

Article

A Critical Examination of Child Protection Initiatives in Sport Contexts

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Abstract: With the broadening of focus on child maltreatment beyond intra-familial settings, there is growing awareness of occurrences of maltreatment within the sport context. Millions of children participate in organized sport annually, and despite a tendency to view sport as a context by which to enhance the overall health and development of children, it is also a context in which children are vulnerable to experiences of maltreatment. The well-documented power ascribed to coaches, the unregulated nature of sport and a “win-at-all-costs” approach contribute to a setting that many propose is conducive to maltreatment. A number of high profile cases of sexual abuse of athletes across several countries in the 1990s prompted sport organizations to respond with the development of child protection measures. This study examined seven child protection in sport initiatives in terms of the extent to which they originated from research, had content that was consistent with scholarly work and were evaluated empirically. The findings indicated that these initiatives were not empirically derived nor evaluated. Recommendations are made to more closely align research with these initiatives in order to protect children and to promote a safe and growth-enhancing experience for young participants in sport.

Keywords: child protection; sport; empirical foundations

1. Introduction

The last forty years has been characterized with an enhanced focus on the welfare of children. In Westernized societies, in particular, a cultural shift has occurred in which youth are given special status apart from that of adults, one that is reflected in more child-centered educational practices, distinct legal status and structural mechanisms to protect the welfare of young people when the family structure breaks down [1]. Furthermore, there has been a shift in focus from protecting young people from harm to addressing ways to enhance the overall health and development of young people. As a result, considerable attention has been devoted to optimizing parenting methods, and importantly, this focus has extended beyond the family to a variety of child-populated contexts, including education, day care, sport and recreation settings.

Sport has historically been viewed as an important and beneficial arena for the growth and development of young people. A substantial body of literature supports such benefits as the development of physical strength and coordination, self-esteem, perseverance, teamwork and leadership, as a result of participation in organized sport [2,3]. In fact, sport tends to be viewed as being “innately good” [4] and a context that parents look to as a vehicle by which to enhance the overall health and development of their children. The fact that millions of children participate in organized sport every year is in part a testament to parents’ beliefs that this context is a positive one for young people. In Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, for example, between 45% and 75% of youth participate in organized sport [5–7].

In spite of predominantly positive views of sport, concerns about the competitive nature of sport for young people, including the resultant “win-at-all-costs” approach and high rates of injury, have been expressed for some time [8]. These concerns appear to have fallen on deaf ears, however, until the 1990s, when in several Westernized countries, a number of high-profile cases of sexual abuse of athletes by their coaches emerged. In Canada, for example, a television program called “Crossing the Line” documented examples of sexual abuse by male coaches of female athletes in volleyball, swimming and rowing teams. Also in the mid-1990s, a celebrated Canadian men’s hockey coach, Graham James, named coach of the year, was charged and later convicted of numerous counts of sexual abuse; since that time, other athletes have also disclosed their experiences of abuse at the hands of James [9]. Also in the 1990s, former British Olympic Swimming coach, Paul Hickson, was charged with sexual abuse of his former athletes [4]; similarly, Australian triathlon coach, Brett Sutton, was also charged with sexual offences against a former athlete [10]. With the media scrutiny and very public exposure of these cases of harm in sport, those in the sport community could no longer blindly accept sport as a “moral oasis” or innately good for young people. In fact, sport organizations experienced pressure to be seen to be doing something about the safety and abuse of athletes. The result was the implementation of various athlete protection measures, including policies, educational programs and advocacy initiatives.

While the development of these initiatives is a positive reflection of societal views on the importance of addressing issues of child protection in sport, in order for these measures to be most effective, it is paramount that they are empirically informed and evaluated. The passion that is aroused in response to cases of child athlete maltreatment has understandably led to the development of preventative measures; however, if these measure are not grounded in theory and empirical data, they

are unlikely to be effective in a sustained way. It has now been approximately twenty years since the first of such measures emerged in sport, and to-date, there has been an absence of analysis and systematic evaluation of these initiatives.

