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The BASES Expert Statement on Safeguarding in the Sport and Exercise Sciences

Produced on behalf of the British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences by Dr Emma Kavanagh, Prof Zoe Knowles FBASES, Dr Abbe Brady, Dr Daniel Rhind, Dr Misia Gervis, Dr Andy Miles FBASES and Prof Richard Davison FBASES.

Introduction

Within the context of the sport and exercise sciences, the practice of safeguarding concerns that of a professional obligation to protect all parties (for example the client, athlete and/or self) from abuse or harm. Safeguarding should embrace relational (others), individual (self) and organisational (culture) considerations. The understanding of physical, emotional and social well-being and freedom from discrimination are the focus of typical safeguarding education. In this Expert Statement we provide information in three key areas: 1) a brief summary of the research themes and findings surrounding abuse in sport; 2) a discussion of safeguarding within the sport and exercise profession and finally; 3) recommendations for sport and exercise scientists on matters of safeguarding.

Background and evidence

In this Expert Statement we refer to abuse as an overarching term for what other authors refer to as interpersonal violence (Vertommen *et al.* 2018), maltreatment (Kerr & Stirling, 2019) or non-accidental violence (Mountjoy *et al.*, 2016). All of these terms are adopted to subsume an array of abusive acts or behaviours against the individual including sexual, physical, psychological abuse, bullying and neglect. Existing research remains skewed towards the sport setting with little known about abuse or safeguarding in the exercise or physical activity environment.

Global patterns of abuse have been identified in academic research (e.g., Hartill & Lang, 2018; Gervis *et al.*, 2016; Vertommen *et al.*, 2018), with findings highlighting the occurrence of abuse in sporting contexts ranging from community through to high performance sport. The risk of experiencing psychological, physical and sexual violence increases as athletes progress up the talent ladder (Mountjoy *et al.*, 2016) and can occur in physical and virtual spaces (Kavanagh *et al.*, 2021a).

Traditionally, there has been a focus on the *coach* as the perpetrator and the *athlete* as the victim, yet it is recognised that anyone can become a perpetrator of abuse in sport including coaches, parents/guardians, athletes, scientific and medical staff. Abuse(s) can be experienced directly and/or indirectly through involving and impacting bystanders (Raakman *et al.*, 2010). Further it is important to recognise that abuse(s) can occur at a micro level (individual/relational) to a macro-level, whereby organisations or institutions can intentionally or unintentionally perpetuate, suppress, or ignore violence.

The impact of abuse can be long-term and damaging posing a significant threat to individual and collective physical, social and psychological health. With the acknowledgement that abuse(s) can occur in any environment there is a need for safeguarding initiatives to promote participant and practitioner health and well-being (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2019).

Safeguarding in the sport and exercise sciences

BASES promotes a culture whereby the importance of safeguarding and welfare within sport and exercise sciences is a priority. We advocate for integrity as a guiding principle in research and practice understanding that as a BASES member or practitioner, we have a duty of care (Kavanagh *et al.*, 2021b) to safeguard those with whom we work. BASES meet the statutory requirements for safeguarding by having a designated and trained Lead Safeguarding Officer, as well as a Safeguarding and Welfare Policy with associated procedures for reporting/investigating issues of safeguarding and a Code of Conduct (BASES, 2021a; 2021b). All

practitioners share the responsibility for working in an ethical manner that prioritises safeguarding clients, the self and the integrity of the profession.

In acknowledging the complexity of real world issues it is helpful to consider professional practice as existing on a constantly changing spectrum whereby judgements of practice also exist at the levels of individual (self), relational (others) and organisational (culture). The BASES safeguarding practice barometer (see Figure 1) seeks to capture such dynamic and multilevel considerations.

