Understanding Field Portrayals of Child Athlete Abuse and Wellbeing: A Field Frame Analysis

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Jenn Nichols, PhD, Director of Research Interpretation and Application
Mia Aassar, Research Analyst

FRAME WORKS

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Contents

Introduction

The high-profile cases of Jerry Sandusky at Pennsylvania State University and Larry Nassar at Michigan State University in the past decade helped to bring widespread attention to the issue of child athlete abuse. The shocking details of these cases—the number of victims, the length of time the abuse persisted, the subsequent discovery that many powerful people knowingly covered up these men's crimes—led to tremendous public outrage and may have helped to fuel the growth of movements against sexual violence and harassment such as #MeToo and #TimesUp.

The resulting attention may have sped progress on abuse prevention efforts, but the now-synonymous association of Nassar and Sandusky with the issue of child athlete abuse creates communications challenges for advocates in the field. For instance, these cases involved sexual abuse, but child athlete abuse covers a range of behaviors. These men enjoyed significant status and prestige, but abuse is not confined to sports' upper echelons. They exploited their authority over young athletes, but they were aided and abetted by lax reporting practices, structural inequities, and environments that enabled that exploitation. Their actions cast a long shadow over the coaching profession, but coaches and other child sports professionals belong to a workforce with an important role to play in children's health and wellbeing. They will long be symbols of the worst in youth sports, but abuse prevention advocates are fighting to preserve and promote what's best about youth sports.

How are organizations with a mission to prevent child athlete abuse responding to the limitations and contradictions of this entrenched association? What can they do to ensure their own messages and missions aren't hindered by it?

This report offers an analysis of the framing strategies currently being used by the child athlete abuse prevention field to communicate with the public, media, and policymakers about abuse in children's sports. We identify the field's key communications patterns and habits, evaluate their likely effect on public thinking and conversations about the issue, and recommend strategies that communicators can adopt in order to strengthen their messages' efficacy.

This field frame analysis has been produced as part of a larger research project to survey expert, public, and media discourse on child athlete abuse. Its goal is to identify possible avenues for increasing public understanding of and support for systemic solutions that will increase child athletes' safety and foster their wellbeing.[1] [2]

Research Goals and Approach

This research identifies the storytelling and framing strategies that organizations in the field use to communicate about child athletes. It explores three questions:

1. How does the field frame the issue?
2. How are these frames likely to shape public thinking and understanding?
3. How can the field reframe this issue to expand public understanding?

FrameWorks answered these questions via a multistage process. First, in collaboration with project partners, researchers generated a list of nonprofits and advocates working on and communicating about issues related to child athletes and their wellbeing. This process identified ten relevant organizations. Researchers then sampled public-facing communications materials from each organization's website. These materials, including press releases, "about us" pages, mission statements, and other communications collateral, were selected because they described the organization's work and orientation toward key topics. The final sample consisted of 58 materials across the ten organizations.

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, researchers performed quantitative coding that enumerated important narrative components of each document, such as the characteristics of athletes (e.g., their age, gender, or race), the actors involved in child athlete wellbeing, and so on. Next, researchers used qualitative analysis to identify themes, trends, and patterns of meaning in the data. Finally, the findings from the first two steps were interpreted against the backdrop of the public's deep assumptions and implicit understandings about child athletes, including child athlete wellbeing and abuse identified in prior stages of research.

This three-step process was used to develop a set of communications recommendations: ways in which the field can cue and reinforce productive ways of thinking, amplify the effective frames already in use, and fill in the public's gaps in understanding.

Building a Strong Foundation for Effective Issue Advocacy

Successful issue-framing depends on several factors; chief among them are 1) an effective overall framing strategy that is 2) disseminated widely, consistently, and with fidelity over time. Neither of these factors alone is sufficient to move people's support for addressing a social issue. Most of this report focuses on the first, offering an analysis of the framing strategies currently in use by advocates communicating about child athlete abuse to shape the direction of additional research on how to frame the issue more effectively.

