



Creating optimally safe and enjoyable youth sporting experiences within the United Kingdom

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A B S T R A C T

Considering recent research and reports, much attention has been given to understanding and addressing issues of abuse in sport. Similarly, attention has been given to enhancing children's psychosocial experiences within sport. However, to-date, consideration of these two elements together, that is minimising abuse and enhancing enjoyment, has been minimal. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to explore perceptions of the process through which an optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experience can be created for young people. A Straussian grounded theory methodology was used to develop a substantive theory detailing the process through which an optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experience is created for young people in sport. Interviews were conducted with 19 young people, six parents, nine coaches, and five individuals in safeguarding roles. The interviews were analysed through open and axial coding, followed by theoretical integration. The resultant theory highlighted that establishing positive relationships between all young people and key individuals in a physically and developmentally safe environment was a fundamental requirement for fostering an optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experience. Achieving this required consideration of factors both in the immediate and broad sporting context. Specifically, support from sports organisations, access to continuing professional development opportunities, and a network of safeguarding experts are required in the broader environment. While within the immediate sporting environment, visibly displayed and appropriately implemented safeguarding policies and procedures; open, honest, and respectful interactions; shared goals and expectations between parents, coaches, and young people, and; trusting and supportive friendships with shared experiences are required.

1. Introduction

In recent years, various researchers have highlighted how the unique socio-cultural context of youth sport presents various possibilities for different forms of maltreatment including bullying and emotional abuse to occur (e.g., [Fasting & Brackenridge, 2009](#); [Hartill, 2013](#); [Mountjoy, 2016](#); [Parent, 2011](#)). In response to the recognition of youth sport as a location in which various forms of maltreatment can occur, there has been increasing interest in promoting young people's rights and creating positive sporting experiences ([Brackenridge, 2001](#); [Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2017](#)). Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ([UN General Assembly, 1989](#)) young people universally are granted rights. Specifically, Article 19 of the UNCRC states that "children (under 18 years of age) have a right to be protected from all forms of maltreatment, abuse, and violence" (Article 19, [UN General Assembly, 1989](#)). The responsibility to protect young people lies with all individuals who bear clear legal, ethical, professional, and/or cultural responsibilities over them ([UNICEF, 2005](#)). Although sport is not explicitly included in the UNCRC, the rights established within the UNCRC still apply ([David, 2005](#)).

Recognising the rights of young people in sport has led to the emergence of various strategies to protect young people from different types of harm or maltreatment ([Rhind & Sekeyere, 2017](#)). The most notable approach in the United Kingdom is safeguarding, which is a comprehensive and proactive approach to keeping young people and vulnerable adults safe from harm or abuse ([UK Department for Education, 2018](#)). Safeguarding includes "protecting children from abuse and maltreatment; preventing harm to children's health or development; ensuring provision of safe and effective care; enabling young people to have the best outcomes" ([UK Department for Education, 2018](#), p. 7). In the UK, the term safeguarding signified a transition from a reactive child protection approach to a more child-centred perspective ([Lang & Hartill, 2015](#)). Specifically, from a safeguarding perspective, the reactive objective of protecting young people specifically at risk of or experiencing maltreatment (i.e., child protection) assumes a secondary role, and emphasis is on the proactive nature inherent in safeguarding ([Gurgis et al., 2021](#)).

In response to many high-profile cases of abuse of young athletes, safeguarding was formally introduced in the UK sport context in 2001 with the formation of the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) and the

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publication of National Standards for Safeguarding Children in Sport (CPSU, 2018). The CPSU, which is part of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), aims to “support the sport and physical activity sector to create a caring culture where children and young people are safe and thrive in sport” (CPSU, 2024). CPSU work in collaboration with National Governing Bodies (NGB’s), sports organisations, and other organisations and individuals involved in youth sport, to provide guidance about safeguarding and to implement safeguarding principles within sport (CPSU, 2018). As a requirement, all organisations that receive funding from UK Sport or Sport England must adhere to the CPSU Standards for Safeguarding and Protecting Children in Sport. In accordance with these guidelines, sports clubs/organisations should implement procedures to minimise young people’s risk of all forms of maltreatment. They should also work towards ensuring that sport remains safe and enjoyable for everyone involved (CPSU, 2018).

As well as the establishment of the CPSU, the high-profile cases of abuse in sport also prompted increasing research pertaining to maltreatment and safeguarding in sport, both within and beyond the UK. For instance, researchers have explored the prevalence of maltreatment within sport, consequences of maltreatment for athletes and parents, and factors that influence the likelihood of maltreatment occurring (e.g., Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014; Everley, 2020; Nite & Nauright, 2020). Specifically, researchers have identified that maltreatment is influenced by interactions between individuals and organisational systems (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014) and it has been suggested that there is a need for a comprehensive approach that addresses all factors contributing to maltreatment in sport (Owusu-Sekyere & Rhind, 2022).

Furthermore, recent research on safeguarding has emphasised the importance of not only preventing maltreatment in sport but also prioritising the optimisation of sporting experiences (Lang & Hartill, 2015). Specifically, researchers contend that when sporting organisations focus on optimising experiences it offers protection from relational, physical, and environmental harm in sport (i.e., positive, inclusive, healthy, growth-enhancing, and respectful of human rights for all individuals; e.g., Gurgis et al., 2023). Particularly, enhancing enjoyment or fun is one of the key considerations for optimising young peoples’ sporting experiences (Gurgis et al., 2023). Sport enjoyment is, “a positive affect response to sport experience that reflects generalised feelings such as pleasure, liking and fun” (Scanlan et al., 1993, p. 6). Research shows that sport enjoyment is the main reason young people participate and maintain involvement in sport (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986; Visek et al., 2015). Meanwhile, a lack of enjoyment can lead to young people dropping out of sports (Gardner et al., 2016).

As one may expect, research indicates that maltreatment can substantially decrease experiences of enjoyment in sport (Jewett et al., 2020; Stirling & Kerr, 2013; Willson & Kerr, 2022). As such, ensuring young people’s safety in sport is likely to have positive impacts on enjoyment. However, merely ensuring safety does not automatically guarantee that they will have enjoyable experiences, not least because enjoyment is a complex concept. For instance, several theoretical perspectives have been adopted by researchers to guide inquiry into sport enjoyment including self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), fun integration theory (Visek et al., 2015), and the sport enjoyment model (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986). The above definition originates from the work of Scanlan and Lewthwaite (1986) who categorise enjoyment across four quadrants. Specifically, their model indicates that sources of enjoyment can be either intrinsic (e.g., excitement, personal accomplishment) or extrinsic (e.g., winning, pleasing others) and can be achievement (e.g., success, mastery) or nonachievement (e.g., time with peers)-related. Clearly, with so many elements influencing enjoyment, to assume that creating safe experiences is sufficient to enhance enjoyment is insufficient.

1.1. The current study

Several advances have been made as it pertains to safeguarding

young people in sport, however, most research emphasises the prevention of maltreatment (Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere, 2017). While ensuring safety and preventing maltreatment in youth sport is paramount, researchers have recently acknowledged the need also to prioritise the optimisation of sporting experiences because solely preventing harm in sport does not guarantee that young people will have optimal sporting experiences (i.e., accessible, inclusive, fair, positive, and enjoyable; Gurgis et al., 2023). Unfortunately, while strides have been made in the prevention of maltreatment, limited attention has been given to establishing how to both ensure safety and optimise sporting enjoyment. Rather, researchers have concerned themselves with enjoyment (e.g., Furusa et al., 2021) or they have sought to examine abuse within youth sport (Alexander et al., 2011; Mountjoy et al., 2015; 2016). Thus, the purpose of the current study was to explore perceptions of the process through which an optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experience can be created for young people.

