

A New Narrative about Elite Child Athletes

Reframing Wellbeing and Abuse Prevention

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WORKS**

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Introduction

Over the past few years, the discourse around elite child athletes in the US has centered on high-profile cases of abuse. The media has largely sensationalized and individualized the issue, portraying irredeemable individual perpetrators instead of talking about the role that broader systems and institutions can and should play in addressing *and* preventing abuse.¹ These sensationalized stories about elite child athlete abuse in the media tend to reinforce the US public's fatalistic thinking that child abuse is unpreventable, due to an existing cultural mindset that "evil" will always exist.

At the same time, the messaging that organizations working to support elite child athletes have used has, at times, unintentionally reinforced unproductive ideas. For example, the field's focus on individual "bad apples"² can make it difficult to build public understanding of and support for reform of sports institutions at the systemic level.

Moreover, both media and field discourse has focused almost exclusively on abuse that's already occurred, which hasn't left much space to talk about what needs to happen to *prevent* elite child athlete abuse and support their wellbeing. As a result, the public relies on their existing cultural mindsets about elite child athletes either as extremely vulnerable or superhumanly strong, which leads people to assume either that children should never compete in elite athletics, or that they are so extraordinary they don't need support to develop well.³

Communicators and advocates working to improve the lives of elite child athletes need to expand the story of elite child athletes to talk about abuse prevention *and* wellbeing. Those working in organizations focused on elite child athletics, sports and human rights, and those with a mission to prevent elite child athlete abuse need to include a discussion of how elite child athletes' wellbeing can be supported, as well as talk about what abuse of elite child athletes looks like, how the risks of abuse are an equity issue, and how abuse can be prevented with the right systemic support.

The recommendations in this brief are designed to give communicators and advocates ways to communicate about elite child athlete abuse prevention and wellbeing more effectively. The recommendations presented here represent a narrative shift – from talking about abuse after it's occurred to talking about abuse prevention *and* wellbeing of elite child athletes. We've identified specific framing recommendations to achieve this narrative shift. Some recommendations are specifically meant to talk about abuse prevention, others are specifically meant to talk about wellbeing, and one recommendation is designed to talk about both at the same time:

How to talk about abuse prevention:

- **Recommendation #1:** Talk about abuse prevention as a societal value, and institutional accountability as a way to uphold that value.
- **Recommendation #2:** Tell stories about how sports institutions can prevent the abuse of elite child athletes from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

How to talk about abuse prevention and wellbeing:

- **Recommendation #3:** Use safeguarding officers as examples of what preventing abuse *and* supporting wellbeing looks like.

How to talk about wellbeing:

- **Recommendation #4:** Talk about what elite child athletes need from sports institutions to develop well, without comparing them to other children.
- **Recommendation #5:** Talk about elite child athletes' wellbeing as a matter of common sense.

The communications strategies described below are based on empirical research undertaken by the FrameWorks Institute, in collaboration with the Oak Foundation, from 2019-2023. A detailed description of the methods of this research can be found as a supplement to this brief. This narrative shift to talk about abuse prevention *and* wellbeing is designed to help communicators and advocates talk about how sports institutions can prevent abuse and promote wellbeing, overcoming existing unproductive cultural mindsets and leveraging productive ones about elite child athletes and their wellbeing.

What are cultural mindsets?

Cultural mindsets (or mindsets) are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we understand the world and how we make decisions. The mindsets we hold can normalize or problematize aspects of the existing social order. For example, a mindset rooted in individualism makes public policies that support the community good seem unnecessary and misguided. Individualism focuses our attention on measures that help individual people make better decisions (for example, health education) and draws our attention away from the ways that broader structures and systems affect our lives (for example, the ways that housing affordability, toxins in our water, or access to quality food affect our health).

Cultural mindsets are highly durable. They emerge from and are tied to cultural and social practices and institutions with deep historical roots. At the same time, in moments of social upheaval, mindsets can be pushed into flux and become destabilized, leading to fairly rapid changes in thinking.