The purpose of the current study, therefore, was to critically review seven child protection initiatives in the context of organized sports with a focus on the extent to which these initiatives have been empirically informed and evaluated and whether the content included in these initiatives is congruent with scholarly work.

It is important to critically examine child protection initiatives in sport for several reasons. As mentioned earlier, sport is highly populated by young people and is seen as an important avenue for their overall health and development. In spite of this prevailing positive ideology of sport, various forms of maltreatment of young athletes have been documented. Since the high-profile media cases of sexual abuse in sport emerged in the 1990s, research on sexual abuse in particular has burgeoned. Although prevalence data are relatively unreliable due to differences in definitions of sexual abuse and harassment and under-reporting, findings from studies conducted in Denmark, Australia, Norway and Canada reveal that between 2% and 42% of athletes have reported experiences of inappropriate sexual conduct, including sexual assault, by their coaches [11–14]. Research on emotionally abusive experiences has emerged more recently, indicating that this form of maltreatment is the most commonly one experienced by athletes [15,16]. Although physical abuse and neglect in sport have not been investigated empirically, numerous anecdotal cases exist and include death of athletes as a result of the withdrawal of water during intense training in very hot temperatures [17]. Given the long-lasting effects that child maltreatment can have on mental health, including depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, even into late adulthood [18,19], the pursuit of effective preventative measures is warranted.

An examination of child protection in sport initiatives is also critical given the well-documented and unique characteristics of the sport environment itself that enhance children's vulnerabilities to maltreatment by coaches in particular. As an example, the unquestioned power and authority ascribed to coaches by athletes, reflected in their references to coaches as a "parent" or "God-like" figure [4,20], enhances the power differential between coaches and athletes; this power and its misuse are fundamental to all forms of child maltreatment. The sport environment itself, with opportunities for the coach to be alone with an athlete during training and travelling, enhances vulnerabilities for maltreatment to occur [4]. Although one might assume that parents play a role in protecting their children from maltreatment, it appears instead that parents are often socialized into the sport culture in such a way as to relinquish control over their children to the coach [21]. Finally, the well-documented over-emphasis on winning and performance outcomes means that young athletes' wellbeing is often neglected by the adults in positions of authority [22,23].

Lastly, a critique of child protection in sport initiatives is necessary because of the self-regulated nature of sport. Historically, sport has been autonomous, unregulated, self-policing and dominated by a large un-scrutinized workforce [4,22]. In some countries, such as the USA, sport outside of the formal education system is provided almost entirely through volunteers. In other countries, such as Canada and the U.K., some state funding is provided for identified levels of sport, but other levels depend entirely upon volunteers. As an example, in Canada, over 40% of children between five and 14 years of age play soccer, and over 20% of this age group participate in minor league hockey; the coaches for

these children's sport are almost exclusively volunteers [5]. Having such a volunteer base raises questions and concerns about whether or not these individuals have been scrutinized for previous incidences of maltreatment and have a minimal standard of training and education relative to child development and child protection issues. Interestingly, while one might expect that sport organizations in receipt of state funding would have higher obligations for accountability, this is not always the case. A recent study of Canadian national sport organizations that receive state funding indicates that the majority of these organizations fail to meet the requisite standards with respect to child protection to receive such funding [24].

The autonomous, unregulated nature of sport organizations also means that they are not monitored and evaluated by neutral, third-party bodies and, thus, are not necessarily held accountable. As David ([22], p. 229) wrote: "... in practice, due to the tradition of self-policing, paternalism, a fierce resistance to independent criticism and a refusal to accept that sport is not always "pure" and free from society's problems, the principles of accountability and scrutiny are still inadequately respected by the sporting world, or at best looked upon with suspicion." Sport organizations have an important role in responding to concerns about maltreatment of young people, but the ability of any organization to respond responsibly and effectively to issues of child protection depend in large part on the quality of the protective measures in place.

