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Article in *Child Abuse Review* · March 2011

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Sexual Abuse in Sport: A Model to Prevent and Protect Athletes

Several studies clearly show that sexual abuse exists in sport. Currently, very few studies have examined the prevention and management of this problem in sports organisations. This article explores the measures used to prevent sexual abuse in sports organisations as well as the perceptions of the sports actors affected by these measures (parents, athletes, administrators and coaches). The results demonstrate that several factors affect the implementation of measures and the management of this problem in sports organisations. Moreover, few measures exist to prevent and manage cases of sexual abuse in these organisations, thus jeopardising the protection of athletes. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

KEY WORDS: sexual abuse; prevention; sports organisations

Several researchers have noted that the literature has paid little attention to extrafamilial sexual abuse, a type of abuse which exists in sport (Bolen, 2000; Edinburgh *et al.*, 2006; Wolfe *et al.*, 2003). Yet cases of sexual abuse occurring outside the family make up the majority of crimes of this nature perpetrated on children and adolescents (Finkelhor *et al.*, 1990; Saewyc *et al.*, 2003; Trocmé and Schumaker, 1999). According to Paine and Hansen (2002), in the majority of sexual abuse cases, the victim has an emotional or familiar link with the abuser and, in many cases, the latter is an authority figure in relation to the victim. The sports community is thus a context which is conducive to sexual abuse.

Studies examining this problem in the field of sport have, moreover, demonstrated the existence of risk factors specific to this context (Cense and Brackenridge, 2001). In fact, the power of coaches, the predominance of performance over the well-being of athletes and the many opportunities for abuse offered by sport seem to constitute important risk factors. At the relational level, coaches have considerable influence over athletes, since they are often seen as parental figures (Stirling and Kerr, 2009). The coach's authority is also rarely questioned by parents or athletes

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(Stirling and Kerr, 2009). Thus, there is a great risk that this type of abuse may be kept quiet and that the adult may take advantage of this situation (Toftegaard and Nielsen, 2001). In such a context of vulnerability, it is hard to believe that so few youth protection measures exist in sports organisations, as has been observed by several researchers (Brackenridge *et al.*, 2004; Malkin *et al.*, 2000).

Studies conducted on child protection in sport have shown that several obstacles appear to hamper the implementation of such measures, for example, a lack of resources, fear and administrative difficulties (Malkin *et al.*, 2000). Studies have also pointed to a policy void relating to child protection between sport federations and affiliated local clubs (Brackenridge, 2002, 2004; Brackenridge *et al.*, 2004). Thus, the child protection measures implemented by higher-level organisations only very rarely reach lower-level organisations. Brackenridge *et al.*'s study (2004) examined stakeholders' perceptions regarding athlete protection. The results reveal that athletes, parents and coaches were not well informed about the protection measures that existed in their sports organisations. On the other hand, administrators seemed to be informed about these measures, but encountered numerous administrative problems in carrying them out, such as long delays in criminal background checks or difficulty with regard to the sharing of information about offending coaches among sports organisations. Studies on sexual abuse prevention in sport have mostly been conducted in a European context and current knowledge on this subject remains scant. To date, there have been no studies describing sexual abuse prevention in sport in Quebec and Canada.

In Quebec, there are 63 sports federations which oversee several hundred local and regional clubs including more than 500 000 young people and employing more than 60 000 coaches. It is also estimated that more than 600 000 people work as volunteers in the Quebec sports system (CorporationSports-Québec, 2005). Despite the high number of young people participating in sport and the numerous opportunities for abuse offered by sport, several indications suggest that young athletes are not well protected in this context in Quebec and Canada. In fact, two studies reveal that sexual abuse clearly exists in sport in Canada (Kerr and Stirling, 2008; Kirby *et al.*, 2000). Moreover, presently there is no law forcing Quebec sports organisations to adopt screening measures when hiring people who will be called on to work with young people. In addition, fewer than five per cent of Quebec sports federations have a policy related to harassment and sexual abuse which is clearly posted on their website (Kirby *et al.*, 2008). As for Canada, national federations are obliged by Sport Canada to produce a policy on harassment and abuse in order to receive government funding (Sport-Canada, 2002). Nevertheless,

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only 27 per cent of Canadian sports federations have made this policy available on their website (Kirby *et al.*, 2008). Apart from the obligation for Canadian federations to implement a policy to prevent harassment and sexual abuse, as required by Sport Canada, currently there is no programme imposed by the Canadian or Quebec government to equip the sport organisations in the country with regard to sexual abuse prevention. Based on these findings, it is therefore important to examine how well young athletes are protected in the Quebec sports context. This article thus sets out to describe the measures aimed at preventing sexual abuse in Quebec sports organisations and the perceptions of stakeholders involved in these measures.