It's also important to acknowledge that we all have multiple mindsets that we can use to think about a given issue. For example, while Americans often think individualistically, we also have access to more ecological and systemic mindsets. When these mindsets are active, they bring into view social systems and the ways that environments shape outcomes alongside individual choices.

What does it mean for a mindset to shift?

Mindsets can shift in multiple ways. They can become more or less dominant over time (for example, mindsets about the power of the free market became more dominant in the second half of the 20th century while mindsets around the value of collective labor action grew weaker). The boundaries of a mindset can also stretch as people apply existing ways of thinking to make sense of new realities (for example, the contours of established mindsets about marriage have stretched to encompass same-sex marriage). And circumstances can introduce entirely new ways of thinking, as was the case in the mid-20th century, when mindsets about the dangers of smoking emerged and the malfeasance of tobacco companies took hold.

How does cultural mindsets research differ from public opinion research?

Public opinion research examines the explicit attitudes and preferences that people hold on specific issues. Cultural mindset research explores the deeper, underlying ways of thinking that shape and explain these patterns in public opinion. Where public opinion research examines *what* people think, cultural mindset research examines *how* people think. For example, public opinion research might demonstrate that people support health education programs more than they support policies that help with access to healthy housing. Cultural mindsets research explains why this is, revealing the role that the mindsets of health individualism and housing market naturalism play in driving these opinions and preferences.

For more on cultural mindsets and mindset shifts, see [*Mindset Shifts: What Are They? Why Do They Matter? How Do They Happen?*](#)

Recommendations

How to talk about abuse prevention

RECOMMENDATION #1

Talk about abuse prevention as a societal value, and institutional accountability as a way to uphold that value.

What this is:

- Talk about abuse prevention as an aspiration – something we, as a society, want to achieve and uphold
- Pair the Abuse Prevention value with a description of how institutions can and should be held accountable to prevent abuse
- Employ an urgent tone to talk about abuse prevention – that sports institutions need to do something *now* to prevent abuse – without sensationalizing the issue
- Provide specific descriptions of the types of things that institutions can and should do to prevent abuse

Why this works:

Members of the public are largely fatalistic about the possibility of preventing child abuse because they assume that irredeemably “bad” people will always exist and are incapable of rehabilitation. Additionally, people tend to assume that abuse prevention only happens at the individual level, and they reason that individual parents and children are solely responsible for preventing abuse.⁴ To overcome fatalism and individualistic thinking among the public, it’s necessary to foreground abuse prevention as a societal value. This means framing abuse prevention as something that our society aspires to and wants to uphold. Talking about prevention as a value that we all aspire to is easy for people to get behind and helps steer the conversation away from fatalistic ideas about prevention. In our research, we found that the prevention value increased a sense of collective efficacy that we all have a stake in making sure abuse is prevented in elite child athletics. Talking about abuse prevention as a value we all aspire to also helped build support for institutional policy change to prevent abuse, such as the implementation of safeguarding officers, improving health and safety standards, requiring comprehensive background checks, and imposing fines on sports institutions who cover up or ignore accusations of abuse.⁵

When using the Abuse Prevention value, be sure to combine it with the following framing elements:

- **An urgent tone.** Using an urgent tone to talk about the abuse prevention value is helpful, so that the framing doesn’t come off as flippant or unrealistic. However, that sense of urgency should be balanced with a description of concrete systemic solutions to avoid sensationalizing the issue or triggering fatalism.

- **An explanation of what institutions need to do differently to be held accountable.** Pairing abuse prevention as a value that society aspires to with an explanation of what institutions need to do differently to prevent abuse helps people think about systemic solutions. Talking about institutional accountability or reform on its own, without pairing it with the abuse prevention value, can trigger an undercurrent of fatalism that the public has about the possibility of large-scale systemic change. However, talking about institutional accountability to uphold the value of preventing abuse to which society aspires helps overcome this fatalism. This combination of framing elements is the winning combination to shift public thinking in a productive direction.

