

Communicating about Child Athlete Wellbeing: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations

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Introduction

Who are child athletes and what do they need to do well? For most members of the US public, this is not an easy question to answer. Because people often don't have much experience with the issue, they rely on narratives of exceptional successes or tabloid-worthy abuse, as well as deeply seated beliefs about children, sports, and society's economic imperatives and demands. As a result, people often come up with a story that is high in contrast, but incomplete at best.

Members of the public think of child athletes as either superhuman prodigies who are destined to succeed athletically, or vulnerable victims exploited by pushy parents. But they can also understand that child athletes, just like other children, need support to thrive. People believe that child athletes who succeed athletically will automatically gain fame and wealth, and that winning competitions is what makes life worth living. But they can also see that the stress of elite training and competition can affect children's mental health and wellbeing. And although the public mainly thinks that child athlete abuse is rare and sensational, not widespread and often hard to detect, it is aware that child athletes can be abused or exploited and believes that it should be stopped.

As a result, people struggle to see children in elite athletics as both children *and* athletes, or to see the need for external supports and programs to ensure child athletes' wellbeing and healthy development. At the same time, there are clear opportunities for communicators to leverage people's more helpful beliefs to tell a richer, fuller story about child athletes and what they need to thrive.

These are just some of the findings that emerged from research the FrameWorks Institute conducted into public perceptions of child athlete wellbeing.* This research is part of a broader project—conducted in partnership with the Oak Foundation—to develop strategies to communicate about and build support for child athlete wellbeing.

* A fuller description of the data and methods behind this research is available as a supplement to this brief.

This brief describes the challenges and opportunities for communication that result from the public's existing understandings of and assumptions about child athlete wellbeing. It also offers preliminary recommendations for responding to these challenges and opportunities, although further research will be needed to build on these findings and to develop the most effective ways of framing child athlete wellbeing.

What Are We Trying to Communicate?

To develop an effective strategy for communicating about child athlete wellbeing, it's necessary to identify a set of key ideas to get across. To do this, FrameWorks researchers conducted interviews and a feedback session with key stakeholders—researchers, advocates, and practitioners—in the field of child protection in elite sports, supplemented with a review of relevant literature. Below, we summarize the key ideas that emerged from this process, which represent the core points that need to be effectively communicated and the solutions that the field wants to build support for through communications.

Who are child athletes?

- Elite child athletes possess a high level of athletic talent, receive intensive training and coaching, and compete in sporting events at the regional, national, and international levels.
- Participating in elite athletics as a child requires intense dedication and investment.
- Elite child athletes are a unique population with complex needs.

What type of risks might children face when participating in elite athletics?

- In elite sports, child athletes are often isolated from important relationships and networks of social support.
- Child athletes are vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation.
- Child athletes are susceptible to injury, overtraining, and burnout.
- Child athletes experience high levels of pressure and psychological stress.

What does it mean to support elite child athletes' wellbeing?

- Prioritizing athletes' needs and rights over the goal of winning.
- Minimizing the risk of injury or psychological harm.
- Ensuring that participation in elite sports is pleasurable and fulfilling for the child.

What needs to happen to better promote the wellbeing of competitive child athletes?

- Implement more rigorous standards for hiring, training, and oversight of sports professionals.
- Educate parents, children, and staff on how to spot signs of abuse and mistreatment.
- Simplify and clarify reporting mechanisms.
- Pass legislation to hold leagues and sports governing bodies accountable for safeguarding children.
- Increase the representation of current and former athletes in policy discussions relating to child athletes.
- Fund research to better understand the scale of challenges facing competitive child athletes.

Challenges and Opportunities

To understand how the public thinks about child athlete wellbeing, FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 one-on-one, two-hour long cognitive interviews with a diverse group of participants. These interviews were analyzed to identify the deep, implicit ways of thinking that members of the public use to think about children in elite sports and the wellbeing of child athletes.

Because these tacit patterns of thinking often grow out systems of power and oppression, our analysis also aims to show how a history of capitalism, discrimination, and racism shapes the public's views on child athletes, whether it is enacted in discourse and thought (e.g., through racial stereotyping about skills and abilities, claims to fame and wealth) or critiqued (e.g., by identifying gender discrimination in elite sports).

