

How to talk about elite child athletes' wellbeing

A practical guide

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**Sophie Gordon, Senior Communications Strategist
Maria Castellina, Director of Impact**



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Introduction

This guide will help you communicate about elite child athletesⁱ in ways that are more likely to build support for policies and programmes to promote wellbeing and prevent abuse.

FrameWorks and the Oak Foundation are currently undertaking research to identify the best ways to frame the issue of elite child athletes' wellbeing. This guide is based on the first phase of that research, which has been undertaken in the US. Our recommendations here are also informed by FrameWorks' extensive research from the UK, Australia and the US on how to talk about child development, child abuse and neglect.

Why “elite” child athletes?

Including the word “elite” and talking about “elite child athletes”, makes it clearer who we are talking about: children training and competing in sport at a very high level. Our US naming pilot survey suggests that using this term is helpful for building that understanding.

What is framing and how can it help?

Framing is the choices we make about which ideas we share and how we share them. This includes what we choose to emphasise, how we explain things, and what we leave unsaid. Framing can help us side-step the challenging beliefs people hold and unlock new ways of thinking about social issues.

Challenges for communicating about elite child athletes

Our research found that both the needs of elite child athletes and the measures we can put in place to prevent abuse are not well understood. But by telling a new story we can build support for policies and programmes to promote the wellbeing of child athletes and prevent abuse.

We found people hold some beliefs about elite child athletes and abuse that make it harder to get our messages across. People often think that:

- abuse is rare, and when it happens it's only in extreme ways
- it's up to parents and coaches (not institutions) to stop abuse
- elite child athletes are either resilient superhumans who don't need the kind of support other children do, or vulnerable victims who shouldn't be subjected to the pressures of elite sport under any circumstances.

The recommendations in this guide will help you to frame your communications in ways that counter these challenging beliefs, and instead encourage more productive thinking that will build support for positive changes to promote elite child athletes' wellbeing.

Six recommendations for talking about elite child athletes' wellbeing

1. **Talk about what elite child athletes need to thrive**
2. **Expand people's understanding of abuse without triggering crisis**
3. **Explain how we can prevent abuse**
4. **When talking about children's rights, spell them out**
5. **Avoid myth-busting**
6. **Use numbers to strengthen your story, not to tell it**

Recommendation #1

Talk about what elite child athletes need to thrive

When we spell out what elite child athletes need to thrive, we can overcome the idea that they are either superhumans who don't have the same needs as other children, or vulnerable victims who shouldn't be subjected to the pressures of elite sport.

Talking about what elite child athletes need to thrive helps people to understand how and why they might need support to achieve their goals in a healthy way. By using concrete examples, we open up thinking about solutions and help people see the kind of programmes and policies that can help.

How to do it

- **Talk** about the importance of wellbeing and healthy development, including both physical and mental health, at least as much as you talk about taking part in competitions and winning.
- **Be specific** about what elite child athletes need, e.g., opportunities to learn, rest and play, and supportive coaches and trainers who understand child development.
- **Avoid** talking about vulnerability or playing into the idea that elite child athletes are different from other children.

Examples

<p>“Like all children, elite child athletes need opportunities to learn, rest and play as part of their healthy development. Equipping coaches, trainers and sports institutions with an understanding of what children need to flourish will help ensure children reap the benefits of sport and stay safe.”</p>	<p>“Elite child athletes are children first. They need support and opportunities to learn, rest and play, just like all children do.”</p>
<p>“All children need supportive environments and people around them to support their mental health. For elite child athletes, that means having coaches, trainers and sports institutions who understand child development, as well as the expertise to help them excel in sport.”</p>	<p>“With the right support from sports institutions, training and competing in sport at an elite level can be hugely rewarding for young people and can benefit their mental and physical health. Every child needs opportunities to learn, rest and play, and the same is true for elite child athletes.”</p>

Note: People can see that mental health is important for children and for elite child athletes, but the importance of winning tends to be more front of mind. By highlighting mental health, we can leverage people’s existing understanding and build on it in important ways.

Recommendation #2

Expand people’s understanding of abuse without triggering crisis

By showing the scale and varied nature of abuse we can help people understand the risk children face. When people think about abuse as something that’s rare and exceptional, the problem feels distant, or easily written off as the fault of a few ‘bad eggs’. When people think about elite child athletes, they often focus on extreme cases of sexual abuse that are in the news (such as the Nassar case in US Gymnastics), and assume that physical and emotional abuse is uncommon in elite sport. This makes people unable or

unwilling to see how elite child athletes are at risk of all types of abuse and makes them less likely to support collective solutions.

But we don't want to go to the other extreme and make people feel a sense of crisis either. This fuels fatalism and makes it hard for people to see how anything can be done to make things better. So, whenever we talk about the problem, we must also talk about the solutions – to help people see what we can and must do to promote elite child athletes' wellbeing and prevent abuse.