Methodology

The research project described in this article was conducted in three Quebec sports federations and three clubs in the Quebec City region which are affiliated, respectively, with each of these three federations. In each of these federations and clubs, sports stakeholders were targeted to participate in the study. To maintain confidentiality, the sports chosen are not identified in this article. This project was approved by the Laval University research ethics committee.

Instruments

To meet the purpose and goals of this research, a multiple instrumental case study design was used (Stake, 2006). Semi-structured interviews and analysis of written materials or documents were used to provide answers to the research questions. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the sports stakeholders targeted in the study: (a) administrators of the sports federations, (b) administrators of the affiliated clubs, (c) athletes in the affiliated clubs, (d) coaches in the affiliated clubs and (e) parents of athletes in the affiliated clubs. The interview guides used were based on the literature in the field as well as on various authors’ recommendations regarding prevention. All the guides dealt with the same themes, that is, the sports environment surrounding the athletes, the stakeholders’ perceptions regarding sexual abuse and preventive measures. Lastly, the body of written materials on prevention of sexual abuse held by the sports federations and the affiliated clubs was analysed. The documents examined dealt with: policies, prevention programmes, codes of ethics and conduct, rules and disciplinary action, awareness-raising, training and general regulations.

Participants

A total of 27 sports stakeholders participated in the project. Five sports administrators (4 men and 1 woman) participated. Two of these administrators worked for provincial federations, two worked for affiliated clubs and one was both general manager of a provincial federation and president of an affiliated club. They were aged between 29 and 59 and had been in their current position in the organisation for an average of six years. The sports administrators had several years' experience in this area (mean: 15 years). Six male coaches aged between 26 and 41 participated in this study. They coached athletes at the national and international levels. The coaches had, on average, 14 years of coaching experience and had been involved in the targeted organisations for an average of ten years. Nine athletes (7 women and 2 men) participated in the study, aged between 18 and 22. These athletes had between eight and 15 years of experience in their sport and had been involved in the targeted organisation for an average of five years. Five were involved at the provincial level, three at the national level and one at the international level. A total of six parents participated in this study (3 women and 3 men) aged between 44 and 55. On average, their children had been practising their sport for nine years and had been involved in the targeted organisation for three years.

Ethical Considerations

A letter presenting the project was sent via electronic mail to the sports organisations targeted for the project. All the organisations which were approached agreed to participate in the project and signed a consent form. The questionnaire used for the study was sent at the same time as the consent form. An appointment was then made with those responsible for sexual abuse prevention to collect the completed questionnaire as well as the written documents to be used for the study. A second appointment was then scheduled for an interview with each person responsible for sexual abuse prevention. A list of all the parents of athletes, athletes over 18-years old and all the coaches was then provided by each organisation. The sports stakeholders were chosen based on the study's selection criteria. Before meeting the targeted individuals, a letter presenting the project was sent by the organisation to all sports stakeholders to inform them of the organisation's participation in the project. Subsequently, a letter presenting the project once again and requesting their participation was sent to the targeted stakeholders. Those who agreed to participate signed a consent form prior to the interviews. Lastly, to prevent any psychological risks associated with participation in the research, contact

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information for a psychologist and a sport psychology consultant was transmitted to the participants via the consent form.

Data Analysis

The data gathered were analysed using content analysis (L’Écuyer, 1987). This type of inductive analysis brought out the themes and categories that were specific to the perceptions of these sports stakeholders regarding their sports environment, the phenomenon of sexual abuse in sport and the prevention of this phenomenon in their sports organisation. Content analysis was also used to analyse the written documents (Gratton and Jones, 2004). In this study, the documents identified for analysis related to: (a) the general regulations of the organisations, (b) the policies on sexual abuse, (c) the codes of ethics or conduct, (d) awareness-raising, information or training regarding sexual abuse, or (e) any other document deemed relevant by the researchers. The information related to sexual abuse sought in the identified documents included rules regarding behaviour management, existing policies and codes of ethics, and any disciplinary action or disciplinary measures proposed.