2. Method

2.1. Methodological approach and philosophical underpinnings

The current study utilised a Grounded theory (GT) methodology. It is suggested that GT is beneficial when exploring novel areas of investigation with limited existing theories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Moreover, GT is useful in investigating research topics that focus on social processes present in human interaction specifically in the environments in which they take place. Given that the current study sought to explore the process underpinning optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experiences, GT was deemed a suitable approach to employ. Furthermore, although there has been a recent increased emphasis on preventing maltreatment in sport and optimising young people’s sporting experiences (Gurgis et al., 2023), to the best of our knowledge there are no existing theories pertaining to optimising safety and enjoyment in sport. We recognise that there is a vast array of theories that have been applied within youth sport, however, these have had an explicit emphasis on safeguarding in sport. Therefore, GT was considered an appropriate methodology.

Specifically, the current study employed the Straussian version of GT (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In line with the more recent versions of Straussian GT, an interpretivist approach was adopted in the current study. An interpretivist perspective proposes that reality is subjective and constructed by the individual (Lather, 2006). Additionally, interpretivism suggests that there is no single reality or precise route to knowledge (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Instead, this approach accepts that multiple perspectives exist and tend to differ between individuals, due to people’s past experiences, personalities, social interactions, and environment. Further, interpretivism acknowledges that the researcher and the object of inquiry both influence one another to shape the construction of the research outcomes.

2.2. Sampling

Following receipt of University Ethics Board approval, participant recruitment commenced. A combination of purposive and theoretical sampling strategies were employed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In GT methodology, initial participants are sampled based on their ability to best address the research aims (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Lead safeguarding officers and/or club welfare officers (CWO)¹ were recruited

¹ Within the UK, a safeguarding officer is the designated person within a sports organisation with primary responsibility for managing and reporting concerns about children and for putting into place procedures to safeguard children. A club welfare officer (CWO) is the person with primary responsibility for managing and reporting concerns about children and for putting into place procedures to safeguard children in the club.

first because they have a fundamental responsibility to safeguard children in sport and were perceived to be able to provide a comprehensive overview into the research topic (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Subsequent recruitment occurred through theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Based on the initial interviews with lead safeguarding officers and welfare officers it appeared that peer relationships were important, the decision was made to sample young athletes involved aged between 13 and 15 years (this age was chosen because individuals of this age were deemed to be cognitively capable of discussing this topic and also likely to have spent sufficient time within sports environments to inform responses). As theoretical sampling progressed other concepts pertaining to 'parental involvement' and the nature of interactions between young people and parents developed leading to the recruitment of more young people and parents. Furthermore, recognising that the relationship between young people, parents, and coaches seemed important, a decision was made to recruit coaches and older young people aged between 15 and 18 years. Sampling concluded once the processes of constant comparison no longer generated new theoretical insights and the theory was deemed sufficiently developed (theoretical saturation; Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

2.3. Participants

The sample consisted of 39 participants: 19 young people, six parents, nine coaches, and five individuals in safeguarding roles. The young people were involved in eight sports: tennis (n = 7), swimming (n = 3), football (n = 3), rugby (n = 3), hockey (n = 1), and cricket (n = 2). Young people ranged in age from 13 to 18 years (M age = 14.89, SD = 1.88), and had been involved in their self-declared "main" sport for between four to 12 years (M = 7.21, SD = 2.14). Parent participants were four fathers and two mothers, who had children ranging between 13 and 17 years of age involved in tennis (n = 4), rugby (n = 1), and swimming (n = 1). In total, from the young people and parent participants, 6 were familial dyads (e.g. a parent and a young person from the same family participated). Coaches included six men and three women who currently coached tennis (n = 2), football (n = 3), rugby (n = 1), basketball (n = 1), hockey (n = 1), and rugby (n = 1) to young people ranging between 8 and 23 (M age = 16, SD = 3.59). The individuals in safeguarding roles were five women, who worked as lead safeguarding officer (n = 2), club welfare officer (n = 2) and child protection consultant (n = 1).

2.4. Data collection

Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, with the aim of identifying perceptions of optimally safe and enjoyable youth sport experiences. Before each interview, participants were given an information sheet detailing the study aims and asked to provide informed consent/assent and parental consent. On average the interviews were 69.62 min (SD = 15.4), ranging from 45.01 to 99.00 min. Separate interview guides were developed for young people, parents, coaches, and individuals in safeguarding roles. Across all participants, introductory questions aimed to establish rapport while collecting demographic information and understanding participants' involvement in sport. Subsequently, the main questions examined perceptions of enjoyment and safety within sport. Particularly, participants were asked to share examples of experiences, factors, or considerations which had positively and/or negatively influenced their (if children) or perceived to influence children's (if adults) enjoyment and safety in sport. Additionally, participants were asked to share their perceptions of what would be required to enhance safety and enjoyment. As new concepts emerged, the interview guides were revised, aligning with the principle of theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In total 20 iterations of the interview guides were developed. These are available from the lead author.

2.5. Data analysis

Data analysis commenced after the initial interview and continued throughout the data collection process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Initially, open coding occurred. This involved breaking down the data and defining concepts to represent the interpreted meaning of raw data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Specifically, during open coding, analysis explored data for concepts which were relevant to the research as well as properties and dimensions of these concepts. For instance, in the initial phases of data collection and analysis codes such as "friendly atmosphere" "welcoming environment", and "positive relationships," were used when participants discussed what they believed was important in the sporting context.

Next, axial coding was conducted. This involved reconstructing fractured data by making connections between the various categories and subcategories (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Specifically, data were reviewed and coded again to identify connections between concepts that were identified during the initial coding process. For example, "welcoming environment helps increase enjoyment and safety," "having adequate sporting facilities and equipment," and "making sure training drills are developmentally appropriate" were some of the axial codes used.

The final stage, known as theoretical integration, occurred once all concepts were fully developed and careful consideration had been given to relationships between categories had been identified (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Specifically, theoretical integration involved identifying and organising concepts around the core category. Reviewing the data, it appeared that participants perceived the most important aspect of optimally safe and enjoyable experiences to be developing positive relationships between young people and key stakeholders within a welcoming sporting environment. Additionally, ensuring a safe physical environment and delivering developmentally appropriate activities were identified as important across categories. Therefore, a core category labelled "developing positive relationships between stakeholders in a welcoming and environmentally safe and developmentally appropriate setting" was created.

To facilitate data analysis, various analytic strategies were employed. Firstly, questioning the data with prompts such as, what or how are participants' meanings different? helped facilitate the identification of key properties and dimensions of developing concepts. Additionally, the process of constant comparison enabled the discovery of patterns and variations within the concepts. For example, several participants mentioned that developing positive relationships where people were on the same page helped optimise enjoyment and safety. As a result, data analysis included comparisons of participant responses for similarities and differences focused on follow-up questions regarding shared goals.

Memos and diagrams were also created. These were used to facilitate the identification of properties and dimensions of concepts, as well as understanding the relationships between them. Memos drew upon previous memos, interview data, and existing literature to inform the interpretations of the research team. With regards to literature, Straussian GT encourages a basic review of the literature as it can be useful in providing context to the phenomenon being studied and assist in developing a rationale for the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the current study, a literature review was conducted initially to gain an understanding of safeguarding and enjoyment in sport. For example, it was evident from the literature review that various frameworks exist for safeguarding or enhancing enjoyment in sport, including the Safeguarding Culture in Sport Model (Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022), the SafeSport Framework (Gurgis et al., 2023), the Fun Integrated Theory (Visek et al., 2015), and the Sport Enjoyment Model (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986). However, none of the theories explicitly focused on safety and enjoyment in an integrated fashion. Subsequently, following the initial stages of data collection and analysis, existing literature was used to explore the concepts that had been developed.

