

**Healthy sport for healthy girls?  
The role of parents in preventing sexual abuse in sport.**

Professor Celia Brackenridge  
Cheltenham & Gloucester College of HE  
Francis Close Hall  
Swindon Road  
Cheltenham  
GL50 4AZ  
UK

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## ABSTRACT

*Sexual abuse has only recently been recognised as a problem within sport (Brackenridge 1994) and, as yet, little is known about the contexts in which girls might be at greater or lesser risk of experiencing such crimes. This paper explores the assumptions which parents make about their daughters' health and safety in the sports coaching context in relation to Hellestedt's (1987) Parental Involvement Continuum. Data from a study of 93 sets of parents of elite young sportswomen are presented which show what much mothers and fathers know about their daughters' coaching setting. The results are used to evaluate the extent to which parents' assumptions about sport as a healthy place for healthy girls are warranted. Research on sexual abuse prevention in day care settings (Finkelhor & Williams 1988) is explored as a possible template for parents who wish to contribute to the prevention of sexual abuse of girls in sport.*

There can be no more horrifying image for parents than that of the mass murder of children and a teacher by Thomas Hamilton in a Scottish school gymnasium in March 1996. The persistent use by Hamilton of sports clubs as a means of gaining access to children, exposed as misplaced assumptions which parents and others make about the safety of voluntary sports. The relative social and legal freedom afforded to voluntary sport allows large numbers of young people to be entrusted to adults about whom very little is known, other than their coaching qualifications. With coaches holding absolute power and authority and girls (and boys) desperate to achieve success, the ingredients of the coaching situation lead to a potentially risky mix where children are susceptible to abuses of power by the unscrupulous coach.

Sexual abuse was recognised as a social problem some ten years before it came to the attention of researchers in sport. The early studies of Kempe and Kempe on child battering (1978) led social work researchers to investigate an aspect of domestic violence which had not previously been named and which was, arguably, part of the complex of taboos which feminists had begun to challenge in the 1970s (Dobash & Dobash 1979). The majority of subsequent research has been carried out on *intra-familial* abuse since this is the site of highest incidence (Fisher in Morrison *et al.* 1994). Relatively little work has been done on *extra-familial* abuse and even less on abuse in the voluntary sector, which includes amateur sport.

Denial of the possibility of sexual abuse in sport has recently started to break down in the face of a number of major legal cases against prominent, national and international level coaches. Before former Olympic swimming coach Paul Hickson's conviction for rape in September 1995 (with the longest ever rape sentence handed down in a British court - 17 years) even major sport authorities resisted the idea that such behaviour could occur in sport (Brackenridge *et al.* 1995). Now, there is recognition amongst all sectors of sport that sexual abuse *is* a problem and that prevention measures should be implemented (Brackenridge 1996a). However, lack of knowledge about the precise risks of sexual abuse which are involved in sport hampers the effective implementation of child protection measures. This article reports one of a sequence of research projects which are intended to fill this knowledge gap. It presents findings from an exploratory study of 93 sets of parents and their elite athlete daughters, carried out in South West Britain during the Spring of 1996. (The term parent is used here to include those carers who fulfill a role *in loco parentis*.) In particular, the article addresses three questions:

- 1        What do parents of elite young sportswomen know about their daughter's        coaching situation?
- 2        Are assumptions by parents that sport is a healthy activity for healthy girls        justified?

3 How far might knowledge about sexual abuse in day care settings assist parents who wish to play a more effective role in preventing sexual abuse of their athlete daughters by sport coaches?

### THE VALUE OF SPORT FOR GIRLS

The literature on children in sport, especially that emanating from the United States, is replete with examples of the social and personal values of sport for children (Martens 1978; Magill, Ash & Smoll 1982; Gleeson 1986; Lee 1993). Roberts & Treasure (in Lee 1993 p.5), for example, report that sport is highly valued by both sexes as a 'strong social asset' and that children with above average physical skills are accepted more readily by their peer group. Although in a recent Canadian study both boys and girls thought boys to be better at sport than girls by the age of six (Promotion Plus 1996), the US Women's Sports Foundation study of Minorities in Sport (1989) found that 'Girls benefit from sports as much the same as boys' (p.5).

Hispanic females... were more likely to score well on achievement tests, to report high popularity, to stay on in high school, to attend college, to seek a degree and to make progress towards their degree. ...white (athletic) girls... were more likely than non-athletes to do well in high school and college, to feel popular, to be involved in extracurricular activities, to stay involved in sport as adults, and to aspire to community leadership. (p.5).