What this looks like:

Example #1:

We can all be a part in preventing harm to elite child athletes before it happens, but sports institutions play an important role. Sports institutions can make sure that their elite child athletes are physically and mentally well, feel safe with coaches and staff, and enjoy their sport. We can all hold sports institutions accountable for preventing harm and making sure that elite child athletes can thrive in their sport and in their lives.

Example #2:

Sports institutions can prevent abuse of elite child athletes. They can implement more rigorous hiring practices of coaches and sports staff, create training and practice schedules that support the needs of elite child athletes, and hire safeguarding officers who are responsible for preventing abuse and ensuring the wellbeing of elite child athletes.

Talk about accountability of institutions rather than of bad actors.

Focusing on how sports institutions need to be held accountable and describing the things they can and should do to prevent abuse is more useful than focusing on individual bad actors, whether they are the perpetrators of abuse or the “rot at the top” leaders of sports institutions.⁶ This is because talking about how bad actors need to be punished only further entrenches people’s existing fatalism that prevention can never fully be achieved.⁷ Prominent cases of elite child athlete abuse remain top of mind for many people, and referencing bad actors can trigger punitive thinking and overshadow conversations about prevention. It can also overshadow conversations about providing systemic support for those who are at risk of committing child sexual abuse (CSA), which is crucial to preventing CSA, as described in related FrameWorks’ research.⁸ Instead, talk about how sports institutions can and should be held accountable to prevent abuse, along with the framing of abuse prevention as a societal value. The language around institutional accountability doesn’t need to be punitive – you can talk about what institutions need to do differently without overemphasizing punishment (which will likely lead to individualistic and fatalistic thinking about prevention).

Talk about accountability of institutions rather than of bad actors, cont.

Instead of...

For far too long, there's been an epidemic of abuse among elite child athletes, and CEOs of sports institutions have stood by and done nothing as children get abused. This must stop.

Try...

Sports institutions such as the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee have so many tools to prevent abuse of elite child athletes. Hiring safeguarding officers, improving health and safety standards, and comprehensive screening, training, supervision, and background checks for all staff will prevent abuse and ensure the wellbeing of elite child athletes.

Don't use moralizing language when talking about abuse prevention.

Talking about abuse prevention as a societal value that we all aspire to doesn't mean invoking moralizing language about who should be responsible for protecting children. In fact, in our research we found that using a moral responsibility frame to talk about abuse prevention of elite child athletes wasn't effective to build understanding or policy support. In the survey experiment, talking about a moral responsibility to "protect children" or "keep them safe from harm" didn't shift thinking in productive directions, and it made people *less* supportive of institutional or governmental responsibility. Language around "protecting" children tends to lead people to moralize about what individual *parents* (rather than systems and structures) are or aren't doing to keep children safe and evokes a strong cultural mindset that the public has about parents being solely responsible for their children. When this type of thinking about parents as solely responsible is triggered, people tend to blame individual parents when abuse does occur, and they tend to downplay or ignore the larger systems that play a role in preventing abuse.

Therefore, it's best to avoid moralizing language about what society *should* do. Instead, use the abuse prevention value and the explanation of institutional accountability to give people something to aspire to and concrete ways to get there.

Instead of...

We should protect children better than we have been, including in elite sports. Children deserve better than this.

Try...

Preventing abuse of elite child athletes is a top priority for sports institutions. There are so many things they can do to prevent abuse and ensure elite child athletes are doing well in their sport and their lives.