2.6. The research team

The lead researcher responsible for data collection is a Black British African who is educated with an undergraduate and postgraduate degree in sport and exercise science. He was actively involved in various sports, including basketball, athletics, and football, until his early twenties. His master's research focused on parental involvement and its influence on children's enjoyment in sport, reflecting his predominantly positive sporting experiences. However, his perceptions of sport as a universally positive environment shifted upon enrolling on his PhD programme focusing on safeguarding in sport and collaborating closely with the CPSU. Through his studies and this collaboration, he gained first hand insights into the pervasive issue of maltreatment within sport and the risks it poses. As such, over the course of the study, his understanding of the role of sport evolved from merely facilitating enjoyable experiences to a more holistic approach that places paramount importance on ensuring the safety and well-being of young people in sport. The second and third authors, both White British academics, contribute distinct expertise to the study. The second author, a woman, brings extensive experience in youth sport parenting and youth sporting experiences. Meanwhile, the third author, a man, offers insights gained from his background as a sport science researcher and practitioner.

2.7. Methodological Rigor

In the current study, the quality of the GT was assessed using criteria proposed by Holt and Tamminen (2010). First, the authors suggest that epistemological and ontological perspectives and the research questions should align with the variant of GT employed in the study. Consistent with these suggestions, the current study employed a Straussian GT approach which aligned with the researcher's ontological and epistemological perspective. Following the selection of the Straussian GT approach all subsequent research decisions were informed and in line with this approach. Secondly, Holt and Tamminen (2010) suggest that researchers consider participant sampling and sample size. Unique to grounded theory GT studies is the concept of theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation, which are critical in determining the suitability of participants and decisions regarding the conclusion of data collection (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Thus, purposive sampling and theoretical sampling were utilised in the current study. This process helped identify connections between different concepts.

Thirdly, the authors suggest that methodological congruence should be demonstrated throughout the planning and execution of data collection and analysis (Holt & Tamminen, 2010). Aligned with these suggestions, the planning and execution of the current study followed an iterative process of data collection and analysis throughout the duration of the study. Furthermore, congruent with GT methodology, several methods such as memos, diagrams, and constant comparison were used throughout the data analysis process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Finally, Holt and Tamminen (2010) suggest that the last step should involve the contemplation of the final product, theory generation which should be the ultimate aim of a GT study (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Congruent with GT, the current study presents results as an interconnected set of categories, instead of a descriptive set of independent themes. As a result, the categories and connections between categories provide a substantive GT of an optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experience. This substantive theory is proposed not as a definitive global model but one that is open to future exploration and modification across different cultures and contexts.

3. Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the process through which an optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experience is created for young people. The substantive grounded theory (GT) generated consists of thirteen categories revolving around the core category of developing

positive relationships between young people and key individuals in a welcoming, environmentally safe, and developmentally appropriate setting.

3.1. Optimally safe and enjoyable sport experiences

In developing a theory of optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experiences, it is first necessary to detail what participants perceived constituted a safe and enjoyable sporting experience. For Devin (14-year-old county cricket player), it was comfort that was important, he shared, "cricket is fun, I love the sport it helps because I've got good friends and coaches at my club, I feel comfortable there because we all know each other, and I enjoy playing with my mates." For Sian (14-year-old national tennis player), it was the relationships that were important, "I feel really comfortable at my club because people smile at me every day, they say hi and stuff, they always try and include us in stuff which makes me feel good." Further, participants also explained that an optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experience is one in which young people feel secure and perceive personal development occurring. Brian (county rugby coach) expressed, "it's important that we ensure that they're treated correctly, you know, that they're treated like children and we need to make sure they're in a safe environment where they can come and enjoy and get better at their sport without fear of any abuse or anything whether that's physical or psychological." Taken together, within the context of this grounded theory, an optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experience is considered as one in which young people feel happy, comfortable, confident, competent, relaxed, and connected with others in the environment. It is an environment in which young people feel valued, that things feel familiar, they have a sense of security (free from anticipation of any harm both emotionally or physically), and they experience and perceive self-development.

3.2. Core category: developing positive relationships between individuals in a welcoming, developmentally appropriate, and physically safe setting

To achieve the optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experience, participants suggested that having opportunities to develop positive relationships was core. Susan (Lead safeguarding officer) summarised, "for me, I think having positive relationships are key to ensuring kids are safe and enjoying themselves." Participants explained that positive relationships made them feel comfortable, which in turn enabled them to have positive experiences as Jacinda (17-year-old county football player) said "I've always felt comfortable at my club, I think because everyone knows everyone, we're all familiar with each other and for the most part everyone gets along as well, you know." Furthermore, participants believed that positive relationships were crucial for safety as it facilitated opportunities to address any safeguarding concerns, Jenny (CPSU Development officer) shared, "I think relationships, impact on these policies and procedures [...] There needs to be positive relationships for people to know what to do if anything happens."

For such relationships to exist, participants expressed that it was useful for people in the immediate sporting environment to be welcoming, friendly, approachable, and acknowledge one another. Katie (18-year-old national hockey player) shared, "it's as simple as everyone saying hi and if someone new joins, make the effort to introduce yourself, that obviously makes new players feel comfortable." Meanwhile, participants highlighted that if individuals in the sporting environment were unwelcoming, it created feelings of discomfort and negatively impacted young people's enjoyment. Rueben (15-year-old county cricket player) explained, "I would feel uncomfortable if I couldn't approach people at my club, let's say they ignored you [...] I wouldn't enjoy that." Such sentiments extended beyond young people and included parents, Toni (Lead safeguarding officer) expressed, "You know, it's not just about making children feel safe, coaches also need to make parents feel that the children are safe." Similarly, Jenny (CPSU development officer) shared, "when the culture is unwelcoming towards

parents it can become a bit uncomfortable and less enjoyable for children because conflict happens because there's a complete communication breakdown and parents just don't feel they can say anything."

Beyond relationships, participants also placed emphasis on the physical environment. Specifically, participants thought the sport setting should be physically safe for young people, Jermaine, (father of a regional tennis player) mentioned, "I guess the facilities are important. As a parent, you're always looking for a club with the right facilities. It should be hygienic and safe for her to be in." Such facilities were also seen to impact on enjoyment, as Jason (18-year-old academy football player) expressed when talking about his old club, "It wasn't great [old club] [...] it was rundown, [...] the facilities were crap, I didn't enjoy playing there."

Another factor pertaining to the physical sporting environment was the importance of having efficiently run sports clubs with health and safety protocols. Rhodri (father of an academy rugby player) said, "I think the academy has a duty to create a safe environment for the players and have processes and systems in place so that whatever is happening follows strict guidelines." It appeared that it would be uncomfortable for young people to take part in a sport setting that had no health and safety policies in place. In fact, this was partially the reason Elana, (mother of county tennis player), removed her daughter from her old club:

Sports clubs need to have proper procedures in place when accidents occur, who to report it to, there should be a method of reporting an accident properly. My daughter had a head injury once at her old club, they didn't even have ice packs available that sort of thing. The safety bit from that side of things concerned me and not just me a lot of other people and that was part of the reason why I moved her to [new club].

Finally, participants expressed that it was fundamental that children accessed developmentally appropriate activities to ensure that young people were safe and able to enjoy their sport. Brian (county rugby coach) explained, "So, when you're teaching things, you know, you need to ensure that they are developmentally appropriate, and players understand." Age-appropriate sessions enabled young people to adapt to the demands and physical aspects of their sport without risking injury. Mona (14-year-old county tennis player) shared, "my coach gives us stuff to do which is hard but not too hard that you want to stop." By doing so, confidence increased, in turn enhancing young people's enjoyment. Jerome (county football coach) said:

It's important when they're young to start things off quite easy, skills through games. It needs to be developmentally appropriate. You don't want to throw them straight in the deep end where they're going to fail, do you know what I mean? Because they just won't enjoy it and probably won't come back.