Findings and Discussion

The results of this study show that several factors influenced the management of sexual abuse prevention in the participating sports organisations. Moreover, nearly all the factors contributed to maintaining a climate of inaction on this issue within the participating sports organisations. This section sets out these factors and their impacts on the measures existing in these organisations.

Factors Influencing the Implementation of Measures and Management of Sexual Abuse in the Sports Organisations

Negative View of Prevention

The way sports stakeholders view prevention can contribute greatly to limiting the effort made in this regard or to no effort being made at all. In fact, the stakeholders greatly trivialised the impacts and the effectiveness of sexual abuse prevention. Although they considered it important to try to prevent this problem, the coaches, parents and administrators appeared afraid that prevention would arouse fear within the organisation and that members would think that measures were being implemented because sexual abuse existed in their organisation. The following quote, drawn from an interview conducted with an administrator, clearly illustrates this thinking: ‘You don’t want to be talking just

about that [sexual abuse prevention], because people will then have the impression that it [this problem] is prevalent in sport.'

Moreover, sports stakeholders seemed to be worried that raising awareness of sexual abuse would lead to unfounded allegations made by parents who would become more attentive and observant or by athletes who would become more aware of sexual abuse. One coach stressed that he was even worried that the research project reported here would: '[. . .] give ideas [to athletes]. . . You know, made-up stories or whatever. This will surely stir up something. I think . . . they shouldn't put this in their heads.'

Faced with sexual abuse, the coaches and administrators seemed to feel vulnerable as employees and as an organisation. They were extremely fearful of unfounded allegations and the repercussions of a possible case in their organisation. Sports administrators believed that exposure could lead to exaggeration, dramatisation and excessive monitoring by parents which might in turn lead to new unfounded allegations. According to many researchers, fear of unfounded allegations constitutes a considerable impediment to prevention (Brackenridge, 2001, 2002; Bringer *et al.*, 2002). Statistics on unfounded allegations nevertheless show that such accusations are very rare (Oates *et al.*, 2000; Trocmé and Bala, 2005). Furthermore, fears of false allegations of abuse against coaches and authority figures have been shown to be unfounded (Brackenridge *et al.*, 2005a).

Finally, the administrators and some parents, in particular, disputed and questioned the effectiveness of prevention. These stakeholders believed it to be impossible to entirely prevent sexual abuse. Moreover, the administrators seemed to consider that investing in prevention, which was seen as yielding few results and being ineffective, was neither a desirable nor a cost-effective course of action.

Lack of leadership, Competence and Resources

Sexual abuse appeared to be a low priority issue for the sport organisations. This problem was raised by all the administrators who considered that, due to the lack of leadership, training, and financial and human resources, sexual abuse would remain a low priority issue:

'[. . .] there is so much to do – just the administrative procedure, supervising young people, supervising employees here and there – that this matter is always put aside because it takes time, and because we don't know what to do with it either. And then we're better at giving courses and doing technical stuff, and we put our energy into what we're good at. So, that's it. Because of a lack of time, we always choose to set this matter aside.' (Sports administrator)

Is this inaction due to a lack of accountability, a feeling of powerlessness or just simply a total lack of interest in this issue?

'Faced with sexual abuse, the coaches and administrators seemed to feel vulnerable as employees and as an organisation'

'Sexual abuse appeared to be a low priority issue for the sport organisations'

‘The administrators stated that they lacked specialised resources in this area’

‘This effect was felt to an even greater extent in the local clubs than it was in the federations’

‘These incidents had made them realise that they were not equipped to deal with sexual abuse’

Brackenridge (2002, 2004, 2006) attributes the difficulty in carrying out prevention to inertia on the part of senior leaders of sports organisations and to the fact that prevention is viewed as a burden rather than as a benefit, as was clearly seen among the coaches and administrators interviewed. The lack of resources and competence also seemed to affect the interventions and actions of sports organisations with regard to sexual abuse, a fact which has also been observed in other studies (Bringer *et al.*, 2002; Malkin *et al.*, 2000). Indeed, the administrators stated that they lacked specialised resources in this area as well as the tools needed to help them implement measures to prevent and manage such problems: ‘I feel that, as an administrator, I’m sort of powerless. We have no training, we’re kind of . . . lost [. . .].’