RECOMMENDATION #2**Tell stories about how sports institutions can prevent the abuse of elite child athletes from diverse backgrounds and experiences.****What this is:**

- Tell stories about successful institutional reforms that recognized a potential problem and prevented abuse *before* it occurred
- Include specific descriptions of the types of safeguards that sports institutions put in place to prevent abuse
- Use a matter-of-fact tone to talk about what can be done to prevent abuse of elite child athletes – neither overly optimistic nor pessimistic
- Include stories of elite child athletes' experiences from diverse backgrounds, such as gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability status, among other factors, to highlight the diversity of elite child athletes' experiences and the systemic risk factors of abuse
- Avoid telling sensationalist stories of abuse

Why this works:

The public doesn't have a firm grasp on the prevalence of elite child athlete abuse, nor about the type of abuse that can occur (physical, emotional/mental, and/or sexual abuse). They largely assume that abuse of elite child athletes is a rare and sensational occurrence, a belief that is propagated and reinforced by sensationalized media coverage of high-profile child athlete abuse cases.⁹ Members of the public are also unaware of the risk factors for elite child athlete abuse, such as gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status, which is something that neither the media nor the field typically discusses.¹⁰

Storytelling can help build understanding of these issues among the public. By giving insight into people's experiences, storytelling can help build empathy and understanding of what's at stake and what needs to change. To most effectively tell the story of abuse prevention of elite child athletes, focus on cases where abuse *didn't* occur because sports institutions had put the right safeguards in place to prevent abuse. This type of story is engaging, emotionally compelling, and helps people think and talk productively about institutional change. Presenting the story as a tale of institutional change gone right – that institutions enacted the appropriate reforms to prevent abuse from occurring – helps overcome people's fatalism about the possibility of preventing abuse. It helps build people's understanding that sports institutions are responsible for ensuring the wellbeing of elite child athletes. In our qualitative and quantitative research, the story of sports institutions preventing abuse before it occurred also helped build understanding of what's involved in the healthy development of elite child athletes and helped build understanding of the prevalence of abuse.

In particular, the abuse prevention story should include the following framing elements:

- **Discussion of systemic solutions.** Stories that talk about sports institutions (rather than individuals) making changes to prevent abuse can help overcome individualistic ideas about preventing abuse that are common among the public.
- **A matter-of-fact tone.** Stories that are overly optimistic can seem unrealistic and lead to pushback, while stories that are focused only on what went wrong can unintentionally trigger fatalism. A story that talks about what sports institutions can do to prevent abuse in a matter-of-fact, practical tone is more effective than those that use an overly optimistic or pessimistic tone. This type of matter-of-fact storytelling can also be paired with the Common Sense value, as described in Recommendation #5 below.
- **Description of the diverse experiences of elite child athletes.** Talking about elite child athletes from a range of backgrounds and experiences – including in terms of gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability status, as well as the types of sports they participate in, can help expand the public’s currently limited understanding of elite child athletics. Since the public doesn’t currently have a deep understanding of who elite child athletes are, the types of challenges they face, or of the systemic risk factors of abuse, it’s important to talk about diverse elite child athletes in a variety of sports contexts to expand this understanding.

Don’t shy away from using the term “elite” to describe high-level child athletes.

Members of the public don’t have a clear sense of exactly who elite child athletes are or what they do. They don’t have a ready understanding of what “elite” means, and often default to thinking about children participating in school or local sports events. Using the term “elite” helps specify who you’re talking about. The term “competitive” may muddy people’s understanding of who is being discussed. In our quantitative research, we found that talking about “competitive” child athletes made people think more about competitions at school and local levels rather than about athletes competing at regional, national, and international levels. Meanwhile, the “elite” term evoked thoughts of high-level athletes who engage in more rigorous training and compete at higher levels than other athletes, such as in the Olympics or at national sporting events. Moreover, using the term “elite” in stories about a diverse range of child athletes can help expand people’s understanding of the diversity of backgrounds and experiences that child athletes come from, as well as the specific risk factors of abuse that elite child athletes face based on their socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and/or gender and sexuality.

Avoid telling salacious stories of abuse

The salacious, sensational stories of elite child athlete abuse that are common in the media are not effective at building understanding of what elite child athletes need or support for institutional change to prevent abuse. Instead, these types of stories tend to lead to fatalism about prevention, lead people to blame parents and even survivors of abuse (rather than institutions), and trigger thinking that “damage done is damage done,” rather than helping to build understanding that survivors can heal with the appropriate support.¹¹ It’s best to avoid telling these types of stories, and instead tell stories about how abuse can be prevented with the appropriate institutional changes.