In an effort to scrutinize the empirical bases of child protection in sport initiatives, the following research questions were posed: (i) To what extent did the initiatives originate from research on athlete maltreatment? (ii) Is the content of the initiatives informed by and consistent with scholarly literature? (iii) Have the initiatives been evaluated empirically? Not only will this critique of child protection practices in sport potentially benefit sport practitioners and young athletes, but also the advancement of research and practice in complementary fields.

2. Sample

A total of seven athlete protection initiatives from four countries were examined, including: *Play by the Rules* from Australia, *Speak Out* and *Respect in Sport* from Canada, *Safe4Athletes* and *Safe to Compete* from the United States of America and the *Child Protection in Sport Unit* and *Children First* from the United Kingdom. These initiatives were selected on the basis of the following inclusion criteria: prioritized awareness-raising of child maltreatment and protection in sport; provided access to information and resources to facilitate sport organizations' abilities to prevent and/or intervene in cases of athlete maltreatment; and finally, available in the English language.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

A web-based analysis was chosen as the method for investigation, as it is recognized as a valuable avenue for exploring content and key messages. Further, for child protection resources to be of use to members of the sport community, they should be accessible, and the website is now the most frequent first point-of-contact for information about organizations and programs [25].

Data collection began by searching the web for any initiative matching the inclusion criteria cited above. The purpose of the web-based analysis was to assess the extent to which the content of the various athlete protection initiatives was empirically grounded and reflected current scholarly

knowledge with respect to child maltreatment in sport. Recognizing that numerous forms of maltreatment can occur in sport, including, as a few examples, abuse, harassment, bullying, institutional maltreatment and child labor [26], the focus of this study was on the content covered by the athlete protection initiatives on relational child maltreatment (*i.e.*, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect). Accordingly, the webpage information and all attached documentation covered by the initiatives on relational child maltreatment were reviewed in full.

Relational maltreatment refers to maltreatment that occurs within a critical relationship, one in which the child is dependent upon the adult for a sense of trust, security and fulfillment of needs [27]. Relational child maltreatment was chosen as the focus of the current study, as the vast majority of the related research in sport addresses abuses within the coach-athlete relationship, which in many cases can be classified as a critical relationship [26]. As athletes move up the competitive ladder in sport, they often spend more time with their coaches than with their parents; furthermore, athletes depend upon the coach for his or her expertise and access to necessary resources, and therefore, this qualify as a critical relationship [20]. This focus on relational maltreatment is also consistent with the foci of the media cases and scrutiny, which presumably spurred the inception of child protection measures in sport.

Data recorded on the various athlete protection initiatives were then analyzed inductively, and the content was organized into main themes and summary tables. More specifically, data on the origins of the initiative and resources provided were examined. The current study assessed whether the child protection in sport initiatives identified all four forms of relational maltreatment: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect [28]. Further, the ways in which the initiatives defined and provided examples of each form of child abuse were compared against those cited in the scholarly literature. A generally accepted definition of sexual abuse is: “any sexual interaction with person(s) of any age that is perpetuated: (1) against the victim’s will; (2) without consent; or (3) in an aggressive, exploitative, manipulative, or threatening manner” [29]. Physical abuse is typically defined as: the infliction of physical harm on a child by a parent or caregiver [30]. Emotional abuse is referred to as patterns of non-physical harmful interactions, while neglect is a lack of reasonable care [31]. Any mention of contextual or descriptive information about the individual forms of child abuse were compared with existing literature, as well as procedures recommended for prevention and intervention. Information pertaining to contextual influences on vulnerability to maltreatment and whether or not the various initiatives have been evaluated empirically were also examined.

The final step in this phase of research was to run a descriptive analysis of the content described.

4. Results

To reiterate, the main research concerns for this study were to examine the extent to which: (i) the initiatives originated from research on athlete maltreatment; (ii) the content of the initiatives was congruent with scholarly literature; and (iii) the initiatives were evaluated empirically.