Based on this research, we identify both challenges and opportunities that communicators face in getting across the key ideas outlined above. We offer general recommendations about how to respond to the challenges and leverage the opportunities, which communicators can start using right now, with the important caveat that further research is needed to identify specific, evidence-based framing strategies the field can use to move public thinking in the right direction.

Challenges

Challenge #1: The public thinks that children mainly need innate talent and drive to succeed in elite athletics.

Members of the public think that individuals are born with specific traits that destine them to be elite child athletes. They believe that what makes someone an elite child athlete is a combination of innate talent and inner drive, regardless of the external supports they have or don't have. According to this way of thinking, innate talent provides the necessary potential, which is then realized through inner willpower and motivation.

This focus on innate athletic abilities also leads some people to highly problematic thinking about race as a biological or genetic trait, and the idea that specific racial or ethnic groups are predisposed for success in specific sports (e.g., some people assume that Black children are innately better than white children at basketball).

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

People's focus on innate traits makes it harder to see that elite child athletes also need strong external support systems (including sports associations and governing bodies, parents, coaches, trainers, and other staff) to achieve their goals in healthy, positive ways.

The false assumption that race is one of the genetic traits that can destine a child for a career in elite athletics leads to racist thinking about who can become a child athlete and what BIPOC, particularly Black people, are capable (or incapable) of achieving.

How to address this challenge:

Lead with talking about external support systems (i.e., what people currently don't see) rather than talking about innate talent and drive (what they do currently see). For example, describe how a concrete network of parents, coaches, trainers, and sports institutions needs to support child athletes to achieve their goals.

Give concrete examples of what types of support sports associations and institutions provide for elite child athletes and explain how they work. For example, talk about sports associations providing mentoring opportunities and facilities in which child athletes can train and develop their skills.

Challenge #2: The public sees child athletes as either superhuman or victims.

When thinking about child athletes, the public is of two minds. At times, the public thinks that child athletes' innate abilities make them uniquely different from other children—or even from other humans. Participants sometimes went as far as referring to them as extraordinary, superhuman, or comparing them to machines.

At other times, when the public sees child athletes as children first and foremost, they focus on the idea that children are by definition innocent and not equipped to handle the adult levels of stress and responsibility of elite competitions and training. They see child athletes as vulnerable victims who should not be subjected to such adult-like activities, which can only cause severe harm because they're not appropriate for children. People reason this is often due to pushy parents forcing their kids to fulfill their own ambitions.

These opposing views also lead to two different takes on child athletes' health and wellbeing. People believe that superhuman child athletes participating in elite competitions necessarily have incredible physical and mental health, which is assumed to be vastly superior to other children's. On the other hand, when people focus on child athletes' vulnerability and robbed innocence, they assume that children participating in high-level, high-stakes sports competitions will likely experience high levels of stress and harm.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

When people think that child athletes are superhuman—and therefore as more than just children or more than mere humans, it is hard for them to see that child athletes need the same things other children do, such as socialization with other children and support for mental health and development, in addition to the training and supports they receive in their role as athletes. People have a hard time seeing that superhuman children can actually get hurt or might need breaks for their bodies and minds to develop well or to heal.

When people focus on child athletes' vulnerability, they recognize them as children, not adults. But this way of thinking can also reinforce their assumption that it is simply abnormal, or against nature, for children to engage in elite sports. It can also prevent people from seeing that child athletes are not just powerless victims but individuals with agency and rights who, provided the right supports, *can* actually take on the activities and responsibilities associated with their athlete role in positive, developmentally appropriate ways.

How to address this challenge:

Be explicit that child athletes have the same needs as other children, *as well as* needs that are specific to their role as athletes. Be sure to bring up both aspects in tandem to help people see that child athletes are children *and* athletes at the same time.

Focus on the need to support child athletes' development, especially through concrete policies such as training coaches in child development, rather than their vulnerability. This will likely help avoid cueing unproductive thinking about child athletes as powerless victims.

Challenge #3: The public mainly thinks about child athletes in the context of competitions, not training.