Participants also explained it was important there was a balance between performance outcomes and enjoyment, which would change depending on developmental age. Jerome (county football coach) summarised, "You have to find a good balance between performance and enjoyment otherwise kids just won't enjoy it and probably will drop out because of the pressure." Similarly, from a safety perspective, Iona (basketball coach) shared, "if it's all performance driven you can end up creating a bad environment where there's a blame culture, where players are blaming each other for mistakes and that's not a good environment to play in."

Fulfilment of this core category occurs through interactions across 11 categories. Three of these categories (a-c) relate to the broad sporting context (factors external to the immediate sporting environment including and related to the National Governing Body). The other nine (d-k) exist in the immediate sporting context (i.e., the specific club/environment in which children are training/competing). Of note, categories a-c were typically discussed only by adults, with very little reference made by children. Meanwhile, categories d-k were discussed,

to some extent, by all participant groups.

3.3. Category a: tangible support to create physically safe and developmentally appropriate sessions

Pertaining to the broader sporting context, participants expressed the importance of sports clubs receiving appropriate support from the NGBs to create the appropriate physical sporting setting. Specifically, they emphasised that NGBs played a crucial role in supporting clubs to provide safe spaces for young people to participate in their sport securely. From a safety perspective, Toni (Lead safeguarding officer) explained:

I think there's eight or nine performance clubs in Wales which are governed by [NGB]. So, there's some leadership and support from [NGB] that makes sure all Welsh swimmers have access to safe facilities and that clubs are doing what they should to make sure the environment is decent and safe for kids to swim in.

Many believed that a safe physical environment also helped enhance young people's sporting experiences, as Lloyd, (hockey coach), shared, "You know, I think it's important the safety of you know, the playing field and other things like the equipment etc. We are in a good place in terms of the facility management, they [club] do a good job of making sure the physical space is safe for the players to get the best out of their experience." Participants perceived that lower-level clubs often faced financial challenges and lacked sufficient support from NGBs to provide adequate facilities. Jermaine (father of a regional tennis player) shared his daughter's experience at her previous club, saying, "I don't think they [club] received much funding because the facilities were a bit dilapidated, and she didn't really enjoy her experience there as much as she does now at [new tennis club]." As such, some participants expressed that having lack of resources negatively impacted on their enjoyment. For instance, Devin (14-year-old county cricket player) shared, "I've left my gloves at home before and I've had to borrow the club's kit, its all old and horrible I don't enjoy using it." Through the provision of funding and support, NGBs play an important role in ensuring children have access to suitable facilities and equipment to safely participate and enjoyable their experiences.

3.4. Category b: access to and participation in continuing professional development

Alongside their responsibility for funding facilities, participants also highlighted the importance of sports organisations and NGBs providing access to continuing professional development (CPD) training for key individuals (i.e., coaches and individuals in safeguarding roles). Specifically, it was recognised that to provide enjoyable and developmentally safe and appropriate sessions, coaches needed to be competent, which required them to consistently enhance their knowledge. Gwen (Academy tennis coach) explained, "I think it's important to have the right amount of training to know how to set sessions to make sure they are developmentally appropriate because it can become more challenging with bigger groups of kids, so it's important coaches really get stuck into CPD."

CPD related to engaging young people was seen as particularly necessary. Wayne (national football coach) explained, "a lot of coaches are good at technical tactical stuff and they do a shed load of planning in terms of their session, but they miss the relationship piece, the emotional bit, and how to actually connect with players." This need for training to help develop appropriate relationships was also highlighted by Katrina (regional tennis coach) who shared: "Society is changing [...], sadly back in the day some poor practices were accepted as the norm [...] things are changing and what used to be acceptable isn't anymore. So, [coaches need] to be getting the appropriate education, [...] about what is safe and enjoyable for kids now."

Additionally, participants recognised the need for NGBs to provide

appropriate access to safeguarding training courses. Georgia (club welfare officer) explained, “having access to safeguarding training courses is key, otherwise, I wouldn’t have a clue to be honest.” Similarly, Jenny (CPSU Development officer) said, “it can be difficult at club level to make the right judgment, but this is where that extra training is so important and the support for that club welfare officer is really important.” Having access to safeguarding training was particularly important given that most safeguarding roles in the immediate sporting context were voluntary posts, as Susan (Lead safeguarding officer/chairperson) explained, “We have to remember and keep in mind that welfare offices are volunteers and normally have a day job [...] Sadly, on occasion, welfare officers don’t feel confident in doing their role, so it is important they have access to training and resources to help to do their job effectively.” Particularly, analysis suggested it was important the NGB facilitated all staff to have access to relevant courses so that safeguarding concerns were handled appropriately (related to Category d) and the welfare and enjoyment of young people was prioritised throughout.

3.5. Category c: access to a network of individuals involved in safeguarding roles

The final category in the broader sporting context related to staff networks. Specifically, participants highlighted the importance of individuals involved in any safeguarding capacities having access to a broad supportive professional network. Such networks included individuals who possessed expertise in safeguarding to support staff to effectively implement policies and practices (Category d). Lynda (club welfare officer) explained why this was important:

I would say I have an average level of knowledge for a welfare officer. I wouldn’t say that I am well-equipped on how to handle everything. So, the chair of our care management group is [name of person], so I rely on him a lot because often there will be something that comes to me and I have no idea how to deal with it or know the right way to deal with certain things, so if he wasn’t there, I would really struggle.

Moreover, because within this sample, club welfare officers tended to be volunteers, having a wide network with extensive expertise was important to enable welfare officers to effectively fulfil their responsibilities. Toni (Lead safeguarding officer) shared:

The key things that stand out to me is the need to make sure welfare offices are connected and they feel that there is a support system around them, because they’re usually standalone roles they often feel quite isolated because they may have difficult situations that they may not feel confident to deal with. So, having that connection with other welfare officers and myself is important and it’s been key to making improvements.

Given the complexity of safeguarding, participants highlighted that even lead safeguarding officers sought assistance from other individuals who possessed particular safeguarding knowledge. Susan (Lead safeguarding officer) shared, “So as safeguarding officers, we rely heavily on the expertise of people like that [Director of child welfare and Chair] because we don’t always have in-house knowledge on dealing with certain things.”

3.6. Category d: visibly displayed and appropriately implemented safeguarding policies and procedures

Within the immediate sporting context, participants emphasised the importance of policies and procedures. One aspect that was particularly highlighted by participants was the necessity for clubs to have a designated welfare officer. Ray (17-year-old academy football player) said, “it’s quite good because at the academy we have a welfare officer that we can go to if we need to talk about anything, which makes me feel at ease.” However, simply having a welfare officer was not sufficient,

rather it was important for clubs to ensure that young people were informed about the identity of the welfare officer and knew how to access them if needed. Katrina (regional tennis coach) explained, “I think it’s really important that safeguarding stuff is communicated to players and parents, so they know what to do and who to go to if there is a problem or concern.” In fact, participants highlighted that if people were not aware or introduced to a welfare officer they were less likely to feel confident to report concerns, as Erin (mother of a national tennis player) shared, “I have to say I would feel more resistance trying to report a concern to someone I’ve never seen or who I wasn’t really sure who they were [...] I would be more hesitant with that lack of visibility and lack of reassurance.