Our analysis, however, has also yielded a key finding relevant to the second factor, effective dissemination. Namely, the organizations communicating about the issue of child athlete abuse are diverse in purpose and limited in number. This was evident in the sample organizations' missions, audiences, and proposed solutions.

— **Missions.** Organizations communicating about child athlete abuse vary widely in their scope and focus. The sample includes an online community blog about children's sports, a nonprofit dedicated to preventing child sexual abuse, one focused on survivors of child athlete sexual abuse, a think tank researching child abuse data and policies, a federally mandated organization that investigates athlete abuse without age limitations, and global human rights organizations with broad issue portfolios. Their diversity of purpose affects both the depth of their engagement with the issue and what aspects of the issue they focus on.

— **Audiences.** The organizations target audiences ranging from parents and school officials to abuse survivors, national and international athletics organizations, policymakers, and the general public. Different organizations communicating different aspects of the issue to different audiences dilutes the field's messaging.

— **Proposed solutions.** These different audiences receive different messages about the solutions to child athlete abuse. Messages to parents and the general public tend to emphasize personal responsibility and strategies for identifying potential abusers. Messages to policymakers and sports authorities highlight changes to reporting policies and accountability for leaders who fail to enforce zero-tolerance policies. The lack of a unified agenda likely undermines the field's ability to generate broad support for action.

This finding matters because the absence of a well-defined, well-networked advocacy field for this issue contributes to another key finding, that advocacy messaging is sparse and disunited. Frame effects deepen and spread through consistent and repeat exposure, both of which are harder to achieve when a field is small and its members do not communicate a shared vision. Without a shared commitment among organizations and influential voices to advance a common set of ideas, principles, and solutions, communicators will struggle to capture the public's attention, let alone its support.

We start the report with this finding because successful dissemination requires the buy-in of a broad group of communicators. The field's dissemination plan can and should be developed in tandem with the research to develop the overall framing strategy. We recommend, therefore, that the Oak Foundation and its partners take steps to build the field and guide the development of a shared agenda.

In our experience with diverse partners working on an array of social issues, we have found that successful framing efforts share certain attributes, including:

— The existence of a coalition or network among organizations in the field

— Efforts by that coalition or network to discuss and develop a shared platform and adopt consistent messaging about it

— Funding to support the time, labor, and other resources necessary to maintain and expand that coalition

— Outreach to natural allies to build visibility, audiences, and support.[3]

As an example, one potential avenue for building the field, expanding its reach, and increasing support for its work is to intentionally connect the issue to the much broader field of child and adolescent development and wellbeing. (We delve into this idea in greater detail in Recommendation #5.) A networked field of advocates prepared to promote a shared vision across all of their audiences and communications channels will provide a strong foundation for the Oak Foundation's and other stakeholders' efforts to reframe and increase public dialogue about child athlete abuse and its solutions.

Initial Reframing Recommendations

Notwithstanding our observations about the field's existing framing capacity, our analysis revealed important patterns and trends in the messages we sampled. In this section, we discuss the likely effects of these prevalent framing practices and recommend applicable changes that communicators can make to their messages to strengthen their efficacy.

Recommendation #1: Define child athlete abuse clearly, consistently, and more broadly.

What the field is doing:

Few of the materials analyzed take time to establish a definition of child athlete abuse, or child abuse generally: what behaviors constitute abuse and their effects on children's (athletes or not) health and wellbeing. This widespread omission suggests members of the field assume their audiences have a clear understanding of the range of causes, kinds, and consequences of abuse, and therefore that naming the problem is enough to engage people in the issue.

