulate their own long time life plans or make major life choices [7]. This can delay development of an individual identity and life goals distinct from the sport and a lack of self-esteem which is not bound up in sporting success, at a time when they depend on the adults around them to keep them safe. Developmentally a certain amount of adult paternalism is normal and appropriate for all children and the responsibility for the safety, wellbeing and healthy development of children generally lies with their parents and schools. However, in an elite sport environment, where children spend many hours training in gyms under the care and supervision of others, their coaches are by default in *locum parentis*, with coaches often spending more time and having more influence than parents themselves. There is significant power differential between the child athlete and coach [8, 9], and a high potential cost to reporting abuse – sometimes around the perceived shattering of future hopes and dreams and a fear of retaliation. Indeed, when children are involved and the abuse is normalised to the setting

and justified by sporting results, how do children even realise they are being abused?

None of the issues discussed above is unique to gymnastics. However, gymnastics is one of the early specialism sports where young children enter an elite training environment and perform many hours of training at a young age [6, 8, 9].

Over the last 40 years, the age of competitors at elite levels has not only become younger, but in addition from the 1970's when the scoring system changed the required acrobatic skills have increased in difficulty, has necessitated increased training at a younger age [10]. The pre-pubertal child has the advantage of a higher power to weight ratio, thus the prepubertal physique has become favoured, to enhance the potential to perform difficult acrobatics which require significant strength. It was about this time that male coaches also increasingly became involved in training of female gymnasts [10, 11, 12].

In accordance with the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the child [13] children have the right to train and compete in a healthy environment, where well-being is privileged over performance enhancement. We believe children have the right to dignity and respect.

How do we find a way forward and how do we develop best practice? We suggest that this area of concern requires not just reviews and enquiries but the following: sound research into child welfare and wellbeing in sport and elite sport to develop methods of re-incorporating parental voices and a fresh emphasis on wellbeing and child development into the elite sports environment while supporting child athletes to develop their own voices [12, 13]; new approaches to governance and safeguarding in club and elite level sports which is more focussed on preventative and developmentally sound strategies to help children to grow and mature within positive, healthy sporting environments [7, 8, 11, 13]; and increased co-working between mental health specialists (including psychiatrists), child development experts and the sports community to enhance the wellbeing of all children engaging in sport, as well as supporting those who are elite athletes to perform at the highest levels without paying an unacceptable price for their success.

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