Participants also explained that it was important that safeguarding policies and procedures were appropriately and consistently implemented, and incidents were managed appropriately. Christian (father of country tennis player) summarised, “you would hope that if a concern was ever raised that it would be handled properly.” Similarly, Toni (Lead safeguarding officer) explained, “It’s important that if there is poor practice at a club level regardless of what it is, is addressed, and ... those low-level reports are recorded. So, then if it continues to keep happening then it can be escalated to the NGB.” Not addressing aspects appropriately were seen to not only lead to unsafe practices continuing, but also reduce young people’s enjoyment. Rob (14-year-old national swimmer) shared:

I was a chubby kid. I was just like a normal guy [...] and I wasn’t a good swimmer. The older swimmers used to make fun of my weight. I told the coaches at the time, but they didn’t do anything [...] Sometimes the coaches would just look and laugh when it was happening ... I didn’t really enjoy swimming then.

3.7. Category e: open, honest, and respectful interactions between coaches, parents, and young people

To have opportunities to establish positive relationships, analysis suggested its important that all individuals within the immediate sporting context interact with each other in an open, honest, and respectful manner. When staff and coaches facilitated a culture of open communication among all individuals in the immediate sporting context, it made people feel comfortable. Elana (mother of a county tennis player) explained, “with my daughter’s new coach the communication is just there, she’s open with us and I like that, we know where we stand and Lowri [daughter] is comfortable and she enjoys it.” Such open communication was particularly important from a safeguarding perspective because it helped participants feel more comfortable to report concerns if needed, enabling policies and procedures to be followed (Category d). Katie (18-year-old national hockey player) shared, “I’ve never really felt worried about anything to be honest. My coach is pretty cool. He’s super friendly and open, if I didn’t like something or had any worries or anything, I know I could easily speak to him. So, I feel safe in that sense.”

Participants shared that when coaches or staff were not open, this was a cause of concern, particularly parents. Elana (mother of a county tennis player) explained:

It wasn’t a kind of a welcoming place [old club] where you could ask the coach questions or even the manager, they were very defensive. Well, that screams alarm bells to me if somebody is defensive. They’ve got things to hide or they’re not being open or transparent [...] which didn’t make me feel comfortable sending my daughter there.

In such situations, it was perceived that this could then lead to safeguarding concerns not being reported or proper reporting channels being by-passed. Jenny (CPSU officer) shared: If the parents don’t like the coach, they won’t even attempt to report a concern they’ll go straight to the top of the National Governing Body for a bullying issue.

We've had one where a parent has come straight to us because the parent doesn't trust the coach.

Participants also suggested that honesty between all parties was important because it helped develop trust, which facilitated children's enjoyment. For example, when asked what could be done to optimise safety and enjoyment Aled (17-year-old rugby player) responded, "Making sure that players feel comfortable in the environment and giving them good honest advice [...] They [coaches and staff] should just pull players to the side and be honest with them. It's better because at least you know where you stand then." However, participants also wanted interactions to remain respectful, as Kyle (county football coach) simply stated, "No matter how emotional someone's feeling, there still has to be respect." If communication was disrespectful it made people feel uncomfortable and consequently could have a negative impact on young people's enjoyment. Gwen (Academy tennis coach) described: "I remember a while back now a parent was upset with a decision I made, and I was open to receiving constructive criticism. Instead, she had a pop at me in front of other kids [...], she made other kids feel uncomfortable."

3.8. Category f: shared goals and expectations between parents, coaches, and young people

It also appeared that coaches, parents, and young people needed to establish shared goals and expectations. Shared goals for matches/competitions and long-term development created a sense of comfort and enabled young people to derive enjoyment from their sport. Kimi (13-year-old regional tennis player) explained, "it feels good because they [coach and parents] know my goals are and they just support me, which is nice, there's no pressure." Likewise, Rhiannon (13-year-old regional swimmer) shared, "I love it my coaches want the best for me, my parents want the best for me and ... we're all on the same page." Unfortunately, participants perceived that when parents, coaches, and young people were not in tune, unmet goals could lead to conflict that reduced enjoyment and could lead to emotional abuse. Tristian (father of a regional swimmer) shared, "I've seen lots of arguments over the years where people haven't been on the same page and it's not been a pleasant environment to be around and parents have had to take their child out of the club because expectations weren't met."

Similarly, Elana (mother of a county tennis player) explained:

We tried to establish what my daughter's goals were with the coach, in the sense, is she a potential regional player? [...] We could never get a straight answer [...] and that's one of the main reasons we took her out of the club, my daughter just wasn't happy.

Shared expectations were also important, particularly as they pertained to what was expected of individuals within the sport setting. Tristian (father of a regional swimmer) discussed, "I think they [coaches] need to be clear at the start on what they will and won't tolerate from them [swimmers]." Participants believed that if expectations were openly discussed this helped ensure that everyone behaved in accordance with the club's accepted values and principles. For example, Katrina (regional tennis coach) said, "I think it's important that players understand boundaries, discipline and what's expected of them." Similarly, Elana (mother of county tennis player) said, "I suppose there could be more awareness around expected behaviour of parents." It appeared that when expectations were openly and collaboratively discussed, individuals were able to understand their responsibilities and expectations regarding their behaviour. As a result, the environment became more comfortable for everyone involved, inappropriate behaviours (i.e., emotional abuse) were less likely to occur, and it facilitated the enjoyment of young people.

3.9. Category g: opportunities for coaches, parents, and young people to interact

Based on analysis of the data, categories e and f could only occur if there are opportunities for players, parents, and coaches to come together formally or informally. The creation of such opportunities was seen to be primarily the responsibility of coaches. Brian (county rugby coach) suggested, "It's just little things, if there are a few coaches setting up cones, we encourage one to go have a chat with a parent so they can build a relationship and coaches can get a better understanding of the child." Erin (mother of a national tennis player) shared similar sentiments: "Her [daughter's] coach is really good, she'll make an effort and come over every now and then. Sometimes it's just a quick 10-min chat. Sometimes ... we have a longer chat ... it helps build trust plus it helps me support her better [daughter]."

Coaches also played a key role in facilitating supportive peer relationships (category k) by arranging opportunities for young people to take part in games or socialise away from the immediate sport setting which helped enhance young people's enjoyment. For example, when discussing what enabled him to establish supportive peer relationships, Jason (18-year-old academy football player) said:

Usually at the start of the season, we usually go down the beach ... We're there down the beach with the coaches playing games and getting to know each other. ... I think that helps so much. I don't think coaches realise how much stuff like that actually benefits, like us as players ... understanding each other and making friends. It's unbelievable.

Similarly, Katie (18-year-old national hockey player) shared, "coaches were good they introduced us to each other, and they organised a team social where we all got to know each other better." By getting to know each other, and developing supportive peer relationships, peers were also more likely to step in and prevent maltreatment from occurring (see category k).

3.10. Category h: caring, competent, autonomy-supportive coaches

One of the key factors influencing the interactions and relationships within the immediate environment (achieved through categories e, f, and g) was the characteristics of the coach. Specifically, coach's capacity for caring. Susan (Lead safeguarding officer) explained, "When I say a good coach, I don't mean somebody who knows the sport. I mean somebody who cares about them [young people], who is invested in their future, who cares about them as a whole person." Participants explained that having a coach who was caring helped them trust and be open with their coach, which appeared to be important in optimising their safety and enjoyment. Rob (14-year-old national swimmer) shared, "it [his relationship with the coach] makes me feel like I am appreciated at the club like I don't know how to explain it. She actually pays attention, and she cares about me as a person."