Since they had never received training in this area, they did not feel competent and this greatly affected their leadership with regard to this issue. Moreover, they considered that they did not have sufficient financial resources, time or staff to devote their efforts to this issue. It was observed that, due to the lack of resources and knowledge, the organisations were not highly active and did not exercise strong leadership in this matter. This effect was felt to an even greater extent in the local clubs than it was in the federations given the more limited resources of the former.

Actual Sexual Abuse Cases

Despite the rather negative influence of the preceding factors on the implementation of preventive measures and sexual abuse management in the sports organisations, a third factor nevertheless played a positive role in this regard; this related to sexual abuse cases which had actually occurred in the participating organisations. In fact, a number of measures had been implemented following events that had occurred in the sports organisations. These measures mainly involved policies and complaint procedures. In all cases, the sports organisations reacted to the problem after inappropriate acts had been reported. The administrators and coaches stated that these incidents had made them realise that they were not equipped to deal with sexual abuse and that such problems could indeed occur in their organisation. They said they had subsequently become more vigilant.

However, most of the measures that existed in the sports organisations involved case management rather than prevention. Thus, the organisations were equipped to a certain extent to manage the crises, but were hardly equipped to provide protection to young athletes. In several cases raised during the interviews, no disciplinary action was taken against the offending coaches, even when there were strong suspicions. Moreover, several stakeholders considered that their sports organisation reacted too late and did too

little in these cases. The following quote illustrates what one coach who participated in the study thought about a case that had occurred in his organisation:

‘[. . .] I think that before this happened, there were already suspicions that he was not to be trusted. [. . .] Personally, I think that in the institution [where the coach worked], people kept their mouths shut, they waited until there was trouble before reacting.’

These sports organisations were reactive rather than proactive with regard to sexual abuse (Brackenridge *et al.*, 2005b).

Impacts of the Factors on Preventive Measures in Sports Organisations

The factors presented above contributed to shaping the actions of sports organisations regarding sexual abuse prevention. The findings related to the impact of these factors on various dimensions of sexual abuse prevention are as follows.

Little Pre-employment Screening

The world of sport relies enormously on the involvement of volunteers. However, in the participating organisations, it was observed that volunteers were not subject to any background checks before being allowed to work with young people (e.g. selection interviews, criminal background checks). Volunteers were not the only ones who could join the sports organisations without being systematically and fully screened first. In fact, the majority of sports organisations (5/6) did not do criminal background checks to screen applicants for staff positions (e.g. coaches). However, all the sports organisations in this study undertook some informal selection interviews and sometimes reference checks before hiring. Completing criminal background checks is nevertheless a key recommendation regarding prevention (Brackenridge, 2001; Smallbone *et al.*, 2008).

Stakeholders are not well trained, informed or aware

The results reveal that none of the parents or athletes who participated in this study had received training on sexual abuse. In fact, no such training was offered in the organisations studied, which confirms other findings that training is not readily available to parents and athletes (Brackenridge *et al.*, 2004). The athletes and parents also stated that they had never received information on sexual abuse through documents or awareness-raising materials. Some sports organisations nevertheless have this type of document available. The administrators, as well, had not received

‘ “They waited until there was trouble before reacting” ’

‘The majority of sports organisations did not do criminal background checks to screen applicants for staff positions’

'These stakeholders are thus an important link in the prevention and management of cases'

'The boundaries of the coach-athlete relationship were not very clear for any of the stakeholders'

'The results show that only two sports federations had a policy on sexual abuse'

'The athletes, parents and coaches did not know what procedures they should follow'

training on sexual abuse. This situation causes concern because it is specifically these stakeholders who are called on to implement policies, react if a problem arises, manage the behaviour of coaches, recruit staff and so on. These stakeholders are thus an important link in the prevention and management of cases. The administrators admitted their total lack of competence in this area and expressed their desire to receive assistance in taking steps to better prevent sexual abuse. As for the coaches, training on sexual abuse was provided only by two sports organisations.