4.1. Origins of Initiatives

Four of the seven initiatives were reportedly developed in response to highly publicized cases of athlete maltreatment and, more specifically, cases of sexual abuse; two others resulted from the organization’s recognition of the need to address athlete protection as part of their risk management

responsibilities. Only one emerged from research following from a conference involving youth sport organizations, sport scientists, maltreatment consultants and other stakeholders involved in the prevention and intervention of maltreatment. Four of the initiatives were launched by sport organizations, while three were originated by organizations or individuals independent of any specific sport organization. Despite the lack of research as the stimulus for the development of the initiatives, five of the seven initiatives included empirical evidence on maltreatment in sport on the websites; two of these cited several sources of empirical information, while the other two referenced minimal research findings.

4.2. Descriptive Characteristics

A broad description of the athlete protection initiatives is important for providing a context for the evaluation. Each initiative stated a clear purpose and goals, although the degree of detail provided varied substantially across programs. All referred in some way to addressing and reducing harm experienced by children in sport; inherent in these goals was a focus on raising awareness of issues of abuse and child protection in sport. All of the initiatives, except for one, stated an intent to raise awareness regarding various forms of athlete maltreatment; the exception was an initiative explicitly aimed at sexual abuse alone. For all of the initiatives, the intended audiences included administrators, coaches, parents and athletes involved in organized sport. All of the initiatives engaged in modes of promotion and information dissemination, such as e-bulletins, posters, conference presentations, flyers and newsletters. Only three, however, promoted themselves through Facebook and/or Twitter. Most of the websites have a welcoming first page that is visually pleasing and identifies sponsors, athlete endorsements and resources. Additionally, tabs are used to organize the information into various sections, such as making complaints, legal information and resources, although there is no consistency in the organization of content across initiatives. In the majority of cases, accessing information on the various forms of athlete maltreatment was difficult and was categorized under headings ranging from “issues” to “fairness”, “inclusion” and “discrimination”, as examples. As can be seen in Table 1, all of the initiatives addressed the prevention of athlete abuse, but only five included content related to procedures for dealing with complaints of athlete abuse.

Table 1. Goals and means to achieve goals across initiatives.

Goals	Means to Achieve Goals	Number of Initiatives
Prevention	Awareness-Raising	7/7
	Provision of Educational Resources	7/7
	Provision of Structured Educational Modules or Workshops	4/7
	Establishment of Partnerships	6/7
	Incorporation of Research	6/7
Intervention	Identification of Procedures for Issuing a Complaint	7/7
	Duty to Report	7/7
	Identification of Procedures for Responding to a Complaint Against You	1/7
	Sample Policies and Procedures	7/7
	Recommendations for Athlete Advocate	4/7

All of the initiatives focused on prevention through the provision of educational resources and formal education programs, although they varied with respect to the format and delivery of educational content. Broadly, learning opportunities were available through short videos, worksheets, workshops or in-depth online programs; three of the seven initiatives provided all of these avenues for accessing content, while the remaining four initiatives offered at least one of the above options. Three of the seven initiatives charged a fee for some of their educational resources. One initiative charged a fee for accessing all of their educational materials.

Some, but not all, of the initiatives addressed intervention processes related to dealing with cases of athlete maltreatment. Of those that included measures of intervention, a wide variety of information and resources were observed with respect to complaint procedures, ranging from simply providing telephone numbers for abuse helplines, to the inclusion of detailed sample documents and procedures for filing a complaint and the importance of having an athlete advocate or athlete welfare officer to receive complaints.

The initiatives also differed organizationally with respect to their affiliations with non-sport child protection organizations. Three of the seven initiatives were situated within or affiliated with child protection initiatives that extend beyond the realm of sport. Five of the seven initiatives were linked with established non-governmental organizations outside of sport that were involved in humanitarian efforts (e.g., Red Cross), human rights associations and child services (e.g., ChildLine). One of the initiatives did not advertise any formal affiliations with other organizations.