> **Sport has the power to do good, but unfortunately, the alarming number of cases of abuse against athletes being brought to light shows it is also capable of doing incredible harm. The need for action is urgent and pressing.[4]**

A common pattern in field communications is to name abuse as a broad category but then pivot to focus on sexual abuse specifically:

> **Abuse happens in all sports. We think that early-specialization sports (e.g. gymnastics, figure skating) may present greater risks of sexual exploitation, especially those for whom intensive talent ID happens just before or around puberty. However, this hypothesis is only weakly supported by empirical data, since we have access to so few well-archived and detailed cases. We do not yet know whether there is any relationship between other types of abuse and early/late specialization sports.[5]**

[The U.S. Center for SafeSport] is the first and only national organization of its kind, focused on ending all forms of abuse in sport while carrying out its mission of making athlete well-being the centerpiece of our nation's sports culture through abuse prevention, education and accountability. As an independent non-profit headquartered in Denver, CO, the Center provides services to sport entities on abuse prevention techniques, policies and programs and provides a safe, professional and confidential place for individuals to report sexual abuse within the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movements.[6]

In lieu of a definition or explanation of child athlete abuse, other advocacy communications in the sample rely on specific, graphic examples. For example:

[I]n some states child abuse laws go beyond sexual abuse, and cover physical and emotional abuse. A coach who finds out, after telling an athlete that he's a scrawny, non-masculine weakling, that the athlete was so traumatized by the comment that they had to see a psychologist, may be putting himself, and your organization, into hot water.[7]

Japanese athletes from more than 50 sports reported abuses that included being punched in the face, kicked, beaten with objects like bats or bamboo kendo sticks, being deprived of water, choked, whipped with whistles or racquets, and being sexually abused and harassed.[8]

How this is likely to affect public thinking:

Leaving audiences to develop their own working definition of child athlete abuse invites them to reason about the issue from preexisting assumptions that may be counterproductive or simply wrong.

For example, one of the public's main sources of information about child athlete abuse is sensationalized media stories about high-profile cases in elite sports that suggest abuse is extreme and rare, and, more often than not, involves sexual violence.[9] A related assumption that we have found in our research, that financial exploitation is one of the biggest or most common problems child athletes face, reinforces narrow ideas about the risks child athletes face.[10] By focusing people's attention on these sensationalized cases, the field's communications may limit not only people's awareness of other kinds of abuse but also the existence of abuse at all levels of sport. Popular depictions of "tough" coaches and team roughhousing further limit people's understanding by normalizing some types of verbal and physical abuse.

When coupled with the public's general lack of knowledge about the long-term effects abuse may have on children's development, these top-of-mind assumptions about abuse provide little reason for people to be concerned about any but the most flagrant violations of behavior standards in sports. Without exposure to a broader definition of abuse that includes the full scope of abusive behaviors child athletes may be subjected to, such as working athletes too hard, verbal abuse, or bullying by other athletes, people will assume the worst cases are the norm. They will also struggle to perceive the broad array of problems and potential solutions at issue.

A consistent effort by the field to expand people's understanding of what abuse looks like, who experiences it, and how it affects them can counteract these prevalent but limiting beliefs about the extent and salience of child athlete abuse.

What can help:

— Provide clear, concrete explanations of child athlete abuse that demonstrate the breadth of behaviors that experts consider abusive—not only sexual violence, but also behaviors like verbal abuse, overtraining, using food as a punishment or reward, coaches not handling bullying by teammates, and so on.

— Discuss the consequences of these behaviors on children's physical, mental, and social-emotional wellbeing. Assume nothing about audiences' knowledge of the issue.

— Expand messaging to include more discussions of how abuse can happen at all levels of sport, not only in elite athletics. This will help to draw in bystander publics who may not readily see their role in fixing a problem that affects Olympic athletes but who *will* feel responsible for children playing sports in their communities.

— Avoid relying on extreme examples to illustrate the problem. When using examples, vary the types to build audiences' awareness of the scope of the problem across all levels of sport.

— Pair definitions of abuse with a diverse set of solutions to seed support for a multilayered approach to prevention, remediation, and accountability.

Recommendation #2: Focus on the need for systemic change instead of perpetuating "bad apple" or "rot at the top" perceptions.