When members of the public think about child athletes, they mainly focus on child athletes entering and winning elite competitions. People talk about traveling to and participating in competitions as the main activities in which child athletes engage. Even when there is some recognition that child athletes need to practice in order to compete—including vague ideas of “working out” and “getting up early”—people don’t have a clear sense of what that practice and training entails, or of who and what is needed to make it sustainable for children.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

Because people don’t have a clear sense of what high-level training for children entails, they are unlikely to see the need for investing in coaches’ and trainers’ education and skills, or to support policies to ensure that child athletes can train in ways that support their health and development.

How to address this challenge:

Explain what training involves and what skills and knowledge coaches and trainers need to adequately support child athletes.

Explain how rigorous training supports success in competition by giving child athletes the dedicated space and time to practice and achieve their goals.

Challenge #4: The public thinks that children who go into elite sports become famous and wealthy.

Members of the public believe that child athletes engage in elite training and competition to become rich and famous and take for granted that wealth and public recognition necessarily follow from winning high-level competitions. In other words, people assume that all child athletes follow in the footsteps of famous adult athletes like Serena Williams and LeBron James. When thinking this way, people often think that child athletes' talent and drive are commodities that adults—especially parents—invest in and expect high return from, whether it be to pay for the child's college tuition, help the family's finances, or to get rich themselves.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

When people focus on wealth and fame, they often overlook that engaging in high-level training and competitions provides opportunities for child athletes to build skills that are essential to healthy physical, mental, and cognitive development.

The belief that most child athletes can expect wealth and public recognition not only exaggerates what they can aspire to in reality, but it can also minimize their need for other types of support. If these children are already rich and famous, the logic goes, what more could they need or want in this day and age?

Finally, when people focus on the idea that child athletes can be financially exploited by the adults in their lives, it is often at the expense of thinking about other critical types of abuse (e.g., physical, emotional, sexual).

How to address this challenge:

Explain how engaging in activities that are challenging but attainable is a great way for children and adolescents to build skills and thrive. So, while elite sports practices might be too challenging for other children, they can adequately support skills building and healthy development for child athletes.

Give examples of child athletes who are successful at many different levels of competition without necessarily being rich and famous to counter people's assumption that child athletes are "in it for the money."

Challenge #5: The public typically sees child athlete abuse as rare and sensational.

The public rarely thinks about child athlete abuse. When people do think about abuse, they think of it as uncommon, serial, and so horrific that it is tabloid-worthy. People think about recent national news stories about serial offenders such as Larry Nassar (the “Olympic doctor” or “Michigan State trainer”) and Jerry Sandusky (“Penn State football”). People reason that these newsworthy cases, where the offenders were caught and prosecuted after their cases became famous, are what child athlete abuse typically looks like. They assume that serial abusers are as rare as they are easy to recognize, and often blame parents, who “should’ve known” what was happening to their children. Most coaches, on the other hand, are seen as benevolent figures in children’s lives, acting like substitute parents in an athletic context.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

This sensational view of abuse downplays the risks that child athletes face on a daily basis, as well as the barriers they might face when seeking to report abuse. This surface-level way of thinking makes it hard for people to understand what the causes of child abuse and child sexual abuse are or what might be done to prevent them in the first place.

Moreover, when coaches are viewed as substitute parents with benevolent intentions, this makes it difficult to see that the power dynamics between coaches, child athletes, and their families can facilitate child abuse and child sexual abuse.

How to address this challenge:

State the scope of the problem of child abuse and child sexual abuse in elite sports and always offer effective solutions. Be clear about what abuse looks like, how frequent it is among child athletes, and how it starts (e.g., through grooming behaviors and one-on-one time with staff). Always pair this description with effective ways to prevent and address abuse through things like education, rigorous hiring standards, and legislation.

Give examples of solutions that go beyond hotlines and talk therapy. For example, talk about the need for legislation to hold leagues and sports governing bodies accountable for safeguarding children, and the need for institutional supports to facilitate disclosing abuse.

Challenge #6: When thinking about solutions, the public largely focuses on parents and coaches and pays little attention to institutions.