Conversely, when coaches lacked care, young people did not feel valued and struggled to trust them, which negatively influenced their enjoyment and safety. For example, when explaining why he did not like his former coach Ray (17-year-old academy football player) said, "For the first few weeks, my coach didn't say much to me off the pitch he didn't care. I was just there. I was going in, and he barely spoke to me. He would just walk past me, that type of thing. It makes you feel shit." Similarly, if coaches were too critical this negatively impacted on young people's safety. Rhys (16-year-old academy rugby player) said:

If you shout at someone and say what they've done wrong it doesn't help. If anything, you're going to make the player feel like shit and they're not going to get anything out of it. But if a coach pulls someone to the side after a session or a game and explains the situation to them and explains what they did wrong and how can improve it, that's much better.

When coaches were too critical this made young people feel uncomfortable and consequently, negatively influenced their enjoyment as Ray (17-year-old academy football player) shared, “I’ve had coaches tell me, you do this badly, you do this badly, you do this badly. It doesn’t feel great.” Similarly, Iona (University basketball coach) shared, “Honestly I don’t think constant negative reinforcement or negative feedback alone will ever have a positive effect on performance or players overall mood.”

Participants also highlighted the importance of having a coach who was competent and equipped with the appropriate knowledge and skills to fulfil their responsibilities. Jenny (CPSU Development officer) said, “it’s important to have coaches who have been trained and know what they’re doing.” More specifically, it was important that coaches deliver developmentally appropriate sessions, as Lloyd (hockey coach) shared, “it’s all got to be child-centred and developmentally appropriate or else that can be potentially dangerous and negatively impact children.” When young people were making progress in their sport and perceived their coach to be competent, they explained it impacted on their confidence and, subsequently, optimised their feelings of safety and enjoyment. For example, Sian (14-year-old national tennis player) said, “I really enjoy playing tennis at my club now, because I want to get better and I know there are good level coaches here, [...] and I enjoy playing well in matches.”

Finally, participants also expressed the importance of coaches being autonomy supportive. Gwen (Academy tennis coach) explained, “When I am coaching, I like players to make suggestions and make choices about what they want to do in training. I don’t see an issue with that, it makes them feel more comfortable.” Specifically, participants believed that giving young people choices over their participation helped increase their enjoyment while also helping them to feel comfortable and safe. Linked to this, participants recalled the importance of coaches providing consistent and constructive feedback. Fabya (14-year-old national swimmer) said, “it’s nice, they [coaches] critique you afterwards and give you feedback, don’t get me wrong. They’ll say if you messed up something, but they will also tell you how to improve it which is good.” This approach limited feelings of pressure, which can be associated with emotional abuse.

3.11. Category i: positive, proactive, supportive parental involvement

Alongside specific coach characteristics, participants also suggested specific parental characteristics that were associated with enjoyment and safety, namely positive, proactive, support involvement. Participants explained that sport meant a lot to young people as such it was important that parents showed interest in their participation. Devin (14-year-old county cricket player) said, “my parents are amazing! Cricket means a lot to me, so it’s nice to have their support. My mum knows nothing about cricket, but she’s still interested like.”

Linked to showing interest, participants explained that having parents who made an effort to be present during training helped young people feel comfortable and enabled them to relax and focus on enjoying their sport. Lowri (13-year-old county cricket player) said, “I feel safe when my parents watch me and like maybe if I hit a good shot, they like clap or something and they just give me encouragement to play, and I enjoy it.” Having parents present was particularly important for younger athletes when they were nervous. Mona (14-year-old county tennis player) shared, “normally in a competition I feel nervous at times, so it’s nice to look over and see them [parents] it calms me down and I can just focus.” Participants also expressed that having parents around was good in case anything happened which compromised young people’s safety. For example, Jayna (13-year-old regional tennis player), said, “having my dad around at tournaments is nice because sometimes you get parents shouting and calling out lines [...] if he’s there I know he will stick up for me if anything happened.” This was particularly important when adults in the environment acted inappropriately, Gwen (Academy tennis coach) shared:

Unfortunately, I’ve been at tournaments where I’ve seen a dad spit in his kid’s face a little girl like nine years old [...] I’m sure it was probably scary for other kids who watched that happen. Thankfully, their parents were there to support them.

Linked to this, participants indicated that emotional support from parents played a key role in enhancing young people’s sporting experiences. Participants emphasised that competing was challenging, and young people tended to be self-critical. Encouragement from parents helped young people feel better, as Jacinda, (17-year-old county-level football player) explained:

I over think things in games and when I make mistakes, I don’t think of the good things I’ve done, I always think of the bad things ... but it’s nice to have my parents watch because they’re so supportive they encourage me and focus on the positives of the game.

Most young people were critical of their own performance, as most wanted to improve. Therefore, increased criticism negatively influenced their experiences, so it was suggested for parents to focus on encouraging them as Susan (Lead safeguarding officer/chairperson) explained, “there has to be a point where parents understand that it’s important to watch their children and it’s important to encourage them and not to be over critical about their performance.” Conversely, when parents were critical and not supportive this impacted negatively on safety and enjoyment, as Rhiannon (13-year-old regional swimmer) shared, “some parents try to make their kids the best even when they can’t be [...] They shout and stuff which causes arguments [...] it’s not nice to be around.

3.12. Category j: welcoming friendly peers

Participants expressed the importance of young people creating a friendly and welcoming environment, particularly when new individuals joined. Katie (18-year-old national hockey player) said, “it can be quite daunting joining a new team if you don’t know anyone, so I always try my best to make new people feel welcome.” Creating a welcoming atmosphere was important in making young people feel safe and enjoy their sport. Jason (18-year-old academy football player) shared his experience joining the academy, “the boys [teammates] were so welcoming when I joined, they helped me a lot with settling in, I felt really comfortable, and it allowed me to crack on and play football.” However, when peers were not welcoming this negatively impacted safety and enjoyment, as Jacinda (17-year-old county football player) “some of the girls at my old club back home were a bit clicky and bitchy which can’t have been comfortable for new players joining.” Similarly, Katie (18-year-old national hockey player):

I know quite recently in the under 16 squad, one comment was said about a family member [...] and people have then taken that to heart [...] things have sort of changed quite quickly and the environment is a bit hostile, there’s a bit of friction between players, because other teammates feel like they need to pick a side [...] it’s not a nice environment to play in.

In addition, participants highlighted the importance of peers in the environment being friendly and approachable. Reuben (15-year-old county cricket player) explained, “when you join a new club, you’d want there to be someone that’s friendly and approachable, someone you can get along with and have a laugh with, that’s what it’s all about, making friends and playing together.” Ultimately, having welcoming and friendly peers enabled young people to develop meaningful trusting and supportive friendships (category k), and participants emphasised that these relationships are fundamental to children’s sporting experiences making them feel comfortable and allowing them to enjoy their sport and also protecting them from maltreatment.

3.13. Category k: trusting and supportive friendships with shared experiences

Participants explained that through opportunities to interact (category g) and having welcoming and friendly peers (category i), young people were able to develop trusting friendships. Having trusting peer relationships helped young people support and better understand each other. This was particularly important when it came to banter and camaraderie. Ray (17-year-old academy football player) shared, "I enjoy having a laugh with the boys, we take the piss out of each all the time, I actually think banter is healthy." That said, participants highlighted that banter had the potential of getting out of hand but that supportive peer relationships helped young people navigate this. Devin (14-year-old county cricket player) shared, "we have banter, but people know not to step over the line, we all know each other and if it was to get too intense, we would step in and say stop." Similarly, Rueben (15-year-old county cricket player) explained, "Yeah, it can be hard, but you've got to find that balance. I've heard that the banter in other clubs can get out of hand, where it's borderline bullying basically."