What the field is doing:

In general, the field's communications frame the problem of child athlete abuse in ways that perpetuate a focus on individuals over systems. Most obviously, communications about high-profile cases such as Larry Nassar's train a spotlight on individual predators and the specific authority figures who fail to stop them. Some materials focus exclusively on coaches as the source of abuse without commentary on the structural and cultural conditions that make abusive behaviors possible.

> **[Game Over: Commission to Protect Youth Athletes] will conduct a thorough public document and media review of every aspect of each institution's and adult's involvement in creating a pathway for Nassar to abuse hundreds of children.[11]**

> **[M]any factors have led to the failure to protect children and the vulnerable from sex abuse, assault, and harassment, such as: false assumptions about the prevalence of abuse and assault, denial, the desire to "get along", the silent bystander effect, and a general preference to protect adults and the organization over children.[12]**

> **Human Rights Watch has spoken to seven survivors of sexual abuse, including men and women's national team players and officials. In recent weeks, several of them said they have been followed or threatened, or have received suspicious offers of assistance, and believe the threats or overtures are efforts to intimidate them from cooperating with judicial authorities or the FIFA investigation of Jean-Bart. As head of Haitian football, Jean-Bart has wielded huge power for decades, and has high-level connections into the government, political, and legal systems.[13]**

> **The USA Swimming scandal is a good case in point, identifying many of the weaknesses the youth sports community has in screening coaches. We really do rely too much on fingerprints. The USA Swimming coaches knew this. They weren't convicted criminals. They just went from job to job, and city to city. They often left one job and moved to another city when people started becoming suspicious.[14]**

Other materials in the sample focus on what parents can do to protect their children, such as pressuring schools and youth sports organizations to adopt better background check processes, putting the onus on individual parents to prevent abuse.

> **Ask these questions to find out if preventing child sexual abuse is a priority for your child's youth-sports program.[15]**

> **One of the best ways to protect children is to surround them with adults who are concerned for every child's welfare and safety. The first step in doing this is to set up a comprehensive screening process for applicants. A comprehensive screening process consists of: Criminal background checks; In-person interviews; Reference checks; Ongoing observation.[16]**

Even those communications focused on structural change, such as the creation of independent oversight agencies, more responsive reporting systems, and the repeal of statutes of limitation discuss these systemic solutions in individual terms. They emphasize, for example, the crooked leadership that necessitates independent oversight or the fear of individual reprisal that prevents many athletes from reporting their experiences of abuse. These framing practices elevate the importance of individual behaviors and individual blame while diverting audiences' attention from the need for large-scale structural change.

> **While a legislative push can be empowering for many survivors, it can also be traumatic when legislators irrationally reject the survivors' pleas for justice.[17]**

> **One of the reasons why it is so hard to deal with cases of abuse is that athletes are not encouraged to have a voice. Just like the many brave athletes who are increasingly speaking up for their rights, sports bodies must show courage to deal with the past, if sport is to be a true force for good.[18]**

How this is likely to affect public thinking:

Ideas prevalent in public thinking about child sports and child athlete abuse reflect our society's deep cultural attachment to the primacy of the individual. For example, members of the public interviewed in our previous research repeatedly expressed their belief that families bear primary responsibility for protecting their children from abusers. They discussed coaches and coaching in terms of individual stereotypes—for instance, the mean coach whose "tough love" ultimately benefits child athletes—rather than in structural terms such as professional credentialing and workforce development. When asked to think of solutions to child athlete

abuse, they leaned into individual resources, such as mental health care access for victims of abuse, and individual behavior change, such as encouraging parents and other involved adults to relieve pressure on young athletes by "letting kids be kids."[19]

Of course, it is important to provide parents or other caregivers with practical information and advice about how to protect child athletes in their care from abuse, but in the context of a public conversation heavily focused on individual actors, the field must take care to make sure this advice is not mistaken for the best or only solutions available. Field communications that highlight, intentionally or not, the individual actors within the systems and structures that govern child sports are likely deepening the public's belief that the solution to child athlete abuse lies in individual blame and responsibility (for instance, villainous coaches and administrators and heroic parents) rather than in policy-based solutions and structural change.

