



# Position Paper for Advancing Safety and Safeguarding in Sport



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## Position Paper for Advancing Safety and Safeguarding in Sport

Project Building European Safe Sport Together (BESST) aims to strengthen the foundation for European sports environment free from transgressive behaviour and to support the growing maturity of European sports organisations in safeguarding practices. The project, co-funded by the European Union, was set 1) to develop a modern definition of transgressive behaviour in sports, with an extensive literature review of most recent studies; 2) to equip and educate sports organisations on their role in the battle against transgressive behaviour in sports; 3) to equip European sports organisations with a toolkit for raising awareness and educating their communities about transgressive behaviour through their communication channels; and 4) to develop a legal framework, and proposal for policies and procedures for European sports events organisers.

The partners in project BESST emphasise the bright side of sport and recognize the transformative power it has on improving lives, building communities, and inspiring positive change at both individual and societal levels. However, they also acknowledge the complex challenges that emerge when the core principles of ethics, safety, and well-being are compromised. These challenges, while less visible than the celebrated benefits of sport, demand serious attention to ensure that sport remains a positive and safe space for all involved.

### 1 Unsafe sports environment is a multi-level challenge in a multi-level system

As a multilevel system, the sports community involves various micro, meso, and macro-level stakeholders, all creating and contributing to opportunities for sport participation and development. In short,<sup>1</sup> the micro level includes athletes and coaches. The meso level involves local contributors like sports clubs, board members, referees, and parents who enable participation. The macro level consists of larger entities like governments, national and international sports federations, and National Olympic Committees that provide frameworks and policies for the meso level to implement. In this multi-level system, safeguarding must be embedded in the DNA of every level in the sports community to ensure a safe environment for everyone, regardless of their role (Haandrikman & Schipper-van Veldhoven, 2024). In particular, the issue is not necessarily specific to the field of play and may also be an organisational problem. Therefore, a consistent culture of safeguarding should be maintained by top-tier organisations, like the International Olympic Committee (IOC), European Olympic Committees (EOC) and all the way through the sports system to local sports clubs, coaches, and athletes.

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<sup>1</sup> More information about the multi-level system of the sports community can be found in our report (p. 7-8): <https://besst-safesport.eu/safe-sport/>

Despite decades of research revealing the high prevalence of transgressive behaviours among athletes (e.g., Chroni & Fasting, 2009; Hartill et al., 2021; Fasting et al., 2010; Schipper-van Veldhoven, 2022), unsafe sports practices continue to exist. Addressing this issue is complex, as it presents a multi-level challenge within a multi-level system, particularly due to the differing roles and responsibilities at each level. However, with every challenge comes a vision. Project BESST partners believe that everyone in the sports community should share the vision of a world where sports environments are entirely safe. Achieving this vision requires aligning our efforts. Project BESST's approach starts with the basics to tackle this shared multi-level challenge and move towards our collective goal.

## 2 Foundation for safe(r) sports

To foster a shared responsibility for ensuring a safe environment in sports, all members of the sports community need to be aligned, as highlighted by Hartill et al. (2021) and Schipper-van Veldhoven (2022). However, not every stakeholder within this community starts from the same position, as they vary in their levels of awareness and understanding. This variation affects their ability to identify unsafe practices and limits their capacity to contribute effectively to our collective goal.

### 2.1 Awareness through recognition, or the other way around?

To address our shared multi-level challenge, it is crucial to focus on both awareness and recognition of unsafe sports practices and transgressive behaviours. However, this presents a “chicken-or-the-egg” dilemma: which comes first, awareness of unsafe sports practices or their recognition? Project BESST explores this dilemma more deeply by highlighting a twofold underlying issue: no (accurate) understanding of transgressive behaviours and unsafe practices, and not (wanting to) see them.

#### 2.1.1 No (accurate) understanding.

The sports community lacks a universal definition (Kerr et al., 2014) and understanding (Mountjoy, 2020) of unsafe sports practices, which impedes their awareness and recognition. This results in varying terminology (e.g., harassment, abuse, and violence) with different-linguistic- meanings across academic, practical and cultural contexts.

To emphasise the need for a consistent definition and understanding, consider the term “violence” as an example. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines violence as involving intentional harm (Krug et al., 2002). However, this is not always the case in sports; for instance, a coach might subject athletes to excessive drills that are physically inappropriate, intending to improve performance without intending harm. Violence is often perceived in terms of physical harm or extreme aggression, which can be misleading, as this definition too narrowly captures the full scope of unsafe sports practices. Furthermore, cultural differences shape the

understanding of violence, as certain violent behaviours may be accepted in some cultures (e.g., hitting a child for pedagogical reasons). Consequently, using the term “violence” can hinder the inclusion of all forms of unsafe sports practices.