What this looks like:

Example #1:

Christopher’s story shows us how institutional reform can prevent the abuse of elite child athletes. Last year, Christopher qualified to become a member of the National Youth Tennis League. He heard that the head coach was “demanding” and “tough.” The coach was known to yell often and call players names when they didn’t perform well. Although his players often won their matches, lots of them also ended up with injuries. That same year, the National Youth Tennis League hired a **safeguarding officer**, whose job it was to prevent player abuse. They also implemented a code of conduct for all sports staff. The safeguarding officer quickly established athlete check-ins and began to observe training sessions. They realized that the head coach wasn’t complying with the code of conduct. Just a few weeks into the season, a new head coach was appointed.

Because the National Youth Tennis League hired a safeguarding officer and implemented a code of conduct for its staff, **Christopher wasn’t subjected to emotional or physical abuse from his coach**. With good coaches and a safeguarding officer who was actively focused on his safety and wellbeing, Christopher had a great first season, enjoys training, and continues to grow and excel as a tennis player.

This example talks about safeguarding officers as responsible for preventing abuse. It’s also useful to talk about safeguarding officers as able to promote child athlete wellbeing, which is described in the following Recommendation #3.

Focusing on how sports institutions prevented abuse will help overcome fatalism and build support for systemic solutions among the public.

Example #2:

Sports institutions can make changes to their policies and practices to prevent abuse of elite child athletes. Amanda's story is a great example of this. Amanda is an elite youth basketball player. Before Amanda was recruited by the National Youth Basketball League, the League started to conduct mandatory abuse prevention training sessions for all sports staff and risk assessments for all their activities. The risk assessment identified that players on lower incomes weren't always able to afford their own hotel rooms while traveling, which meant they sometimes had to share rooms with other team members or staff. As a result of the assessment, the League made sure all players had their own rooms while traveling. By the time Amanda started, she had the resources she needed to practice, play, and rest well without experiencing uncomfortable situations or abusive behavior. Amanda is now thriving on the basketball team and has what she needs to do well, on and off the court.

Highlighting the different experiences of elite child athletes and what they need – for example, those who come from families on lower incomes – helps build understanding among the public and highlights the distinct needs of elite child athletes to prevent abuse.

How to talk about abuse prevention and wellbeing

RECOMMENDATION #3

Use safeguarding officers as examples of what preventing abuse *and* supporting wellbeing looks like.

What this is:

- Explain what safeguarding officers do to both prevent abuse *and* support the wellbeing of elite child athletes
- Connect the safeguarding role to how institutions can be held accountable for preventing abuse and supporting wellbeing
- Incorporate safeguarding officers as an example in stories focused on what sports institutions can do to prevent abuse before it occurs
- Incorporate safeguarding officers as an example in stories focused on what sports institutions can do to promote wellbeing

Why this works:

Talking about safeguarding officers and what they do is an effective way to build understanding of a systemic solution that can both prevent abuse and promote wellbeing. Building this understanding among the public is necessary because the public is currently unaware of the types of systemic changes that are needed to prevent abuse *and* support the wellbeing of elite child athletes. When people do think about solutions, they tend to default to individualistic ideas, such as parents or children being more vigilant in recognizing problematic behavior of coaches and other staff, or children needing to be especially strong-willed to develop well as an elite child athlete.

The concept of a safeguarding officer can help overcome this individualistic thinking and give clarity to what systemic change of sports institutions can look like. People are largely unaware of who safeguarding officers are or what they do, including how they conduct investigations as well as recommend and help implement changes to prevent abuse and promote wellbeing. This gap in understanding among the public can be a benefit to communicators, because the public doesn't have preconceived notions about this role. Providing a detailed description of safeguarding officers and their roles in sports institutions gives people a concrete change they can get behind. The idea of the safeguarding officer resonates with people, and they can easily recognize how having a staff member dedicated to preventing abuse and promoting wellbeing of elite child athletes would be advantageous.