Other framing research has shown that the public tends to believe that problems like crime, abuse, racism, ageism, and other harmful social behaviors are attributable to the "bad apples" that inevitably exist in every society and are, therefore, unpreventable. Advocacy messages that villainize individual perpetrators or other actors can weaken audiences' willingness to believe that abuse can be prevented, not just discovered and punished. They may also strengthen perceptions that all abuse cases are worst-case situations and close the door on conversations about the possibility of rehabilitation for offenders.

What can help:

— Explain the social determinants of abuse to direct attention to the "upstream" work that can be done to prevent abuse and promote child athletes' wellbeing.

— Tell stories about systems, not people. Focus on what must change in sports-related systems and environments to reduce the risk of abuse without dramatizing the problems (for example, through specific stories of corrupt officials or foot-dragging by policymakers).

— People know that children need support. Use this common knowledge as a productive starting point for conversations about the specific *structural* supports that can be developed and implemented to protect and promote child athletes' wellbeing.

— Cast a wide net. Public support can drive systems change, so treat all audiences as potential supporters of structural solutions. Don't limit the effects of a systems-focused message by sharing it only with some audiences.

Recommendation #3: Show how the risk of abuse is an equity issue.

What the field is doing:

On the whole, the field's communications are largely silent about the relationship between occurrences of child athlete abuse and known risk factors such as gender, race, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, despite experts' agreement that children from underrepresented groups are more likely to be targeted for abuse. One reason for this may be the lack of demographic data collected about child athletes who experience abuse, as noted in documents analyzed for this report.

With few exceptions, risk factors for child abuse discussed in the sample typically are not sports-specific or population-specific. Instead, they focus on situational risks, such as a child spending time alone with a coach, and general safeguarding guidelines for children and their families that would apply in many contexts.

> **What may increase a child athlete's vulnerability to sexual abuse? Youth-sports programs, like all youth-serving organizations, give adults access to youth. It is therefore critical that all youth-sports programs develop policies and procedures which help keep youth safe from sexual abuse. This includes developing policies that address potentially risky circumstances, such as overnight trips, changing in locker rooms and travel to practices and games where an athlete may be driven by a coach or volunteer. It also includes increasing awareness of the factors that may increase a child athlete's vulnerability to sexual abuse.[20]**

> **Encourage kids to tell you any time someone's behavior makes them feel unsafe. Even if you feel concerned about what a child has told you, act calm and ask open-ended questions like, 'Tell me more about this.'[21]**

> **If your child tells you that he or she is being harassed, abused, or neglected, experts say you should:**
>
> — **Take them somewhere where they can talk freely.**
>
> — **Listen and believe.**
>
> — **Never ignore even seemingly trivial calls for help.[22]**

One notable exception to the prevalence of general rather than sports-specific discussions of abuse risk factors can be seen in several articles that note how coaches may use their positions of trust and authority over children in their care to victimize them. These articles are examples of the field's use of the "bad apple" narrative discussed in Recommendation #2 above. These communications, however, generally do not make explicit connections between coaches' authority and how child athletes' particular social markers may make them more vulnerable to this authority (for instance, how an abuser may use fear of stigma against LGBT child athletes or use gifts to create a sense of obligation in a child athlete from a low-income background).