4.3. Identification of Maltreatment

Each initiative was reviewed to assess the extent to which it identified, defined and provided examples of each form of relational maltreatment: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Further, the inclusion of contextual influences on vulnerability was assessed. These results are illustrated in Table 2.

The following section will examine each form of maltreatment in relation to website content from the athlete protection initiatives.

4.3.1. Sexual Abuse

All seven initiatives identified, defined and provided examples of sexual abuse as a form of maltreatment. In terms of definitions, all initiatives perceived age as an important factor in sexually abusive behaviors, and as a result, sexual abuse was often identified as a sexual act or threat between an adult or adolescent and a child. The examples of sexual abuse identified included: being touched in inappropriate areas (e.g., genitals, buttocks) or coerced to touch others in this manner, forced to engage in oral sex or intercourse, indecent exposure, intrusive questions or being coerced to view sexually explicit videos or photographs.

4.3.2. Physical Abuse

As seen in Table 2, all but one of the initiatives identified physical abuse in their content, although definitions varied widely. Most of the initiatives referred to physical abuse as the use or threats of

physical force on a child by a person in a position of trust or authority, but some referred to physical abuse as a response to misbehavior. The importance of an age difference between victim and abuser (e.g., physical harm caused by parent, caregiver or older child) was identified by many of the initiatives.

Table 2. Identification of maltreatment.

Variables of Interest		Number of Initiatives	
Identification of Each Form of Relational Maltreatment		Sexual Abuse	7/7
		Physical Abuse	6/7
		Emotional Abuse	6/7
		Neglect	6/7
Identification of Relational Maltreatment	Definition Provided for Each Form of Relational Maltreatment	Sexual Abuse	7/7
		Physical Abuse	6/7
		Emotional Abuse	6/7
		Neglect	4/7
Identification of Relational Maltreatment	Examples Provided for Each Form of Relational Maltreatment	Sexual Abuse	7/7
		Physical Abuse	6/7
		Emotional Abuse	6/7
		Neglect	4/7
	Indicators of Signs and Symptoms	General recognition for signs/symptoms of maltreatment	5/7
Identification of Contextual Vulnerabilities	Identification of Factors of Vulnerability such as: power relations, opportunities for coach to be alone with athlete, “win-at-all-costs” ideology	Sexual Abuse	6/7
		Physical Abuse	4/7
		Emotional Abuse	2/7
		Neglect	0/7

Examples of physical abuse also varied across initiatives. Some initiatives discussed physical abuse broadly, using examples, such as slapping, punching, hitting or excessive exercise. Conversely, some initiatives provided more specific examples of physical abuse, including touching inappropriate parts of the body, physical acts that do not serve an instructional or congratulatory purpose, physical acts as a result of losing a game and acts that can be perceived by the victim as embarrassing or detrimental to his or her safety.

4.3.3. Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse was identified, defined and described using examples by six of the seven initiatives. For this aspect of maltreatment, there appeared to be consistency amongst the athlete protection initiatives about the defining features of these behaviors. Most initiatives recognized the psychological nature of this maltreatment, suggested that emotionally abusive behaviors are often persistent over time and tend to result in poor emotional development or self-esteem issues. Examples of emotionally abusive behaviors frequently involved verbal acts, such as name-calling, swearing, ridicule, communicating a sense of worthlessness and threatening athletes. The initiatives typically

identified two examples of non-verbal forms of emotional abuse, including ignoring an athlete or isolating the athlete from an activity.

4.3.4. Neglect

Neglect was the form of relational maltreatment that was addressed by the fewest number of initiatives. Although all but one initiative included a reference to neglect, only four initiatives defined and provided examples of neglect. Of these, neglect was characterized by a failure to provide basic necessities to children or adolescents over an extended period of time. Examples of neglect from the initiatives included using equipment that is unsafe, leaving young athletes unattended in sport environments that require supervision, forcing athletes to play through injury and engaging in practice or games in excessive weather conditions.

