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RECOGNISING AND RESPONDING TO ABUSE IN SPORT- OFFICE OF SPORT NSW

Institute for Health and Sport (IHES)

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Executive Summary

This report presents a rapid evaluation of the evidence-based and theory-informed education workshop “Recognising and Responding to Abuse in Sport,” delivered by Dr Mary Woessner from the Safety and Wellbeing in Sport Research Group at the Institute for Health and Sport (Victoria University), in September 2024. The primary aim of this educational intervention is to improve attendee’s capabilities, opportunities and motivations to recognise and respond to abuse in sport. The workshop was conducted through the Sector Engagement Committee, supported by the Office of Sport NSW and Play by the Rules, as part of the organisations’ commitments to improving the sport sector capability to safeguard participants from abuse in sport.

Over 50 attendees participated in the two-hour workshop. The majority of attendees were women (61%) and were primarily employed in sport (60%). Similar to previous deliveries of this workshop (in Tasmania and Victoria), attendees were confident in their ability to recognise diverse types of abuse in sport (>80% agree/strongly agree), but significantly less confident in their ability to respond to abuse in a trauma informed manner (only 25%).

The workshop activities highlighted a discrepancy between the attendees’ feelings of self-confidence in being able to recognise diverse forms of abuse in sport and their actual ability to recognise what constituted abuse in sport when these were presented to them during the workshop. During the activities, many attendees reflected on the fact that they and/or their organisation have had a focus on physical or sexual (and specifically criminally prosecutable) types of abuse in sport and very little focus on more subtle forms of emotional/psychological abuse.

Following the workshop, there were significant improvements in many of the questionnaire elements, particularly those related to responding to abuse. The attendees shared that their favourite elements of the workshop were the practical walk-throughs of responding to abuse, learning from an expert and seeing the evidence base.

The attendees shared some examples of what would help them and their organisation to recognise and response to abuse in sport including: education on how to facilitate behaviour change in volunteers, how to create effective policies, more evidence on best practice in this space.

Workshop Context:

The purpose of the Recognising and Responding to Abuse in Sport evidence-based and theory-informed educational workshop was originally developed in 2023 using the COM-B Theory of Behaviour Change. The aim of the workshop is to improve sport staff and volunteers' capabilities (C), opportunities (O), and motivations (M) to recognise (B-behaviour) and respond (B-behaviour) to abuse in sport. The workshop was first delivered in Tasmania and Victoria in 2023, in partnership with Clubs Tasmania and Vicsport respectively, with support from Play by the Rules.

This report relates to the most recent delivery of the workshop on the 5th of September, 2024, which was sponsored by Office of New South Wales Sport and Play by the Rules. Below we provide a summary of the findings of both the pre and post questionnaire as well as the reflections shared by attendees within the session. Our research team has further generated some recommendations based on these discussions and data.

Pre-workshop capability assessment questionnaire

Before the workshop, participants were invited to complete a questionnaire to evaluate their current capability, opportunities and motivations for recognising and responding to abuse against children in sport.

Over 50 attendees participated in activities and discussions during the workshop. 44 completed the pre-workshop questionnaire and 17 completed both the pre and post survey. The majority of attendees have primary paid employment within sport (60%), but also volunteer in sport (57%) and most of those individuals volunteer at the community sport level (88%). Most participants (74%) had previously undergone formal training on safeguarding in sport (69%).

The majority of respondents strongly agreed that recognising and responding to all forms of abuse against children in sport was important to them and their club. Just over 80% were confident they could recognise abuse in sport and knew what constitutes reportable conduct. However, the confidence in **responding** to diverse types of abuse was much lower, with only 25% being confident in responding to a child in a trauma informed manner. One third did not know the procedures/guidelines to respond to abuse in sport and only 65% agreed there were procedures/guidelines in place within their organisation.

One in four attendees believed they could face repercussions from people within their club if they were to raise an issue of child abuse in sport.

Evidence-based intervention: workshop activities to build capacity

During the workshop, attendees participated in a series of activities designed to generate discussions around recognition of and response to abuse against children in sport.

Recognising abuse against children in sport

Participants engaged in an activity to discuss recognising, managing and ranking the perceived severity of diverse types of abuse in sport. They were not provided a definition of severity, nor any further context ahead of the activity. The purpose of this activity is not to reach a consensus definition on severity but rather to generate discussions about diverse types of abuse in sport.

The majority of participants rated physical or sexualised contact as the most severe forms of abuse. Many remarked this is what they were most familiar with and that they knew they could report these behaviours to the police. Several groups noted ranking the diverse examples of abuse was challenging as they all were considered unacceptable behaviours within their organisation, but not all forms would be covered explicitly within their organisation's policies.

Recommendations:

- It is important for individuals and organisations to know and understand that the impact of experiencing abuse can vary from one person to another. Children come to sport with diverse life experiences and the potential impacts of abuse cannot be objectively categorised based solely on the type of abuse experienced.
- Education, policies and codes of conduct should make explicit mention of diverse sport-specific types of abuse (include online experiences). This is particularly essential for types of abuse that have historically been normalised or excused (over-training, playing while injured, emotional abuse, etc).

Responding to disclosures

One activity asked the attendees to reflect on challenges they or other adults might experience in responding or taking action to disclosures of child abuse in sport. Below are some examples of the most common barriers/challenges the attendees noted.

"No support for volunteers managing it"

"A culture that tolerates abuse"

"Not knowing what to say"

"It's not my role"

Many feared they could unintentionally make it worse for the child or that the formal report system would cause more harm. There was a strong belief that there is a broader culture that accepts these poor behaviours in sport, and the attendees expressed concerns about "ruffling feathers" and that other adults would not support them.