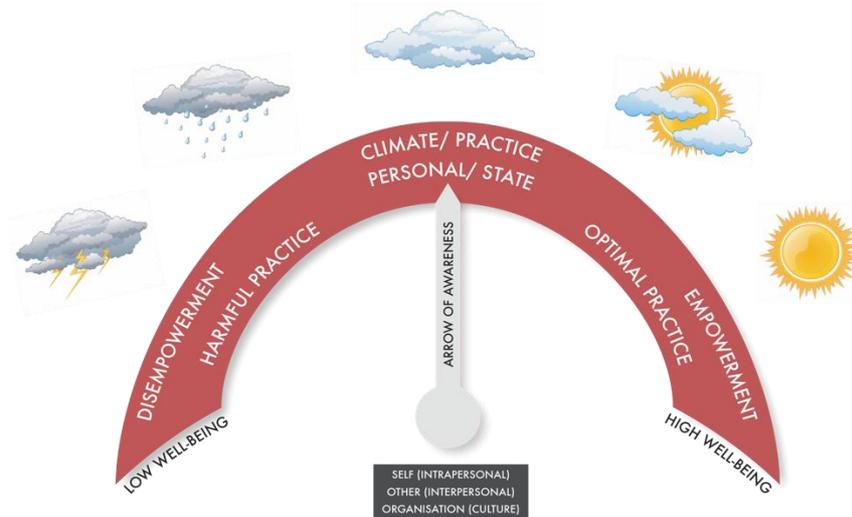


Figure 1. The BASES safeguarding practice barometer

The analogy of a barometer provides a tool with which to raise the practitioner’s self-awareness around *climate* (disempowerment-empowerment), *practice* (harmful-optimal) and *personal state* (low well-being to high well-being). Change begins with observing and by asking relevant questions. At the individual level, sport and exercise scientists may judge whether their practice safeguards both themselves and their clients by addressing questions such as: am I working in accordance with the BASES Code of Conduct and am I ethically sound in my practice? At the relational level, sport and exercise scientists may ask: how effective are my working relationships and am I working in a manner to support client(s)’ well-being? At the organisational level, the questions may include, have I considered the climate or the broader culture in which I work? Have I noticed or experienced any change in circumstances or conflict between what I have been asked to do and the BASES Code of Conduct, and if so, to what extent did my response uphold the integrity of my profession?

Use of the barometer for reflection and to monitor safeguarding will elicit a broader perspective for review that acknowledges the importance of understanding what well-being looks like and the complexity of potential safeguarding issues. Ultimately, the aim is for all three levels of consideration to be aligned to support empowered clients with high well-being. Sport and exercise scientists need to show openness to examining factors that support or impede practice, and the conviction and courage to challenge activities that detract from client well-being and neglect safeguarding imperatives.

Recommendations and action

Sport and exercise scientists should:

- Understand and apply the key principles of safeguarding and ensure that they can provide evidence that the appropriate action has been taken to protect themselves, the people they work with and their profession.
- Attend the *BASES Safeguarding Welfare in Sport and Exercise Sciences* workshop to ensure they are familiar with current legislative, organisational and professional requirements and are aware of relevant reporting and/or referral requirements.

- Keep up-to-date on matters of safeguarding by regularly checking for updates in the BASES Safeguarding and Welfare Policy and Code of Conduct and adjust their own practice accordingly.
- Identify and know in detail the appropriate safeguarding guidelines and reporting procedures for the context(s) they operate within whether in the UK or abroad (for example National Governing Body policies and procedures).
- Stay up-to-date with guidance notes provided by key bodies, for example the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU), the Ann Craft Trust and the International Olympic Committee (IOC).
- Ensure they meet the necessary clearance and vetting requirements for the context(s) in which they operate (e.g. Disclosure Barring Services in England and Wales; Disclosure Scotland; Access Northern Ireland).
- Reflect on practice adopting safeguarding as a focus. The aspiration is to move beyond a 'do no harm' ethos; towards safe, fair, positive, inclusive, and enriching higher welfare environments.

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