4.4. Identification of Contextual Vulnerabilities

As observed in Table 2, the identification of contextual factors that enhance the vulnerability of young athletes to experiences of maltreatment were lacking in many initiatives, except in the case of sexual abuse. In fact, three of the seven initiatives identified characteristics related to sport that may make an athlete vulnerable to sexual abuse, including: travel and overnight trips as a team, access to the locker room and a coach or trainer's frequent access to youth. Some of these initiatives also identified risk factors of individuals that may enhance their vulnerability to sexual abuse, including low self-esteem, unwavering allegiance to the coach and small physical size.

There were references to positions of authority or trust, particularly in reference to sexual and physical abuse, as increasing the vulnerability of athletes to experiences of maltreatment. Generally, references to the use or misuse of power, which is fundamental to all experiences of maltreatment, were lacking. Likewise, there was a relative absence of content related to the effects of a performance outcome or "win-at-all-costs" focus on child athletes' vulnerabilities to maltreatment.

4.5. Evaluations of the Initiatives

The final research question addressed by this study was the extent to which the initiatives had been evaluated empirically; in other words, do data exist to show that the initiatives are meeting their goals? Although the goals varied across the various initiatives, all of them sought to increase awareness and educate members of their communities regarding child maltreatment and protection. A review of the website content indicated that none of the initiatives had been evaluated in terms of the stated outcomes of enhancing awareness and knowledge, nor were there references to other publications sites that contained evaluative data.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that theory and research were not the primary drivers of the development of most of the athlete protection initiatives. Instead, the majority of these initiatives emerged in response to high-profile media instances of athlete abuse and, more specifically, cases pertaining to the sexual abuse of athletes by their coaches. Such cases ignited fear and condemnation, as well as a passion for

doing something about the problem of sexual abuse in sport. This passion, however, was not matched with empiricism. In fact, research on relational maltreatment in sport was fairly non-existent until these cases emerged. Although concerns about competitive sport for children had been raised long before this time, empirical research had not focused specifically on the maltreatment of athletes by their coaches. It appears, therefore, that these publicized cases of sexual abuse were stimulants for research on athlete maltreatment, as well as the development of athlete protection measures. It should be noted, however, that a wealth of information on maltreatment existed in the child development and social work literature at the time of these publicized cases that was not drawn upon in the development of the initiatives in sport, thus highlighting the prevailing ideology in sport of maintaining self-regulation and autonomy from the broader society.

Although cases of sexual abuse accounted for the origins of most of the initiatives, the content of all of the websites extended to include physical and emotional abuse in addition to sexual abuse (exclusive of the initiative that intentionally addresses sexual abuse only). However, the findings indicated that neglect was largely overlooked by most of the initiatives. Additionally, even when it was included, it was addressed in a very broad manner rather than distinguishing between the various forms of neglect (e.g., physical, educational, social). Such a narrow scope means that inadequate attention is devoted to the special needs of children, the developmental importance of relationships outside of the sport environment and the prioritizing of educational needs over sport training, as some examples. Given previously documented concerns about the over-emphasis on performance outcomes at the expense of the holistic development of children in sport [8], recommendations are made to expand upon content on neglect within these initiatives.

David [22] wrote almost 10 years ago that the child protection in sport measures established in Canada, the U.S. and Australia focused heavily on sexual abuse and tended to neglect other forms of maltreatment. It is encouraging to see that the initiatives have expanded the focus to include physical and emotional abuse, but clearly, more work needs to be done in regards to neglect. The absence of attention on neglect as a form of relational maltreatment in sport within these initiatives is also seen in the research; to-date, there is a paucity of empirical work that addresses the neglect of athlete's needs within the coach-athlete relationship. Even in the general child abuse literature, calls have been made for increased attention to neglect, particularly emotional neglect [32].

While it is encouraging to see that the initiatives identified, defined and provided examples of all of sexual, physical and emotional abuse, accuracy and specificity could be enhanced by drawing upon relevant research. For example, some initiatives used examples of sexual abuse interchangeably with physical abuse. Further, both physical and sexual abuse were seldom categorized into contact and non-contact forms, and emotional abuse was not differentiated into verbal and non-verbal forms. Failure to make such distinctions can narrow the scope of behaviors under consideration, potentially excluding some important abusive behaviors and, thus, leaving athletes vulnerable.