> **It also seems from some data that female athletes suffer more harassment outside than inside sport. Yet they experience more harassment from their coaches than pupils or workers experience from teachers or bosses. This is explained by the authoritarian hierarchies in sport—with coaches all-powerful and athletes often lacking a chance to express their own opinions or to challenge sport authority figures.[23]**

> **Child sexual abuse victims are usually emotionally linked with their abusers, and these abusers are often authority figures. Coaches often have a good deal of authority over athletes, and this authority may not be questioned by the athletes or their parents. These factors may contribute to making the sports community a context which is conducive to sexual abuse.[24]**

How this is likely to affect public thinking:

Some members of the public equate participation in sports, especially elite sports, with race and class privilege. In this view, people assume that inequity in sports is primarily about disparities in who has access to athletics programs, equipment, training, and so on. There is also some thinking about the discrimination that child athletes from historically oppressed groups may face while participating in sports, such as racism and homophobia. While this thinking exists, it is not top of mind for the public in general. Instead, the public tends to equate child athletes' success (or not) to personal drive and natural talent, rather than thinking much about structural inequalities.[25]

It is unsurprising, then, that the ways in which social identity markers like race, class, or gender put some child athletes at greater risk of abuse are not top of mind to much of the public.

Absent any narrative to the contrary, members of the public will likely assume that abuse is random and equally likely to happen to any child. They will be less likely to see how policy-based solutions that address disparities and inequities among children can also function as primary prevention solutions to child athlete abuse.

Field communications' overall silence on abuse risk factors is a missed opportunity to expand people's understanding of child athlete abuse as an equity issue and how we can protect children who are most at risk of abuse.

What can help:

— Use concrete examples and cause-and-effect statements to help audiences understand how social problems such as structural sexism or racism, biases such as homophobia, and class disparities can increase some children's risk of abuse.

— Emphasize the role of equity in child athlete abuse by intentionally communicating about diversity and inclusion as a means to reduce risk factors. Explain how collecting more demographic data about child athlete abuse can help child advocates more accurately assess risk factors and develop appropriate solutions.

— Explain how programs and policies that support child athletes from diverse backgrounds and identities can reduce the likelihood of abuse and promote child athletes' wellbeing.

Recommendation #4: Foreground primary prevention solutions.

What the field is doing:

Field communications focus heavily on strengthening remedies for athletes affected by abuse: better reporting procedures, more protections for whistleblowers, greater accountability measures for sports governing bodies, swift discipline for perpetrators. These solutions are important but mainly address what should happen to remove athletes from further harm once abuse occurs and hold adults accountable. They are preventive only to the degree that better oversight and zero-tolerance policies may act as deterrents for would-be abusers.

> **You should create and implement formal systems of children's rights and safeguarding compliance even where there is limited legislative or cultural pressure for you to do so. This should include clear grievance and remedy mechanisms. Creating children's rights and/or safeguarding systems can be daunting. FIFA has recently created a Child Safeguarding Toolkit for Member Associations: FIFA Guardians, that also incorporates the protection and realization of children's rights through the lens of the UNCRC.[26]**

Human Rights Watch's main recommendation is that the country set up a Japan Center for Safe Sport, an independent administrative body tasked with addressing child abuse in Japanese sport to ensure reporting and tracking of abuse complaints, establish meaningful remedies for athletes and parents, and deter child abuse by identifying and decertifying abusive coaches.[27]

Sexual abuse in sports is a problem that is not going to go away, anymore [sic] than sexual predators are always going to be a problem in the larger society. But being pro-active can help. Parents owe their children and the teammates of their children no less.[28]

Primary prevention solutions, such as efforts to change sports culture, equity measures to reduce risk factors for specific populations, higher professional standards and training for the coaching field, and strengthening child protection guidelines, are largely absent from advocacy materials. When mentioned, few details are offered. To the extent that field communications discuss primary prevention, they focus on education and awareness and on changes to background checks and hiring procedures in order to improve decisionmakers' ability to identify coaches with prior histories of abuse. Parents and school or other youth-serving officials are the primary audience for messages that discuss these types of solutions, in which safeguarding is characterized as something individuals can "do," rather than as a system of laws, policies, and regulations.