Unclear Boundaries and Lack of Rules relating to Behaviour Management

The results obtained seemed to show that the boundaries of the coach-athlete relationship were not very clear for any of the stakeholders. Moreover, these boundaries were not systematically and formally defined in the sport organisations. There were no instructions or written rules relating to showers, changing rooms, trips away, sharing of hotel rooms and so on. Only one federation had a written regulation prohibiting romantic/sexual relationships between coaches and athletes. Codes of conduct were rare and when one such code existed, it did not require the coaches' signature and no disciplinary action was attached to it. Moreover, most of these codes were produced by the provincial or Canadian sports federations and were not adopted by or did not apply to local member organisations.

Few Measures for Managing Sexual Abuse Cases and Ineffective Existing Measures

The results show that only two sports federations had a policy on sexual abuse. Moreover, these policies only applied to immediate employees of the federations and not to the coaches in local clubs. Also, the national and provincial federations delegated the responsibility for adopting policies to lower-level organisations. Therefore, the policies in place applied to only a very small number of coaches. When discussing policies on sexual abuse, the sports administrators all agreed that such policies were complex and not very applicable in practice. Moreover, they pointed out that they did not feel well equipped to manage or implement such policies. It was also observed that the athletes, parents and coaches did not know what procedures they should follow or what resources would be available if a problem were to occur.

Conclusion

Based on the results, it seems clear that athletes are poorly protected from sexual abuse in sports organisations in this Canadian

sample. Athlete protection inevitably depends on better prevention in sports organisations. In taking action to deal with sexual abuse, it is essential that sports authorities focus on the factors which influence organisations to act or not to act on sexual abuse as well as on the measures involved. The recommendations stemming from the findings of this study have been grouped into a *sexual abuse prevention model for sports organisations* (Figure 1).

Given that a lack of training among sports administrators was an important factor hampering the implementation of measures to prevent and manage cases of sexual abuse, it is necessary to enhance their competence in this matter. Thus, training should be provided for the sports administrators in federations and local clubs to enable them to prevent sexual abuse. Moreover, sports organisations should have access to a resource-person or a body that can help and advise them on this matter. This body could be called on to design and provide training, awareness-raising sessions and tools for sports organisations, while serving as a reference resource for the organisations in case of any problems. Furthermore, this body could provide leadership in athlete protection and ensure that prevention measures are standardised so that

‘A lack of training among sports administrators was an important factor hampering the implementation of measures’

‘This body could provide leadership in athlete protection’