According to the public, parents and coaches are ultimately responsible for child athletes' success and wellbeing. As a result, people assume that changing the behavior of individual parents and coaches is the primary way to help child athletes win competitions and generally "do well" in life. They think that pushy parents and mean coaches need to be restrained, and that supportive parents and benevolent coaches should listen to children and let "kids be kids" (that is, not let them participate in elite competitions that are thought to require adult roles and responsibilities).

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* to get key points across:

When people focus on parents' and coaches' roles only, they fail to see that child athletes' wellbeing also depends on systemic and institutional supports, such as legislation to protect and safeguard child athletes from abuse.

How to address this challenge:

Give concrete examples of solutions that don't just apply to parents and coaches and explain how they would make a difference. For example, talk about the need for institutions to implement rigorous standards for hiring, training, and oversight of coaches, trainers, and other sports staff, including hiring safeguarding officers whose job it is to check on and hold accountable staff and leadership. This is likely to broaden the range of solutions people are willing to support.

Challenge + Opportunity #1: While people sometimes recognize that elite sports can harm children's mental health, the issue is mostly an afterthought.

People tend to recognize that mental health is a component of children's overall health. They can sometimes see that participating in elite sports can be stressful for child athletes, who face intense pressure to perform well in their sport, and that this can be detrimental to their mental health and emotional state.

However, mental health and emotional satisfaction are much less top of mind for people thinking about child athletes than winning in competition. People assume that child athletes need to win competitions to be fulfilled and do well in life, because this is how they are thought to accomplish their natural destiny. Mental and emotional health, on the other hand, are seen as secondary, optional sources of wellbeing that are nice to have, but not essential.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *harder* and *easier* to get key points across:

This focus on winning competitions tends to eclipse the idea that child athletes' mental health and wellbeing should always be a key priority.

People's awareness that elite sports are very stressful for children can be leveraged to build understanding of the importance of mental health and wellbeing for child athletes. However, people will also need a deeper understanding of the emotional supports that child athletes need to thrive to prevent them from becoming fatalistic about the issue.

How to address this challenge and take advantage of this opportunity:

Talk about child athletes' mental health and wellbeing at least as much as winning and competitions. This is likely to help shift people's thinking to recognize the importance of mental health and wellbeing in child athletes' lives.

Explain how child athletes' mental health can be supported. For example, talk about the safeguarding policies and programs that aim to create safe sporting environments for child athletes, such as employing safeguarding officers to check on child athletes' wellbeing, and explain how they help.

Challenge + Opportunity #2: The public recognizes that children need resources to become elite athletes, but people mostly think about individual family resources.

Members of the public can see that child athletes require a lot of time and money for travel, equipment, facilities, and access to sports leagues. However, people often assume that individual family finances fundamentally shape whether a child has access to the resources they need to become an elite athlete. People think that parents are primarily responsible for paying for their child's equipment, access to facilities, training, and travel, and that parents should be willing to sacrifice their own needs to support their child's. People then often conclude that coming from a financially well-off family greatly increases the likelihood of becoming a successful child athlete.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* and *harder* to get key points across:

The fact the people are thinking about child athletes' need for resources can provide an opening to make a case for broader policies and programs that provide access to elite athletics for children even when their parents can't afford it. However, because people place such a heavy focus on individual family finances, they are not likely to see the need for larger systems and structures to support child athletes.

When people assume that the wealthier a child's family, the more likely they are to succeed in elite sports, issues of diversity and inclusion don't come up. Since elite sports are thought to be primarily for children from wealthier families, the issues that child athletes from less privileged backgrounds might be facing are largely off the radar for the public when thinking in this way.

How to take advantage of this opportunity and address this challenge:

Focus on institutional and community resources at least as often as family resources. Give examples of the ways in which sports leagues, associations, governing bodies, and the government provide resources for practice, training, and competition.

Give concrete examples of systemic solutions and explain how they would work. For example, talk about policies and programs that support child athletes from low-income backgrounds and the need for representation of former child athletes from low-income backgrounds in sports governance bodies and policy discussions.

Opportunities

Opportunity #1: The public has some sense that child athletes, just like all children, need support to thrive.