Used by U.S. Olympic and Paralympic sports and completed by over 520,000 individuals since 2017, the Center's comprehensive online and in-person training enables participants to recognize, prevent, and respond to all forms of abuse and covers topics such as mandatory reporting and sexual, emotional, and physical abuse awareness education.[29]

Youth sports leaders can establish policies to help keep athletes safe from abusers. Those who would abuse children tend to avoid organizations that have a visible policy and action plan to protect kids and report suspected abuse. This document, along with the accompanying videos at www.kidpower.org/youth-sports/, is designed to give you practical ways to discourage child predators from engaging in your organization.[30]

How this is likely to affect public thinking:

The public's widely shared fatalism about most social issues means makes it easy for audiences to think about remedial solutions—how to clean up or fix catastrophes that have happened. Efforts that successfully prevent problems from occurring, however, are typically much less visible, and therefore less top of mind. The weak attention paid to primary prevention solutions in field communications is a missed opportunity to correct people's perceptions that it is difficult, if not impossible, to prevent abuse in the first place.

In previous research, members of the public occasionally cited stronger child protection laws and regulations in sports as potential solutions but held only vague conceptions of what those improvements might entail and how they would work. More commonly cited solutions were individual in nature, such as reducing children's risk by discouraging parents from prioritizing ambition over safety, and tilted toward response rather than prevention, such as increasing access to mental health services for victims of abuse, training parents to recognize the signs of abuse, and bringing perpetrators to justice.[31]

To increase public support for the full spectrum of actions that can help to keep child athletes safe from abuse, field communications should strive to broaden people's knowledge of the types of solutions that exist and how each can contribute to preventing abuse.

What can help:

— When discussing solutions, give primary prevention the spotlight. The public is more familiar with solutions related to background checks, reporting, and accountability. Consider devoting more communications real estate to explaining less familiar solutions to expand people's sense of what solutions exist.

— One reason that people zero in on individual-level solutions is that they simply seem more feasible. To counteract skepticism or fatalism about large-scale preventive solutions, such as child protection policies, workforce development, or culture change efforts, take time not only to name them but also to explain how they would work.

Recommendation #5: Expand the story to include discussion of the promotion of child wellbeing and healthy development (not just prevention of harm).

What the field is doing:

Across the organizations included in this analysis, a majority of communications narrowly frame child athlete abuse as a matter of responding to, reducing, or preventing harm to child athletes.

While the materials analyzed include occasional nods to the positive impacts of participation in sports, these references appear mainly as leads or concluding thoughts, rather than as a framing strategy that positions the prevention of child athlete abuse as a component of the larger project of ensuring child athletes' wellbeing and healthy development.

Sport can contribute to positive youth development and to building life skills. Moreover, it is widely perceived that sport can help to steer young people away from risky behaviors such as youth in contact with the law and aggressive and violent behaviors by strengthening social bonds with positive actors. However, the perception that sport is only a force for good for children has been challenged. Sport can also bring risks such as violence, exploitation, and abuse[.][32]

Youth-serving organizations offer a variety of vital services for children and their families, from scholastic improvement to sports programs. Although each organization may have a different mission, they all share a common goal: providing safe and healthy environments in which youth may learn, play and grow. The key to achieving this goal is the consistent implementation of comprehensive policies and procedures. Nowhere is this more critical than when working to protect youth from sexual abuse and exploitation.[33]

Sport has the power to be a uniting force for good in society in ways little else can. By harnessing this power and acting collectively, the diversity of actors involved in the world of sport have the potential to deliver concrete impacts for those affected by sport.[34]

More broadly, the field's communications seldom contextualize sport itself within the larger framework of children's lives and their cognitive and physical development, educational outcomes, social-emotional skill-building, community membership, and exposure to the social determinants of health. This narrow framing of the issue shortchanges the field's contributions and connections to the broader child and youth development sector and may contribute to perceptions that child athlete abuse is a "niche issue" that affects only some parts of society.