When asked what the sport community needs to respond to and support children and adult disclosing abuse in sport, these were some exemplar quotes:

"Create an environment of **rewarded** vulnerability"

"An understanding that they will be genuinely supported in speaking up"

"Tools on culture shifting from within."

"Clear policies, guidelines and resources."

"Support networks."

"Education on how to do it and why it's important. [We] need to understand the consequences."

Recommendations:

- Sport volunteers/staff need more training on how to informally respond to children disclosing abuse. Decision tree type case studies that walk through both the disclosure and reporting process, delineating the two and the complexities is recommended.
- Clubs/Sports Organisations should have more explicit policies/guidelines around managing informal disclosures, and these should be actively promoted and disseminated within the organisation.
- Consideration should be given to the creation of a Safeguarding Community of Practice (or other support network). This could provide opportunities for collaboration/resource sharing across sport codes and serve as a site for peer support.
- Trauma informed care should be embedded/included within the 'how to' of responding to a disclosure.

Impact of the workshop

A total of 17 individuals completed both the pre- and post-workshop questionnaire. Post workshop, participants reported having an increased understanding of what constitutes child abuse in sport, what is meant by a trauma informed response and how to provide a trauma informed response. Pre-workshop, less than 30% understood what a trauma informed response was, and post workshop this increased to 82% and 95% post workshop felt confident they could provide a trauma informed response (up from 0%). There were still 23% who feared repercussions from their organisation if they were to report child abuse in sport, but it seemed many wanted to action this fear by reviewing their policies, bringing others on the journey by education staff and volunteers in their organisation to shift the culture.

The favourite elements of the workshop included the practical walk-throughs of responding to abuse, to see diverse examples of abuse within the sport context, the importance of a trauma informed response, learning from an expert and being provided evidence-based data.

Participants were all invited to make a commitment of actions they will take in the next 3 months, and their commitments included:

- Disseminating the workshop presentation to committee members for discussion on how to implement within our club
- Find promotional material for tackling child abuse in sport
- Hold a training session for volunteers on what is expected of them and what support we can offer
- Gain data directly from the clubs on their understanding so we can improve it
- Review of policy and reporting mechanisms to ensure we provide a safe environment

What is Needed Next?

Attendees were also asked what more they (or their staff/volunteers) might like to learn about safeguarding in sport.

“How best to implement best practice as it relates to protecting youth athletes and how best to provide a safe and inclusive environment.”

“How to educate volunteers and create effective policies”

“How we can create greater impact collectively/drive change at a local level. What do we need to do to actually support cultural and behavioural change in grassroots sport?”

Recommendations:

- Deliver evidence-based workshops that focus on generating behaviour change (and how to create this within your own club/organisation). The current workshop is underpinned by a theory of behaviour change. Consideration should be given to assisting clubs/organisations in how to enact their own theory of change within their work/education/initiatives.

Relevant Research Cited within the Workshop

1. [Frequencies of violence \(abuse\) against children in Australian community sport](#)
2. [Disclosures of violence \(abuse\) in Australian community sport](#)
3. [Data on young people’s concerns about playing sport](#) (Page 14)
4. [Safe Sport Allies- Resources to support club delivery of safe sport workshops and table on types of abuse in sport.](#) This resource has training packs for clubs/sport organisations to deliver awareness/education training on recognising abuse.

Overarching Safeguarding Education Resource Suite

Sport Integrity Australia, Play by the Rules and the E-Safety Commissioner have expansive (and free) resource suites to support community sport players, volunteers and organisations in understanding how to ensure the sport environment is safe.

1. Scroll down to “Safeguarding” on the [Sport Integrity Australia Resource](#) page
2. [Play by the Rules](#) has templates, articles, and scenarios on safe sport that community sport stakeholders can access.
3. The [e-Safety Commissioner](#) has a sport specific online hub for anyone to access resources related to recognising, responding and reporting online abuse.

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Resources

In response to the requests from community sport stakeholders, we provide the following practical resources, guidelines, helplines and organisations. All of the below resources are free to access and implement.

	Recognising	Responding	Policies and Procedures	Mental Health Support
Adults	<p><u>Safeguarding Children and Young People in Sport Induction course</u>- Play by the Rules/Sport Integrity Australia</p>	<p>Suspected child abuse- Call Sport Integrity Australia- #1300027232</p> <p><u>How to respond to a child's disclosure</u></p> <p><u>Blue Knot Resources</u></p>	<p><u>Checklist</u> from Sport Integrity Australia for selecting a safe sporting club</p>	<p><u>Lifeline</u>- mental health support, triage, and referral. Phone: 13 11 14</p> <p><u>National Support Services List</u></p>
Children/Youth	<p><u>Participant Conversation cards</u> to help <i>kids/youth</i> talk about safe sport and unsafe behaviours</p>	<p>X</p>	<p><u>How you should be treated in sport</u>- Sport Integrity Australia</p> <p><u>Your rights in sport</u>- Sport Integrity Australia</p>	<p>Headspace- Youth-friendly and provide <u>free</u> mental health services, counselling, and support for young people aged 12-25 1800 650 890</p> <p><u>National Support Services List</u></p>
Organisation	<p><u>Child Safe Dos and Don'ts</u>- Sport Integrity Australia</p> <p><u>Safe Sport Allies</u>- Resources to support club delivery of safe sport workshops and table on types of abuse in sport.</p>	<p><u>Reporting resource state by state</u></p> <p>Consider undertaking training in trauma informed responses:</p> <p><u>Trauma Informed Certificate</u></p> <p><u>Blue Knot Resources</u></p>	<p><u>Coach conversation</u> starter cards to help have conversations about safe sport.</p> <p><u>NSW Sport</u>- Safe and fair clubs, child safe sport resources</p>	<p>X</p>