It's important to connect the safeguarding officer with institutional accountability more broadly, so as not to overemphasize the role of one staff member or downplay the limitations safeguarding officers may face in their roles. However, once introduced and connected to broader responsibilities of sports institutions to prevent abuse and support wellbeing, the example of the safeguarding officer can help build public understanding of and support for systemic solutions more broadly, and thereby shift people's thinking away from individualistic solutions.

When talking about safeguarding officers, be sure to include these framing elements:

- **Connect safeguarding officers with the idea of institutional accountability.** Framing safeguarding officers as a concrete way that sports institutions can be accountable for elite child athletes' wellbeing is something that people can easily understand and support.
- **Include safeguarding officers in stories about abuse prevention.** Presenting the presence of safeguarding officers in sports institutions to prevent abuse – through the practices and strategies they can implement in their roles – helps build understanding of how exactly abuse can be prevented, which helps overcome people's fatalism about prevention.
- **Include safeguarding officers in stories about promoting wellbeing.** Talking about how safeguarding officers can promote wellbeing – in stories like the example presented below – can help to increase the salience of elite child athletes' wellbeing among the public. Talking about how safeguarding officers help support elite child athletes' mental health can help build public understanding of and support for systemic change to promote wellbeing. While the public doesn't currently have a good understanding of what elite child athletes need for their wellbeing, they *do* understand the role that

mental health can play in children's lives, including in the lives of elite child athletes.¹² This may be due to the increased salience of children's mental health in media and discourse because of the pandemic. Either way, talking about what safeguarding officers can do to support elite child athletes' mental health is an effective way to build public support for systemic change.

What this looks like:

Sports institutions need to prioritize the mental health and wellbeing of their elite child athletes. They should implement policies and reforms that put the wellbeing of their athletes above all else.

John's story shows us how sports institutions can prevent abuse and promote good mental health and wellbeing for elite child athletes. Last year, John qualified to become a member of the National Youth Ice Skating League. His training schedule was intense: he had very few days off and his weekends were full of matches or practices. That same year, the League hired a safeguarding officer, who established routine check-ins with the team members. John shared with the safeguarding officer that he was feeling burned out, his grades were slipping, and his friendships were suffering. The safeguarding officer worked with John and his coach to adjust John's training schedule so that he had more time to rest, focus on his schoolwork, and spend time with his friends.

Because the National Youth Ice Skating League hired a safeguarding officer, John shared his concerns before they turned into major problems. With good coaches and a safeguarding officer who was actively focused on his wellbeing, John had a great first season, enjoys training, and continues to grow and excel as an ice skater.

Talking about the various ways that mental health can affect elite child athletes, both in and outside their sport, will help build public understanding of the importance of promoting the wellbeing of elite child athletes.

How to talk about wellbeing

RECOMMENDATION #4

Talk about what elite child athletes need from sports institutions to develop well, without comparing them to other children.

What this is:

- Explain the types of rigorous training that elite child athletes are involved in
- Talk about what elite child athletes need to develop well first and foremost
- If you must talk about rights, spell them out (rather than relying on the language of “rights” alone)
- Avoid comparing elite child athletes to other children; instead, be direct about what elite child athletes need themselves to develop well
- Discuss the policy change and institutional support that’s required for elite child athletes to have what they need to participate in their sport at a high level and develop well

Why this works:

Talking about what elite child athletes need from sports institutions to develop well is the most effective way to build public understanding of the importance of elite child athlete wellbeing and shift public thinking in a more systemic direction. Currently, there is a gap in public thinking about the importance of wellbeing for elite child athletes. People either assume that elite child athletes are superhuman athletes whose primary job is to win at all costs, without much regard for their healthy development as children, or they assume that elite child athletes are too vulnerable to compete in sports at a high level (and it is therefore impossible for elite sports to support child athlete wellbeing).¹⁵

To talk about what elite child athletes need from sports institutions, it’s important to keep the following things in mind:

- **Talk about what elite child athletes need *from* sports institutions, rather than talking about needs more broadly.** The language of “needs” is a helpful way to talk about elite child athlete wellbeing, as long as it’s clear that it’s sports institutions who are responsible for providing those needs. Otherwise, people will default to the mindset that parents are solely responsible for providing for children’s needs.¹⁴ It’s also important to include a detailed description of what exactly elite child athletes need from sports institutions, to avoid broad generalizations that can sometimes backfire among the public (through responses such as, “children don’t really *need* that...”). Talking about what sports institutions can do to provide for the specific needs of elite child athletes will help avoid this problematic thinking and shift the conversation away from individual solutions and toward systemic change.
- **Don’t rely on the language of “rights” alone to explain what elite child athletes need.** The term “rights” fails to build understanding of and support for promoting the wellbeing of elite child athletes. In the survey experiment, this language didn’t backfire, but it also didn’t build understanding or policy support. In related FrameWorks’ research on child rights, we found that people in the US

tend to believe that rights are liberties, and reject the idea that children are owed liberties.¹⁵ If you absolutely must talk about children’s rights, be sure to spell them out¹⁶ and connect them to a description of what elite child athletes need. Talking about what elite child athletes need first and foremost, and connecting it to a full description of rights, will go further in shifting thinking in productive directions that relying on the language of rights alone.

- **Avoid comparing elite child athletes to other children.** Talking about elite child athletes as being “just like” or the “same as” other children will likely backfire and lead people to default to their existing views of elite child athletes as either superhuman or extremely vulnerable. Because the public doesn’t have a good understanding of what elite child athletes do beyond winning competitions, they tend to view elite child athletes as always being in “competition” with other children. Therefore, comparing elite child athletes to other children tends to reinforce this competitive mindset. This comparison also appears to reinforce a scarcity mindset about resources – because people assume that there aren’t enough resources for everyone, they reason that if elite child athletes have access to something, then other children won’t have it. In our quantitative and qualitative research, we found that comparing elite child athletes to other children failed to shift thinking in productive directions, triggered competitive thinking and a scarcity mindset, and triggered default thinking about elite child athletes as either too vulnerable to be treated the “same as” other children, or too superhuman to require anything that other children might need. As a result, it’s best to avoid making these comparisons.

What this looks like:

Use the following sequence to talk about what elite child athletes need from sports institutions:

1. First, explain who elite child athletes are and the types of rigorous training they’re involved in.
2. Next, use specific, straightforward explanations of what exactly elite child athletes need. This will go a long way in building understanding among the public, without triggering the unproductive thinking that comparisons with other children and talking about “rights” does.
3. Then, discuss the necessary policy change and institutional support that’s required for elite child athletes to have what they need to participate in their sport at a high level and develop well.

Example:

1. Elite child athletes are children under the age of 18 who compete in their sport at a very high level. They engage in daily training and practice to compete in their sports at the national or international stage.
2. These elite athletes need healthy and supportive relationships with peers, family, and their community; opportunities for socializing with their peers; comprehensive medical attention, including mental health support; and enriching educational opportunities that accommodate their rigorous athletic schedules.
3. Sports institutions can better support elite child athletes’ needs in all these ways. They can change training schedules to accommodate social relationships, education, and activities outside of their sport; they can hire sports staff who specialize in mental health support; and they can implement a staff code of conduct to make sure everyone is ensuring elite child athletes have what they need to develop well.

RECOMMENDATION #5:**Use the value of Common Sense to talk about institutional accountability for elite child athlete wellbeing.****What this is:**

- Talk about what elite child athletes need to support their physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing as a matter of common sense.
- Use the Common Sense value to talk about institutional accountability.
- Talk about systemic solutions as a matter of common sense.
- Provide step-by-step, practical descriptions of what sports institutions can do to support wellbeing, to build people's understanding of the issue.