This framing also obscures the important role that coaches, assistant coaches, trainers, sports medicine practitioners, and other child sports professionals play in fostering the long-term health and wellbeing of millions of children—as educators, mentors, caregivers, and role models. Instead, the field's communications generally characterize members of the child sports workforce in two ways: as a potential threat to be carefully vetted and watched, or as the front-line defense in protecting child athletes from predatory colleagues. Scant attention is paid to the skills, training, and knowledge that the coaching workforce needs to support child athletes' whole wellbeing.

How this is likely to affect public thinking:

Offered primarily stories about the potential harm that may befall child athletes as a result of their potential exposure to abuse, audiences' risk-benefit analysis may inaccurately favor keeping children out of certain sports as an appropriate preventive solution.

FrameWorks' research has found that the public holds only a basic understanding of the positive impacts of sports, such as the importance of exercise and the opportunity to develop social skills through team sports. That understanding coexists with the public's strong belief that childhood is a time in life that should be fun and worry-free. Field communications that do not balance discussions of athlete abuse with reminders of the developmental benefits of sports at all levels may feed perceptions that sports, and elite sports in particular, rob children of their childhood and carry more risk than benefits. Without a strong appreciation for the significant value of sports in children's lives, audiences are less likely to see the need to invest any significant resources into addressing the problems within children's sports.

At the same time, the public also believes that child athlete abuse is both extreme and rare, an assumption reinforced by the tendency of the media and the field to focus on shocking, high-profile cases (see Recommendation #1 above). Reasoning from either of these perspectives—that the risk outweighs the benefits or that there isn't much risk to most children—may lead people to the same conclusion: There is no urgency to act.

By framing the problem of child athlete abuse as an obstacle to the rich developmental and health outcomes that children's safe participation in sports can offer, the field's communications can elevate both the salience of the issue and the benefits of collective action to prevent abuse. This strategy also may help expand the field's reach and move its work forward by forging connections to the larger field of child development and wellbeing, and thus to that much larger field's resources and professional and public audiences.

What can help:

— Tap into and expand on the public's general understanding of the physical and mental benefits of sports.

— Offer concrete examples of the ways sports participation contributes to and can be integrated into children's learning and development to build appreciation for the important role sports play in children's wellbeing.

— Be explicit about coaches' role in supporting child athletes' healthy development, not just their athletic ability. Show how equipping them with the right tools and skills can increase the benefits of children's participation in sports.

Conclusion

Strategic framing is both a cognitive and a social exercise. Cognitive because it is about intentionally guiding people's attention to certain aspects of an issue over others to help them see the issue—its salience, causes, consequences, and solutions—from an angle that inspires their support and will to act. Social because its effectiveness in shifting public discourse depends in large part on the success of a frame's dissemination, or how many people's attention is shifted in this way and for how long.

Our analysis of field communications about child athlete abuse indicates opportunities on both of these fronts. In terms of directing people's thinking in more productive directions, the field's communications would benefit from filling in the public's knowledge gaps by intentionally choosing systems stories over sensationalism and providing a clear and more broadly encompassing definition of abuse. By attending explicitly in its messaging to the equity issues that compound the risk of abuse for some child athletes, the field can find new allies among advocates who are committed to preventing and eradicating social disparities, wherever they occur. And by voicing an inspirational vision of the tremendous social benefits of child athletics at all levels when free from the specter of abuse, the field can advance a gain-based model for action that can make prevention-based solutions as much a part of the discussion as after-the-fact accountability.

These recommended shifts in framing may also aid in the broader dissemination of the field's messages by closely connecting the work of promoting child athletes' wellbeing to other fields of practice and policy concerned with children's healthy development. A more expansive frame can help invite new audiences, new allies, and new resources into the effort to ensure that children's sports provide not just a safe but an invaluable developmental experience for all youth who choose to participate in them.

Endnotes

1 Miller, T. L., L'Hôte, E., & Aassar, M. (2021). *Communicating about Child Athlete Wellbeing: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations* A FrameWorks Strategic Brief. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

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