How to do it

- **Talk** about different types of abuse (physical, emotional, mental, and sexual abuse) using concrete examples, e.g., verbal abuse, overtraining while injured, and coaches not addressing bullying by teammates.
- **Avoid** focusing on extreme and graphic examples. These can often be so distressing that people disengage because they can't bear to think about it.
- **Offer concrete solutions** as well as highlighting the problem. Be explicit that we can fix this through specific policy changes, e.g., sports institutions hiring safeguarding officers whose job it is to ensure child athletes' wellbeing and prevent abuse.
- **Use context** when sharing individual stories and pair stories with solutions, to show that these incidents happen in a larger context and that sports institutions (rather than individuals) are responsible for making things better.

Instead of:	Try:	Why?
“Sport has the power to do good but, unfortunately, the alarming number of cases of abuse against athletes being brought to light shows it is also capable of doing incredible harm.”	“Sport has the power to help children thrive, but too many elite child athletes face bullying, overtraining and physical abuse.”	Spelling out different types of abuse helps people to understand the various forms it takes – rather than reinforcing a limited understanding of ‘extreme’ incidents. Language like ‘alarming’ and ‘incredible harm’ may appear compelling, but can fuel fatalism and disengagement when used to excess.

“The need for action is urgent and pressing.”

“We can support all children’s wellbeing, now and in the future, by putting in place safeguarding training for all staff and clear processes to prevent abuse.”

Offering solutions rather than solely talking about urgency helps to build a sense that we can fix things and helps to show people the role they can play.

Talking about the benefit of action ‘now and in the future’ opens up thinking about short and long-term benefits in a more tangible way – it’s urgent but not just ‘crisis’ language.

“I was only a child and I was being bullied and pushed to my limits at every training session. Now, looking back, I know how wrong it was. I wish someone had helped me.”

“I was only a child and I was being bullied and pushed to my limits at every training session. Now, looking back, I know how wrong it was. I wish someone in my sports league had helped me.”

Putting individual stories in context helps to show they are part of a wider issue that institutions (not individuals alone) need to address.

Spelling out what can be done – both with solutions and a tone of efficacy helps to counteract fatalism and build support for change.

Ben’s story is all too common. But it doesn’t have to be this way. Safeguarding and training to understand healthy child development must be prioritised for all elite child athletes.’

Tip: Balancing urgency

Use the 2:1 ratio – for every dose of urgency and crisis in our communications, we need to include at least two doses of “can-do”. This includes tone, as well as content. Specific solutions are better than general ones – as long as they speak directly to how we’ve explained the problem.

Recommendation #3

Explain how we can prevent abuse

When we take the time to explain why, or how, something happens, we increase people’s understanding of the issue and their support for it. When we leave parts of the story out, people will fill in the blanks with their own existing assumptions.

For example, when we talk about abuse without explaining the causes, people may think that abuse is always carried out by the kind of “monstrous” serial

offender they believe parents should be able to spot. If we explain how the current lack of systems, structures and training facilitates abuse, this helps to make the solutions more apparent, and will likely increase support for action. This also helps people understand the wider responsibility of systems and institutions, such as sports leagues and associations, rather than solely focusing on what individual parents or coaches should do.

How to do it

- **Go further** than asserting. Sometimes we think we've explained an issue, but we've simply asserted it to be true.

Asserting

"We need sports institutions to take action to prevent abuse."

Explaining

"We need sports institutions to take action – such as hiring safeguarding officers who will prioritise the wellbeing of elite child athletes and put measures in place to prevent abuse."

- **Use step-by-step explanation** to spell out exactly how abuse can happen and how it can be prevented by putting solutions in place. What systems can be put in place to stop abuse from happening?
- **Again, offer and explain solutions** to help people see how abuse can be prevented. As much as possible, make these specific and concrete.

How to use step-by-step explanation

- Start with the problem you're trying to fix at the top of the page, and the consequence of that problem and the solution you're advocating for at the bottom. Focusing on an aspect of the issue will make your explanation easier to grasp, rather than trying to cover everything.
- Explain step-by-step how one thing leads to the other using words that explicitly link cause and effect. Words like: 'because', 'this leads to', 'this results in', 'this means'.
- You can vary the number of steps as needed, but do try to stick to one key point per step. In the below example, we've used two steps.

Cause (or Problem):	A lack of training about child development
Step 1:	leads to staff lacking the appropriate knowledge to support children’s wellbeing.
Step 2:	This means they don’t understand the negative impacts of forcing elite child athletes to train through injury, or shouting at them for less than perfect performance.
Consequence (or result):	As a result, physical and emotional abuse like this can happen unchecked, and even be seen as a ‘normal’ part of training.
Solution:	By giving coaches training on what children need to thrive, institutions can embed a culture that supports the wellbeing of elite child athletes and prevents abuse.

You can also use step-by-step explanation to dig into how a solution works. As you can see pulled apart here:

Solution:	Safeguarding training and clear reporting processes for sports institution staff
Step 1:	will mean coaches, trainers, and leadership know what steps to take to prevent risky situations from occurring (such as avoiding one-on-one interactions between elite child athletes and staff behind closed doors).
Step 2:	This means the risk of physical, mental, and sexual abuse can be largely avoided,
Step 3:	because situations in which abuse might occur don’t happen,
Consequence (or result):	And elite child athletes’ wellbeing is supported.