Also, teammates and peers having opportunities to interact (category g) was important to facilitate shared experiences. For example, Marco (13-year-old national tennis player) explained, "I feel safe playing with my friends, obviously we all play tennis together like they understand stuff like my other friends don't." Similarly, when talking about enjoyment, Ray (17-year-old academy football player) shared, "everyone's there for the same reason; everyone's here because we love playing football [...] I think it just becomes much more comfortable, you train better, you play better as a team, you enjoy it more." Sharing similar experiences enabled young people to support and uplift one another in their sport, particularly when they encountered challenges. Dylan (17-year-old academy rugby player) explained, "When we lose, it's tough because I'm sometimes sad. But when you've got like the group of people with you, they've all gone through it as well and we're all friends, then it's not so bad."

3.14. A grounded theory of optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experiences

The grounded theory of optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experiences is presented in Figure 1. Our analysis suggests that the creation of optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experiences for young people is dependent upon *developing positive relationships between young people and key individuals in a physically safe and developmentally safe setting* (core category). Achieving this requires consideration of two elements: the broader sporting context and the immediate sporting context. When considering the broader sporting context, there is a need to ensure *NGBs are providing appropriate resources and tangible support* (Category a) to enable clubs and organisations to offer physically safe facilities/environments in which young people can participate in enjoyable, developmentally appropriate sessions. Additionally, *NGB's providing access to continuing professional development (CPD) training for coaches and individuals in safeguarding roles* (Category b), as well as staff having *access to a broad network of individuals involved in safeguarding roles* (Category c) is beneficial. Particularly because, opportunities to engage in CPD and seek insights from a network of support is useful in enabling staff in the immediate sporting context to *appropriately implement policies and procedures* (Category d) and execute their roles appropriately.

In the immediate sporting context, there are three aspects to consider: policies and procedures, characteristics of individuals within the environment, and the relationships and interactions that exist between individuals. Regarding policies and procedures, it is important that they are *visibly displayed and appropriately implemented* (Category d). At a more intimate level, there is a desire for certain individuals to behave in certain ways and possess specific characteristics. Specifically, safety and enjoyment are enhanced by *coaches who are caring, competent, and autonomy-supportive* (Category h), *parents who are positive, proactive, and supportive* (Category i), and *welcoming and friendly peers* (Category j). However, the presence of these individuals in optimising young people's safety and enjoyment only occurs if they have *opportunities to interact* (Category g) and subsequently engage in *open, honest, and respectful interactions* (Category e) and *establish shared goals and expectations* (Category f).

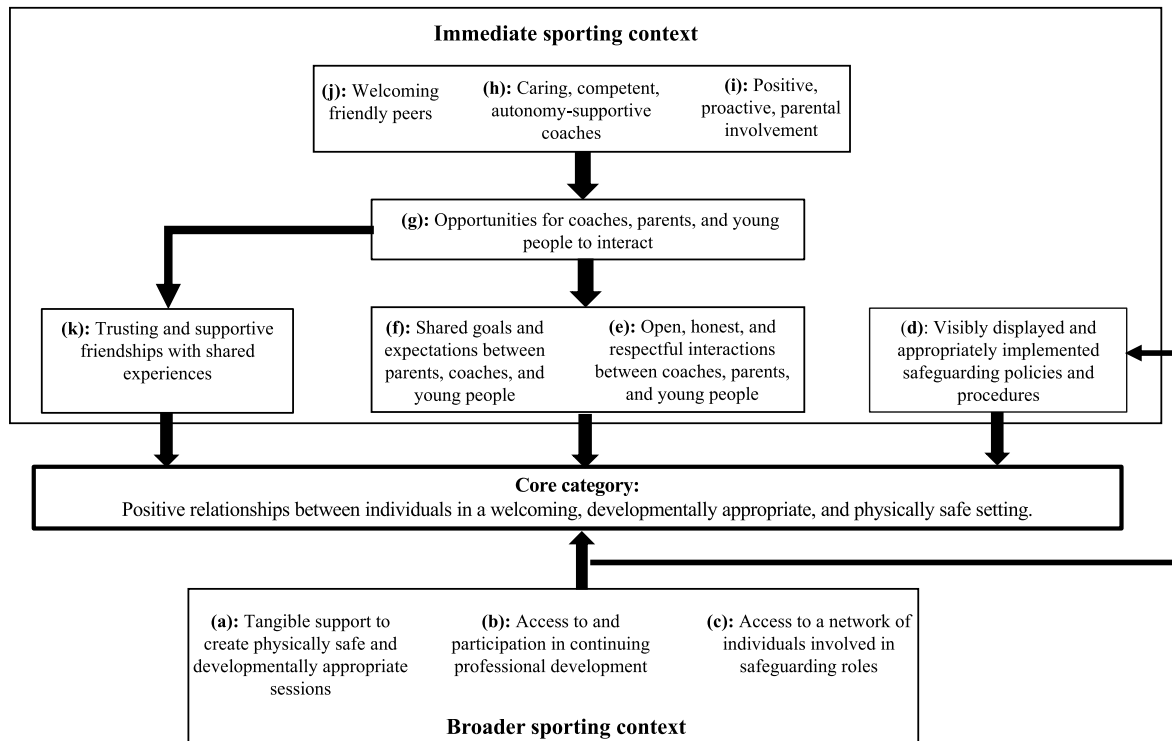


Figure 1. A grounded theory of optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experiences.

(Category f). Additionally, young people should seek to *develop trusting and supportive friendships with shared experiences* (Category k). Together, these interactions facilitate the creation of the positive relationships that underpin optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experiences.

4. Discussion

The present study aimed to explore factors that contribute to an optimally safe sporting experience. The proposed GT conceptualised a safe and enjoyable experience as one in which young people feel happy, comfortable, confident, competent, relaxed, valued, and connected with others within the environment and feel physically and emotionally safe and also perceive self-development. This aligns with the principles of safeguarding (UK Department for Education, 2018) which emphasise protecting young people from abuse and maltreatment, preventing harm to their health or development, and ensuring young people receive safe and effective care all of which aim to provide young people with the best possible outcomes. The current GT underscores the importance for research not just focus on preventing harm in youth sport but also adopting a child-centred approach that prioritises the enhancement of young people's welfare in sport through the promotion of their human rights (Lang & Hartill, 2015).

Together, the theory suggests what needs to be present to create optimally safe and enjoyable youth sport experiences. This occurs through some categories that are focused specifically upon safety, some more related to enhancing enjoyment, and others that are associated with both enjoyment and safety. Notably, the main emphasis of the categories located within the broader sports environment were related to safeguarding, indicating a fundamental requirement to ensure that sport structures are, at their core, emphasising safe practices. In contrast, the elements identified as important within the immediate environment were typically associated with both enjoyment and safety. Particularly, it was apparent that the characteristics of parents, coaches, and peers that enabled interactions that were enjoyable, correspondingly minimised issues related to maltreatment and increased the likelihood that safety-related issues would be raised. Such findings suggest, therefore, that moving forwards, it would be beneficial for researchers, practitioners, and organisations to consider safety and enjoyment collectively to optimise the youth sport experience.

In reviewing the proposed grounded theory, it is apparent that developing optimally safe and enjoyable experiences in youth sport is highly complex and intricate. Specifically, the proposed theory reinforces suggestions that safeguarding should be approached from a holistic systems perspective, recognising the various layers that influence young people's sporting experiences and how all protective measures in place interact to shape these experiences (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014; Kerr & Kerr, 2020; Owusu-Sekyere et al., 2022). Moreover, it also indicates that safeguarding, and further optimising young people's enjoyment, is a shared responsibility, that requires collaborative efforts from individuals within both the broader and immediate sporting contexts to help create safe environments where young people can enjoy sport without experiencing any form of maltreatment (Kerr & Kerr, 2020).