As our human tendency is to categorise our perceptions to simplify social dynamics to improve our interaction with others, it is no surprise that definitions usually concentrate on categorising specific behaviours. However, categorising behaviours can be challenging, as different forms may interact and overlap (Kerr, 2023). To establish a universal understanding, Project BESST moves beyond categorisation and adopts a holistic view by introducing the term “transgression” to cover various ways of crossing boundaries- be they legal, social, physical, psychological, and religious (Madsen, 2014).

Based on the comprehensive theoretical framework, project BESST proposes using the term transgressive behaviour to describe “any form of misuse of a relationship of power violating someone’s access to safe sports” (Haandrikman & Schipper-van Veldhoven, 2024), allowing for a more holistic approach to recognise and become aware of unsafe sports practices.

### **2.1.2 Not (wanting to) see transgressive behaviour and unsafe practices.**

People tend to focus more on frequently highlighted issues (Fischer & Engelhardt, 2019). In other words, individuals tend to prioritise and pay greater attention to information that is more prominent and readily noticeable, a cognitive phenomenon referred to as salience bias (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). However, this tendency may lead to an incomplete or distorted understanding of the broader context. This bias is evident in the sports community as well. Unsafe sports practices began to attract attention in the late 20th century, with academics urging greater awareness (Brackenridge, 2001). This led to some countries revising child protection policies, primarily focusing on sexual harassment and abuse. Over time, efforts to address transgressive behaviour in sports have expanded to include developing codes of conduct, appointing confidants in sports clubs, and launching campaigns by organisations and academics (e.g., Schipper-van Veldhoven, 2016; Vertommen et al., 2015). The focus has shifted from only sexual misconduct to a broader view that encompasses various forms of transgressive behaviour (Haandrikman & Schipper-van Veldhoven, 2024; Schipper-van Veldhoven, 2017).

Despite this progress, salience bias continues to affect public perception: people do not see (all of) the transgressive behaviours. Psychological forms of transgression, in particular, can be more subtle and harder to identify compared to more overt physical transgressions. For example, while the immediate effects of physical harm, such as hitting, are (more) easily recognised as wrong, the consequences of psychological transgressions can vary based on factors like intent (accidental vs. non-accidental), context and individual differences. At the same time, the salience bias affects the effectiveness of preventing transgressive behaviours in sports, as individuals may assume that “what is not seen does not exist.” Therefore, it is crucial to give greater attention to understanding and addressing these “less salient” forms of transgressive behaviour to enhance recognition and awareness within the sports community.

People do not always see all forms of transgressive behaviour in sports as equally important due to their varying prominence. Moreover, discussions about these behaviours differ across countries and cultures, involving more than just variations in terminology. The current incidence and prevalence of transgressive behaviours in sports are framed differently across countries, depending on their unique starting point. At an individual level, the perspective of those experiencing transgressive behaviours in sports must be considered to accurately define unwanted behaviour. Beyond more objective consequences like harm, these transgressions can also lead to subjective outcomes, such as reduced enjoyment of sports or even dropout.

The organisational level plays a key role in shaping how transgressive behaviours are framed and understood at the individual level. As part of the project work, BESST partners engaged with a key government representative who downplayed the issue in their country, describing transgressive behaviour in sports as only a minor concern. As the conversation progressed, the project partners realised that the differing perspectives stemmed from different starting points, leading to different framings of the situation. From the government representative's viewpoint, the prevalence of transgressive behaviour in sports had significantly decreased compared to decades ago, while from the project partners' viewpoint, it remained a pressing concern. At the same time, the person believed that everything would eventually be fine and that things would improve on their own. How the person expressed their point of view made it seem as though the issue was no longer important, but that is not what they actually meant. This experience highlighted the framing effect, where the presentation of the same information influences how people draw conclusions (Tversky & Kahneman, 1985). It underscores the importance of listening carefully to one another to build safe sports together, focusing on the content of what is being said rather than just how it is framed.

## 2.2 The influence of status

To effectively address our shared multi-level challenge, it is crucial to further explore the underlying dynamics at each level within the sports community. Project BESST examines the capacity to contribute to our collective goal by exploring the influence of status within our multi-level sports community, focusing on two key dynamics: power and resources.

### 2.2.1 'Truths' shaped by power.

As in society, within sports community power is seen as crucial for accessing opportunities, creating a hierarchy among individuals and organisations that pressures others to conform to this existing structure. But is this the societal value of power we want for our sports community?