Of particular significance is the lack of attention to the notion of power, which is central to understanding critical relationships and maltreatment [4,22,33]. It may in fact be unreasonable to assume that researchers and practitioners can identify an exhaustive list of potentially abusive behaviors; however, it could be argued that if coaches understand the bases of the power they have over children and are cognizant of the ways in which this power can be used and misused, child protection would be enhanced.

Similarly, other aspects of the sport context that make it an environment ripe for the abuse of children were neglected in the content of the initiatives' websites. In spite of a plethora of literature on contextual influences on children's vulnerability to abuse in sport, such as the win-at-all-costs approach, these were largely overlooked in the content. Enhancing the focus on contextual influences would have the effect of shifting attention for prevention and intervention from the individual to the cultural level. Taken together, the findings indicate that the content of the various initiatives is loosely associated with scholarly work in the area.

In some countries, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, attempts have been made to address the problems inherent with the self-regulated nature of sport by bringing athlete protection into the wider legal and social welfare system. The Child Protection in Sport Unit, for example, is under the auspices of the broader NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children), which has statutory powers that enable it to take action to safeguard children at risk of abuse. The remaining athlete protection initiatives however, are organizationally and functionally separate from general child protection services and, therefore remain insular and less well-equipped to deal with complaints effectively [34]. In Canada, for example, the general child protection agency, the Children's Aid Society, does not typically address child abuse in sport complaints, because it assumes sport has its own independent resolution mechanisms. This, however, ignores the fact that most cases in sport are dealt with by volunteers with limited confidence, abilities and experiences in addressing such concerns. The prevailing ideology within the sport context that it should be autonomous and self-policing has been highly criticized for these reasons. Further, future research should examine sport-specific websites for inclusion of child protection information, as these are the sources parents and athletes would most likely refer to for assistance.

Child protection measures in sport have also been criticized for lacking an integrated approach [4,22]. The initiatives in Canada and the U.S. are examples of a fragmented model with more than one athlete protection initiative, each with their own mission and goals, but separate from broader child protection agencies. On the other hand, progress has been made in the U.K. and Australia with an integrated national strategy and incorporation of sport-related child protection measures with broader child protection agencies.

All of the initiatives aim to reduce harm to children in sport by changing attitudes and behaviors of various stakeholders through awareness-raising and education. However, to-date, none of the initiatives has been evaluated empirically. As such, there is an absence of evidence to indicate whether or not these initiatives in sport have had an impact on the proximal outcomes of altering attitudes and behaviors of those in the community or on the more distal outcome of reducing harm to children. To move the field forward, systematic evaluation is necessary. Those responsible for the initiatives should be concerned about whether the initiatives do what they purport to do. This is especially the case for those initiatives that have compulsory educational modules and are funded by governmental agencies, although accountability should be of primary concern for all. Ideally, accountability would be assured through monitoring and evaluation by neutral, third-party bodies.

Future recommendations for the evaluation of child protection initiatives may include the integration of social and behavioral change theories. As all of the initiatives are intended to influence the attitudes and behaviors of stakeholders within their respective communities, such change theories may form an important theoretical foundation for future program evaluation. One such theory, the

transtheoretical model [35], has been used widely to guide and assess behavior change and could be used to enhance the knowledge base and behavior change process with respect to coaches' conduct and use of power with young athletes. According to this model, effective behavior change occurs when individuals progress from a stage of knowledge acquisition and awareness of the desired behavior, to a stage in which one expresses intent to adopt the new behavior and prepares for the behavior change, to an action stage in which individuals commit to the new behavior in a sustained manner. Future research could assess the extent to which the child protection initiatives in sport affect behavioral change through data collection at each stage of the process.