In relation to the broader sporting context, significant emphasis was placed on ensuring access to and participation in CPD training for coaches and individuals in safeguarding roles. Specifically, the GT highlighted the importance of sports organisations, with support from the NGB, providing access to CPD for coach development. Although research has highlighted the importance of CPD for coach development (Trudel et al., 2013), the current GT furthers our understanding of why CPD is so important in relation to optimising safety and enjoyment. Specifically, the core category within this theory suggests that it is paramount to have developmentally appropriate activities to ensure that sessions are delivered at the right level. Such an approach is perceived to help foster enjoyment and self-development, while also allowing young people to adapt to the physical demands of their sport without risking

injury. Participants also highlighted that CPD was beneficial in enabling coaches to connect and engage with young people in a safer and more relatable manner. Such engagement is particularly important, given the emphasis participants placed on the relationship with coaches for enhancing enjoyment, but also considering literature which demonstrates that coaches may seek to create friendships and close relationships with young people to enable maltreatment to occur (Bisgaard & Støckel, 2019). Ensuring that coaches and safeguarding officers are aware of the need for appropriate boundaries in relationships, while also understanding how to interact in manners which enhance enjoyment (i.e., open, honest) appears particularly pertinent.

Such consideration of relationships is particularly important, given that central to the proposed grounded theory (i.e., the core category) is the importance of developing positive relationships between young people and key individuals. Positive relationships play a key role in young people's overall development and significantly influence their performance, well-being, and long-term engagement in sport (Davis & Jowett, 2010; Smoll et al., 2011). Thus, it is unsurprising that developing positive relationships were a key factor within the current theory. However, what is apparent in the proposed GT is the need to focus on relationships across and between all parties and to specifically consider opportunities for parties to interact. Particularly, to optimise safety and enjoyment within the immediate sporting context emphasis should be placed on enhancing all relationships and recognising the negative impact that minimising or dismissing one party (typically parents) within the youth sport environment may have on the experiences of all young people in that setting. Moreover, given the need for all parties to interact and have shared goals and expectations, it would appear that interventions seeking to address issues of maltreatment or enjoyment in sport may have limited impact if targeted at individual groups in isolation (i.e., parents, coaches, young people). Rather, focusing on supporting young people, parents, and coaches to enhance their informal and formal interactions on a regular basis may be more beneficial.

Linked to the above, however, within the current GT it is apparent that the characteristics of parents, coaches, and young people within the sport environment will influence the quality of their interactions. Thus, there may be some benefit to working with each population group to help them understand those characteristics that may be useful to cultivate to subsequently enhance their interactions with other parties. Moreover, although the specific characteristics identified in the current GT are frequently associated with positive experiences in youth sport and reduced issues of maltreatment (Gurgis et al., 2020), to our knowledge, this GT is the first to identify why these characteristics are required for optimally safe and enjoyable experience. That is, these specific characteristics were seen as necessary from coaches, parents, and peers because, when provided with opportunities to interact, they facilitated open, honest, and respectful communication to occur. Previous studies have found that open communication channels play a key role in building positive between parents, coaches, and young people (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). The GT extends this point, as participants also expressed that from a safeguarding perspective, having open channels of communication that were honest and respectful made participants feel comfortable to use the safeguarding policies and report concerns if needed.

Similarly, the proposed GT also emphasises the importance of coaches, parents, and young people having shared goals and expectations. Sharing goals and expectations have been highlighted in various relationship studies, particularly in relation to coach-athlete interactions or parent-athlete interactions (Gould et al., 2007; Knight & Holt, 2014; O'Donnell et al., 2022). However, more limited consideration of the need to have these across the triad of parents, young people, and coaches exists. Moreover, participants also emphasised the importance of promoting discussions of shared expectations regarding understanding their responsibilities and behavioural expectations to both enhance enjoyment and perceptions of safety. Research has suggested

that sports organisations should identify values, and standards, and discuss behavioural expectations and guidelines with key individuals in the environment to ensure that everyone is aware of their responsibilities and expectations (O'Donnell et al., 2022; Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2017), but typically these are suggested in a “top-down” approach, with organisations stipulating what should be expected. However, in the current study, participants appeared to perceive that co-creating such expectations is likely to be more beneficial.

However, some caution should be taken when developing these expectations and seeking to develop positive relationships, particularly between coaches and young people. For instance, issues of favouritism and preferential treatment can be problematic, and may actually contribute to maltreatment in sport. Research shows that forming social connections appears to be closely linked to the steps in the grooming process which involves building trust and crossing boundaries with young person and their social circle (Bisgaard & Støckel, 2019). Specifically, such research indicates that coaches use their success, reputation, and social capital as a shield of protection while grooming and exploiting young athletes. Therefore, while positive relationships are imperative, precautions must be taken to protect young people and foster a culture for coaches to operate professionally without crossing personal boundaries, especially in small local clubs where everyone knows each other well.

The development of trusting and supportive friendships, as identified as important in the current study, may play another important role in addressing the performance narrative. Participants explained that coaches arranging opportunities for young people to participate in games or socialise outside of immediate sport settings facilitated the development of supportive peer relationships. From a safeguarding perspective, these relationships were important because they helped young people navigate banter and camaraderie. Specifically, these relationships gave young people the confidence to intervene and challenge the banter that they felt crossed the line and acted as a safeguard against bullying behaviours. Given the increase in negative peer interactions in sport, such as bullying (e.g., Vertommen et al., 2016) this is particularly important and ensuring parents and coaches proactively facilitate such relationships is key. Beyond their safeguarding role, these relationships were also a key source of enjoyment, allowing young people to share experiences with others. Such shared experiences and quality relationships may help young people to develop a sense of identity and worth beyond their performance, minimising negative consequences associated with the performance narrative further.

4.1. Limitations and future research directions

The proposed grounded theory should be considered in light of certain limitations. First, it is important to note that the proposed theory is a substantive theory that provides insights into the perceptions of young people, parents, coaches, and individuals in safeguarding roles regarding safety and enjoyment of youth sport within the UK. Substantive theories are context-specific, reflecting the data collected within a particular setting (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Therefore, it is important to interpret the proposed theory considering the characteristics of the current sample and its generalisability to other individuals and their experiences within similar youth sporting contexts (Smith, 2018). Future research may benefit from using the findings from this study as a foundation for exploring similarities and nuances across various environments both within the immediate and broader sporting context.

Second, data were only collected through interviews. It is suggested that GT studies should be bounded to focus on concepts and categories directly related to the core category (Nathaniel, 2020). It should be noted that there might have been other factors influencing safety and enjoyment that could have been captured through alternative data collection methods, such as observations and triangulation of data from diverse sources (e.g., interviews and observations). Therefore, if feasible

future research may consider utilising multiple data sources to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Finally, it is important to note that the study did not explicitly recruit participants who had experienced maltreatment or did not enjoy their sporting experience. Participants alluded to negative experiences, some of which may be considered emotional abuse but explicit examples of maltreatment were not shared. Therefore, it is important not to conclude that the grounded theory presented would guarantee the absence of maltreatment. Future research to expand or test this theory would benefit from including athlete survivors to ensure that it is trauma-informed and accounts for all aspects of the youth sporting experience (McMahon et al., 2022).

5. Conclusion

The current study explored the process of developing optimally safe and enjoyable sporting experiences. Using a Straussian GT methodological approach, a substantive GT of this process was developed. The results indicate that many factors in the immediate and broader sporting context interact to influence the optimisation of safe and enjoyable sporting experiences. Subsequently, the current study emphasises the importance of considering both the broader and immediate sporting environment when ensuring safety and enjoyment in youth sport. Furthermore, the findings underscore the importance of not only focusing on protecting young people from abuse and preventing harm but also promoting their well-being and ensuring that they have enjoyable sporting experiences.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Maita G. Furusa: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Camilla J. Knight:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Thomas D. Love:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors confirm that there are no declarations of interest.

Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2024.102652>.

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