Recommendation #4

When talking about children’s rights, spell them out

Previous FrameWorks research on children’s wellbeing in the US and in the UK has shown that appealing to child rights alone, without expanding on these rights, isn’t enough to build understanding of why an issue matters.

People support what rights are for (e.g. keeping children safe), but often struggle to connect this to the shorthand of ‘rights’, which can feel vague.

We can make the same points more effectively by expanding on what we mean by rights, and talking about elite child athletes’ specific needs, such as the need to be heard, to access education and live free from abuse.

How to do it

- **Spell out** what children need, rather than only summing this up as their ‘rights’.
- **Don’t only rely on** language like ‘children have the right to’. Consider other language like ‘children need’, ‘X helps children thrive’ and so on (see recommendation 1).

Instead of:	Try:	Why?
“This raises the important issue of how sport can work to ensure that these rights are provided to all elite child athletes.”	“This raises the important issue of how sport can work to ensure that healthcare and education are provided to all elite child athletes.”	Spelling out what we mean by ‘rights’ is a more tangible way to talk about what children need.
“Child athletes have the right to a safe training environment.”	“Child athletes need a healthy and appropriate training environment to thrive.”	Positioning this as what children ‘need to thrive’ rather than what they have a ‘right to’ is more concrete.

Recommendation #5

Avoid mythbusting

As communicators we want to counter unproductive beliefs people hold about issues, but multiple studies have shown that doing this via ‘mythbusting’ tends to backfire. Even though our intention is to rebut or counter the myths, the mythbusting tactic inadvertently reminds people of them – activating and strengthening false ideas.

This is especially true when the wrong information is more prominent in the design. In this way, mythbusting unfortunately participates in spreading misinformation.

How to do it

- **Bypass myths** entirely – focusing on the facts and explanations which you do want people to take away.
- **Use** the framing tips in this guide to state a positive case.

Instead of:

“Elite child athletes aren’t exceptionally resilient superhumans, they have the same needs as other children”

Try:

“Like all children, elite child athletes need opportunities to learn, rest and play.”

“The abuse elite child athletes face isn’t as rare and exceptional as we may like to think it is.”

“Too many elite child athletes are facing physical abuse, bullying and over-training.”

Recommendation #6

Use numbers to strengthen your story, not to tell it

When we use numbers to tell our story without explaining what the numbers tell us, people will interpret them according to their existing beliefs. Numbers and stats can provide excellent evidence when they are used to illustrate a well-framed argument that shows why something matters, how it works and what needs to change. But facts alone don’t persuade people.

Without framing, numbers are open to interpretation, and different people will find different meaning in them. But by adding context and seeing numbers as one element of the story we’re telling, we can use them to back up and strengthen our message.

How to do it

- **Provide meaning first**, then use numbers to support that meaning. Situate data and statistics within a broader narrative.
- **Quality over quantity**. Being faced with more and more figures can lessen the impact of one powerful statistic.
- **Consider** whether there's a simpler or more tangible way to present your numbers.

Instead of:	Try:	Why?
<p>“The abuse of child athletes is a national crisis. 37% of athletes reported having experienced one form of physical abuse at least once as a child in sport.”</p>	<p>“Training and competing in sport can be hugely beneficial for young people. But more than one in three athletes report having experienced physical abuse while training or competing as children. By putting in place safeguarding training and robust reporting processes at all levels of sport we can support elite child athletes’ wellbeing and prevent abuse.”</p>	<p>We can make numbers more accessible by using language like ‘one in three’ instead of using fractions and percentages.</p> <p>And by bringing in solutions and cueing the data, we can tell a more complete story – one that’s compelling, but doesn’t leave people in crisis.</p>

Putting it all together

Here's how you could bring in all these recommendations in a single piece of copy:

Like all children, elite child athletes need opportunities to learn, rest and play as part of their healthy development.

Cue the idea of what elite child athletes need to thrive and spell this out.

But too many face issues like bullying, overtraining, physical and sexual abuse. In fact, one in three athletes report having experienced physical abuse while training or competing as children.

Talk about different types of abuse to expand understanding. Use a number to strengthen this story but not tell the whole story.

Sports institutions can support elite child athletes' wellbeing, now and in the future, by putting in place safeguarding policies like limiting one-on-one time between children and staff. And introducing training for all sports institution staff so they better understand children's developmental needs.

Explain how we can prevent abuse using an efficacious tone and clear solutions.

About FrameWorks UK

FrameWorks UK collaborates with mission-driven organisations to communicate about social issues in ways that will create change.

FrameWorks UK is the sister organisation of the FrameWorks Institute in the US. Our research shows how people understand social issues. And we use this knowledge to develop and test strategic communications to help organisations create change.

Change the story. Change the world.

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¹ Elite child athletes are children under 18 who engage in competitive sports at a very high level. For example, an elite child athlete might compete in regional or national sports competitions, or may even compete in the Olympics.