In addition to theories of behavioral change that address impact at the individual level, social change processes focused on shifting the culture of a community should be implemented. Although all of the initiatives claim to be involved in advocacy endeavors to affect cultural shifts in the ways people understand and address child maltreatment in sport, the findings from this study indicate that the advocacy efforts lack theoretical and empirical grounding. Future work should address ways in which to strengthen the links between research, education and advocacy.

Finally, the initiatives addressed in this study focus almost exclusively on the protection of children from harm rather than the promotion of children's holistic health and wellbeing. As such, one could suggest that the sport context remains removed from the broader society, which has more recently focused on the prioritization of methods to optimize children's overall health and development. Further, with a focus on protection rather than growth, children are potentially viewed as objects in need of protection rather than as individuals with rights to participation and self-determination.

This study, while shedding light on the extent to which theory and research are incorporated into the development and evaluation of child protection in sport measures, is limited to data gathered through websites. It may be that supplementary information on the variables of interest in this study is available through other means of access aside from the website, such as educational workshops or modules or related documents and reports associated with the initiatives. Further, it must be acknowledged that some subjectivity was involved in analyzing the website data. As one of many examples, some website content included general statements related to the inclusion of research and partnerships, but did not specify what these were, nor were links provided for further information. In such cases, we subjectively determined that these criteria were not met, as this information was not available on the website. Similarly, there were many instances in which the content provided was so broad or general that it lacked the specificity required for inclusion in our assessment. The study was also limited to athlete protection initiatives in the English language; future research should advance the international perspective.

In sum, the development and implementation of these athlete protection initiatives are certainly important, but they represent a starting point only. If we are to move beyond the emotionally-charged responses to child maltreatment in sport, we need theoretically-grounded approaches and empirical research data upon which to base child protection measures. Conceptual clarity, as well as content that are congruent with the scholarly literature would facilitate discourse both among and between researchers and practitioners. Further, without monitoring and evaluation, it is unknown whether these initiatives are doing what they purport to do. Consistent with this view, Brackenridge ([4], p. 203) writes that many in sport have "failed to attend to implementation or to the monitoring and evaluation processes by which accountability can be assured." To assure the sport community of transparency and

accountability, evaluation should be conducted through an independent, neutral body. Only when these conditions are met can we gain a better sense of whether or not children in sport are being safeguarded. Perhaps, at that point, we can shift the focus from protection from harm to the advancement of children's holistic health and development through the sport experience.

6. Conclusions

As the focus on child maltreatment extends beyond intra-familial settings, there is growing awareness of occurrences of maltreatment within the sport context. In response to high profile cases of sexual abuse of athletes across several countries in the 1990s, a number of child protection in sport measures were developed and implemented internationally. This study examined seven child protection in sport initiatives with a focus on the extent to which they originated from research, had content that was consistent with scholarly work, and were evaluated empirically.

A web-based analysis indicated that these initiatives were not empirically or theoretically derived for the most part. The findings indicated that while most of the initiatives addressed sexual, emotional and physical abuse, neglect was largely overlooked, and of the information conveyed via the websites, much was inconsistent with scholarly work in the area. Of particular significance was the lack of attention to the notion of power and other contextual influences, which are central to understanding critical relationships and maltreatment. And finally, at the time of this study, none of the initiatives had been evaluated empirically.

Recommendations are made to more closely align research with these initiatives both with respect to their design and their evaluation. The content of these initiatives would benefit from an enhanced focus on the contextual influences on maltreatment; such a focus would shift attention for prevention and intervention from the individual to the cultural level. Additionally, finally, a shift in focus from protecting children from harm to the promotion of their holistic health and development would bring the initiatives used in the sport context closer in line with approaches used in other child-dominated domains.

Author Contributions

Gretchen Kerr, a Full Professor and Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto, conceptualized the study and conducted the majority of the writing. Ashley Stirling, a Lecturer at the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto, conceptualized the study and contributed to the analysis and writing. Ellen MacPherson, a Ph.D. student at the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education at the University of Toronto, collected the data and assisted with the analysis and writing.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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