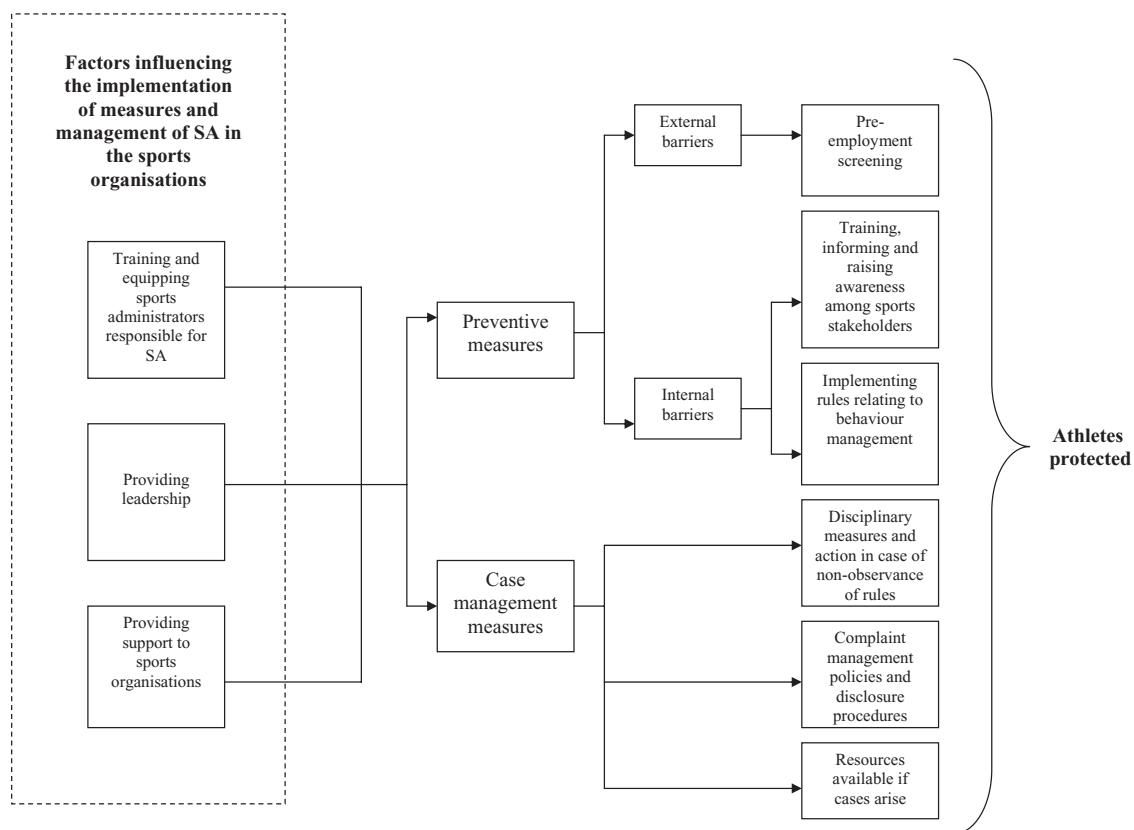


Figure 1. Sexual abuse (SA) prevention model for sports organisations

'The logical solution in terms of better preventing sexual abuse is to exert control over who joins the organisation'

'There is a need for training, information dissemination and awareness-raising, and clear rules and procedures'

'Sexual abuse prevention is contingent on specific approaches based on factors that explain the problem'

disparities can be avoided between sports organisations, as recommended by several authors (Brackenridge, 2006; Weber *et al.*, 2006).

Apart from the factors influencing the implementation of measures, the logical solution in terms of better preventing sexual abuse is to exert control over who joins the organisation (external barriers) and over the risk factors involved (internal barriers) (Cense and Brackenridge, 2001; Smallbone *et al.*, 2008). External barriers refer to the set of measures used by the sports organisations to exert control over employees and anyone who is required to work with the athletes. More specifically, they are measures related to the hiring of coaches and recruiting of volunteers. Internal barriers, on the other hand, refer to the set of measures used to prevent sexual abuse from occurring in a sports organisation once the resource-persons are already inside the organisation. More specifically, these barriers involve disseminating information and implementing rules to manage the behaviour of staff and volunteers towards the young people involved in the organisation. In light of the results, the internal and external barriers should be made more effective. First, the procedures for recruiting coaches and volunteers should be systematised and formalised. Second, there is a need for training, information dissemination and awareness-raising, and clear rules and procedures related to behaviour management need to be laid down. Case management measures also need to be present. Policies, disciplinary measures and complaint procedures need to be established in local organisations as well as in national or provincial federations. Given that policies from higher-level organisations are not highly applicable to member organisations, it is essential that these measures be adapted to the lower-level organisations that work directly with the athletes.

The model presented in Figure 1 is highly consistent with other prevention models, whether in public health (Haddon, 1972, 1974, 1980), crime prevention (Tonry and Farrington, 1995) or child maltreatment (Finkelhor and Daro, 1997). With regard to sexual abuse prevention specifically, the model is similar to the integrated theory of sexual abuse of Smallbone *et al.* (2008). According to this theory, sexual abuse prevention is contingent on specific approaches based on factors that explain the problem. Smallbone *et al.* identify four specific factors: biological and developmental factors (linked to the abuser) and eco-systemic and situational factors. The latter two factors are related to the socio-cultural environment (e.g. culture, laws) and to the risks inherent to a particular situation. The model proposed here takes account of eco-systemic factors (e.g. the culture of sport, myths, etc.) and situational factors (e.g. lack of pre-employment screening) that can explain the appearance or development of sexual abuse in sports organisations. As sexual abuse may have multiple causes, it

should be specified that the present model focuses exclusively on institutional causes. It advocates acting on factors that can favour better sexual abuse prevention in sports organisations.

The *sexual abuse prevention model for sport organisations* was created to guide government, sports organisations and other agencies (police, child welfare, etc.) in their work to protect the youth involved in sport. Indeed, protection of athletes requires collaboration and communication between sports organisations and these agencies. In the future, it could be interesting to combine the present model with Brackenridge *et al.*'s (2005b) model of activation states to determine and evaluate whether changes occurred following the implementation of preventive actions. Brackenridge *et al.*'s model offers a means of evaluating the impacts of protection measures proposed in this article on the organisational culture of sports organisations and this could prove valuable in this respect.

'Protection of athletes requires collaboration and communication between sports organisations and these agencies'

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