At a surface level, people understand that it is important to support child athletes' development by providing for basic needs like good nutrition, sleep, and relaxation that are appropriate for children of their age group. People are also concerned about child athletes being more isolated from their peers than other children, which they think makes it harder for child athletes to play and bond with other children as much as they need to thrive.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across:

When people can see that child athletes, like other children, need support to thrive physically, mentally, and emotionally, they get one step closer to thinking of child athletes as children *and* athletes. They become more likely to support policies and programs aimed at providing child athletes with what they need as children *and* athletes, for instance, to facilitate socialization with peers inside and outside of their athletic circle.

How to take advantage of this opportunity:

Identify the key aspects of development (e.g., brain development, emotional development) for which child athletes need support like any other child, to concretize and expand people's existing understandings.

Explain how each aspect of child and adolescent development can best be supported in the context of elite athletics.

Opportunity #2: The public is aware that child athletes can face exploitation and abuse.

Members of the public are able to see that child athletes can experience exploitation and abuse from the adults in their lives, especially parents and occasionally coaches. People focus on how parents and coaches can financially exploit child athletes, turning them into "commodities" to make money through their sport. People think that coaches mainly hurt child athletes through verbal abuse (e.g., yelling at them to push them further), and occasionally refer to coaches having control or power over children, although this issue is only vaguely defined. Some people see how a lack of parental supervision over coaches' interactions with child athletes can be risky and result in potential abuse, though it is rarely clear what that means concretely.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across:

When people are able to recognize that exploitation and abuse are risks that child athletes face in their role, it opens the door for them to hear more about and better grasp the *specific* risks of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse that child athletes face from coaches, trainers, and other support staff through particular activities and behaviors (e.g., one-on-one meetings with children and through grooming behaviors).

How to take advantage of this opportunity:

Explain how power dynamics between coaches, children, and families can facilitate abuse. For example, talk about how coaches can use their professional status or charisma to establish themselves as trusted, essential members of a family's circle, which not only makes it easier for them to gain one-on-one time with child athletes, but also makes it harder for children to report abuse when it happens.

Give examples of the types of abuse, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, that child athletes can face in addition to financial exploitation.

Provide solutions to change power dynamics and prevent and address abuse and explain how they would work. For example, talk about how simplifying and clarifying reporting mechanisms would make it easier for child athletes to disclose cases of abuse.

Opportunity #3: Some members of the public recognize that discrimination makes it harder for children from historically oppressed groups to engage in elite athletics.

Some interview participants were able to see the role that privilege plays in elite sports. They recognized that discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, gender, or gender identity can prevent some children from engaging in elite sports more than others from more privileged backgrounds. A number of barriers to participation were mentioned in the interviews, including lack of financial support for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds; discouragement from participating in sports that are typically associated with maleness or whiteness only (e.g., girls actively discouraged from playing football; Black children actively discouraged from playing golf); intolerance from peers and fans (e.g., BIPOC child athletes being bullied because of their race/ethnicity or gender identity); and a lack of appropriate accommodations for a diversity of needs (e.g., trans children not having access to the appropriate locker room facilities). BIPOC interview participants in particular were often explicit and knowledgeable about the effects of racial discrimination on children's access to elite athletics.

How this pattern of thinking makes it *easier* to get key points across:

When discrimination is already a salient issue for people, they are more likely to support policies and programs that seek to increase diversity in elite child athletics. However, people will also need to know what can be done concretely to improve access to elite sports for children from historically oppressed groups to prevent them from concluding that such disparities are unavoidable, or just the way things are, in American society.

How to take advantage of this opportunity:

Be explicit about the role that systemic oppression and discrimination play in elite sports. This will likely help create space to discuss these issues in the context of elite sports and take advantage of the opening that this type of public thinking has created.

Use concrete examples of what can be done to address discrimination and oppression in elite sports. For example, talk about the need for diversity, equity, and inclusion training in sports institutions and among sports staff, and the need for representation of former child athletes from diverse backgrounds and identities in sports governing bodies and institutions. Explain how each solution will help support child athletes from diverse backgrounds and identities.

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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