Why this works:

While the public can sometimes see how mental and physical health are important for elite child athletes, they typically see these as optional and secondary to winning competitions. This is because people tend to assume that winning competitions and wellbeing are diametrically opposed to one another – they believe that elite child athletes can't have both, and they therefore assume that winning takes priority, despite any tolls to physical, mental, or emotional health.¹⁷ Talking about child athlete wellbeing as a matter of common sense – something that is essential to support elite child athletes in their sport and in their lives – can help overcome this either/or thinking. Using the value of Common Sense to talk about elite child athlete wellbeing can help foreground the idea that winning competitions doesn't need to, and shouldn't, come at the expense of the physical, mental, and emotional health and development of elite child athletes.

In particular, the Common Sense value should be paired with specific explanations of what sports institutions can do to support elite child athlete wellbeing:

- **Talk about institutional accountability as a pragmatic, common sense approach to support elite child athlete wellbeing.** Talking about how it's practical and common sense for sports institutions to support elite child athletes' wellbeing so they can do well in their sport and their lives can help the public see that the idea of winning vs. wellbeing is a false dichotomy. This framing will also help keep the focus on systemic changes to support wellbeing, and steer people away from individualistic ideas about solutions (such as the belief that elite child athletes just need to be mentally or physically stronger to overcome hardships). Moreover, framing institutional accountability for wellbeing as a matter of common sense can help build a sense of collective efficacy – that it's possible for society and the government to support elite child athlete wellbeing.
- **Highlight the practical steps that sports institutions can take to promote elite child athlete wellbeing.** Talking about specific solutions as practical, common-sense steps to support wellbeing, and explaining why these work, can help build support for systemic change. For example, talking about how hiring safeguarding officers, implementing more rigorous hiring practices, and creating

codes of conduct for staff help promote elite child athlete physical, mental, and emotional health and wellbeing will give people concrete ideas to understand what can be done differently. In the experiment, we found that the Common Sense frame helped build support for systemic solutions, particularly among Democrats.

- **Talk about how sports institutions can support elite child athlete mental and emotional health, just as much as their physical health.** People do have some understanding of the mental health needs of elite child athletes, they just think those needs are secondary to winning. Framing sports institutions' support of elite child athletes' mental and emotional health as a practical, common-sense way forward to ensure elite child athletes can do well on and off the field will help people overcome their preexisting ideas about mental health as secondary in elite athletics.

What this looks like:

We can make sure that sports institutions are focusing on wellbeing by encouraging common sense and practical changes so that elite child athletes are physically and mentally well, feel safe with coaches and staff, and enjoy their sport. It just makes sense that sports institutions use best practices to support the wellbeing of their elite child athletes so they can thrive in their sport and in their lives.

Conclusion

Sports institutions have a central role to play to better support elite child athlete wellbeing and prevent abuse. The narrative shift described here – shifting from talking about abuse after it's occurred to talking about abuse prevention and wellbeing – will help communicators and advocates talk about what elite child athletes need and how sports institutions can meet those needs through systems-level changes.

Talking about abuse prevention can be achieved through using an Abuse Prevention value and storytelling. The Abuse Prevention value, paired with a discussion of institutional accountability, is effective to specifically talk about how sports bodies can prevent abuse. Storytelling of diverse cases where abuse was prevented with the right systemic support can help overcome fatalism about abuse prevention and build understanding of the diversity of elite child athletes and their needs. Using the example of the safeguarding officer – through storytelling, for example – can help people see the need for systemic change to both prevent abuse and support wellbeing. And talking about wellbeing can be achieved through detailed descriptions of what elite child athletes need from sports institutions, as well as by using the Common Sense value to talk about institutional accountability.

These framing recommendations and the overarching narrative shift recommended here can help change the story of elite child athletes to recognize their needs and their diversity, and to spell out the role that institutions can play to prevent their abuse *and* promote their wellbeing.

Endnotes

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5. These are the specific policy change items that were included in the survey experiment. See [Appendix](#) for more details.
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A New Narrative about Elite Child Athletes

Reframing Wellbeing and Abuse
Prevention

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