Foucault's philosophy offers a critical lens on how perceived power<sup>2</sup> is normalised within the sports community, as explored by project BESST (Haandrikman & Schipper-van Veldhoven, 2024). According to Foucault (1991), power is not something that you just have; it changes and

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<sup>2</sup> Perceived power plays a role as it "categorises the individual, marks him by his individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognise and which others have to recognise in him" (Foucault, 1983; p. 212).

shifts based on how people interact with each other. In our sports community, individuals and organisations often claim to possess power, however, these power structures are actually shaped by societal interactions. Foucault argues that our knowledge of power structures arises from the way we communicate and share information, creating a “pool of knowledge” where frequently discussed and widely accepted ideas are seen as more valid and true. Over time, the ways we talk about these ideas shape our understanding of what is considered true. To understand the underlying forms and techniques of (mis)using power, we need to analyse the discourses- how we talk about these so-called truths” (e.g., see the report on the Norwegian women’s beach handball example<sup>3</sup>). Stakeholders at all levels within the sports community must be aware of their power dynamics and how they may misuse the power that contributes to transgressive behaviours in sports. Having a certain position or identity does not automatically grant power over others; it is about how these stakeholders are exhibiting power, in what context, over whom, and with what effects.

### 2.2.2 Empowering resources

Power and status influence each other and individuals within sports organisations, but resources are crucial for advancing safeguarding efforts. Currently, some countries are more advanced in safeguarding sports than others, and this gap is likely to widen as safeguarding has become an additional responsibility for various sports organisations (e.g., clubs, national federations, National Olympic Committees). Project BESST’s study of European national sports federations and National Olympic Committees revealed that human and financial resources are key areas that need improvement to advance safeguarding, regardless of their current safeguarding progress (Biedre et al., 2024a; Biedre et al., 2024b). The study also highlighted a significant need for guidance, knowledge, and support from both governmental and institutional leadership to further advance safeguarding initiatives.

Essentially, there should be greater emphasis on leveraging existing knowledge and expertise to enhance safeguarding. As safeguarding in sports is still in its early stages, it requires more regional and global investment. The sports community should adopt both top-down approaches (e.g., from the IOC to clubs) and bottom-up approaches, recognising the value of successful initiatives at the meso level of the sports community (Biedre et al., 2024c). By doing so, the knowledge and expertise from these resources can be used more effectively to collaboratively build safer sports environments by establishing effective systems to connect and empower all levels.

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<sup>3</sup> Haandrikman, M., & Schipper-van Veldhoven (2024). *Building European Safe Sports Together: A conceptual framework of transgressive behaviour*. Project BESST. Page 14-15. <https://besst-safesport.eu/safe-sport/>

## 3 Effectively raising the maturity of European sports on its safeguarding readiness

How do we find solutions for our shared multi-level challenge of transgressive behaviour in a multi-level system? Project BESST advocates returning to the fundamentals to effectively enhance the safeguarding maturity of European sports. To this end, the project emphasises three key messages.

### 3.1 Practice what you preach

Advocating for safe sports means ensuring a safe work environment within your own organisation as well. While the focus is often on transgressions between athletes and coaches, this does not fully capture the extent of transgressive behaviours within the broader sports community and among different stakeholders. Anyone can be vulnerable. Recently, there have been increasing reports of workplace misconduct at organisational levels (meso and macro) within sports, such as cases involving the director of the Dutch football club Ajax (RTL Nieuws, 2022) and the head of the French Football Federation (Ripley, 2023), as well as persistent toxic workplace cultures worldwide (Whyno & Maaddi, 2022). If you fail to safeguard your own employees or colleagues, ask yourself: how credible is your commitment to safeguarding within the sports community?

### 3.2 Understand power dynamics

To align your actions with your values, it is crucial to understand the power dynamics you are part of. Power itself is not inherently negative; its impact depends on how, in what context, over whom and with what effects it is exercised. In sports, discourses- ways of talking and thinking- shape everything from rules and regulations to the identities and behaviours of athletes, coaches, and organisations. Grasping these discourses is essential for addressing issues and advancing safeguarding. Reflect on whether you are acting based on perceived power or if the power dynamics have just shifted. Consider what discourses you are perpetuating that shape and maintain your power dynamic. How can you leverage discourses to influence the practice, perception, and regulation of safe sports, ensuring they reflect and advance broader social norms and safeguarding efforts?

### 3.2 Embrace transformational leadership

Building European Safe Sport Together is not a one-person's job; it requires the collective effort of the entire sports community. This means that there is no room for monopolistic control within our community. What we need is transformational leadership- leadership that inspires and motivates others to achieve more than they ever thought possible when it comes to safe sports (Bass & Riggio, 2005). It is about fostering growth, empowering individuals, and helping each other develop into leaders within our respective countries, organisations, and sports communities. By addressing individual needs and empowering those who need support, we can all contribute to the goal we should all share: a world where sports are truly safe for everyone.



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