In an earlier US WSF study (1985) of 7000 women, 57% respondents (n=1619) agreed strongly and a further 36% agreed somewhat that if young girls compete successfully on the sportsfield they will be better able to compete successfully in later life. 45% of respondents (n=1645) ranked as the first barrier to increased participation by women in sports and fitness 'lack of involvement and training as children'. This view is confirmed by the results of the US WSF 'Wilson Report on Moms, Dads and Daughters in Sport' (1988) in which 97% of the sample of over 1000 parents agreed that sports and fitness activities provide important benefits to girls. Parents in that study also saw sports as building confidence and self esteem (41%), promoting teamwork, fostering competition and encouraging friendships (27%). One parent said that girls who play sports "become better co-ordinated, they are healthier, and they learn to get along with others. They learn to be part of the team." (p.3). In the same study, white parents, as against non-white parents, more often mentioned health-related benefits (58% to 37%), character benefits (42% to 31%) and social factors (29% to 17%).

Similar findings emerged from two Australian studies of women's and girls' views of sport (Women's Consultative Committee on Recreation and Sport 1992) where 98% of those surveyed identified the main benefits from involvement in physical activity as: feel healthier; enjoyment/fun; improved fitness; time for me; stress reduction. These studies also found that women did more recreational than competitive sport, confirming an important

distinction for women and girls which is also drawn by Sarah Gilroy (in Lee 1993). In Britain, government policy on competitive sports in schools, embodied in a policy document 'Sport: Raising The Game' (Department of National Heritage 1995), has been criticised as discriminating against girls (Jennifer Hargreaves 1995) but may also present dilemmas for those girls who actually prefer to compete than to recreate.

Given the struggles of sports feminists over the last two decades to encourage wider participation by women and girls, it is not surprising that the emphasis of most of the research reviewed above is on the positive benefits to be gained from both recreational and competitive involvement. Nowhere in the growing literature on girls and sport are there any overt references to protection from sexual abuse; only occasionally is general safety mentioned, and then usually in the context of overtraining, sports injuries or performance stress. Lee lists a series of risks and solutions connected with children in sport from a legal perspective (1993 Appendix B pp.298) but not one concerns child protection from sexual abuse. One veiled reference to an abusive coach is made in the WSF US 'Parent's Guide to Girls' Sports (undated p.11), which is otherwise wholly positive about the benefits of sport for daughters:

If you have some concerns about the coach, there are some steps that can be taken... Approach the coach in a concerned, helpful manner...it may be necessary to transfer your child to another coach. This is rare since most coaches are willing to listen and make changes...

Apart from this one reference, most of the material on girls in sport is atheoretical and virtually none problematises the relationship between coach, athlete and parent.

### THE INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS IN GIRLS' SPORT

Byrne (in Lee 1993 p.2) suggests that "...it is extremely difficult for children to take part and develop in sport without the close support of their parents." Indeed, Hellestedt (1987 after Smith & Smoll 1983) calls the coach, the athlete and the parent the 'coaching triangle'. Hellestedt's model of parental involvement (see Fig.1) is one exception to the atheoretical rule. His background in family therapy equips him well to contextualise the relationships involved and to identify those areas of the parent/athlete/coach system which might present difficulties for the athlete.

[Fig.1 about here]

This said, his model of parental involvement has been of most benefit in analysing the role of the 'over-involved parent' in creating stress or pressure on the young athlete. A recent study of elite young sportswomen in Britain (Griffiths 1996) has indicated that that *British* parents defined as over-involved according to the Hellestedt's work may not in fact fit his theoretical model since their involvement is perceived by the daughters as positive.

The WSF study of Mums, Dads and Daughters in Sport (1988) offers us some rare insights into the 'coaching triangle'. Telephone interviews with random survey of 1004 mothers and fathers and 513 of their 7-18 year old daughters produced the following results:

- 70% of the daughters had parents who played sport themselves;
- 90% of the daughters had parents who played sport when they were children;
- 70% continued their sport into their adult lives although the moms were almost as likely to be involved in sports as the dads, despite the fact that the dads were more active as children;
- dads took part in competitive sport as adults whereas moms who participated did so in fitness activities rather than sports *per se*;
- 44% of daughters said that their parents participation in their sport activities was the encouragement they remembered the most but...
- whereas mothers encouraged daughters of all ages, only 27% of the younger girls (7-10 years old) said the father encouraged them but 44% of 15-18 yr olds said that their father was the most encouraging parent;
- parents were supportive of the daughters, perhaps because they saw sport as contributing to their well-being, especially physical and mental health.

In Britain, the Training of Young Athletes Study by Rowley and others (in Gleeson 1986) indicated that, as in similar studies in the USA (such as Lewko & Greendorfer in Magill *et al.* 1982), parents played a crucial role as providers of emotional, financial and general support, making significant adjustments to domestic routines and family budgets in order to help their children participate. Whilst some athletes in the study felt their parents to be a source of stress, whether this happened very much depended on the level of communication between the youngsters and their parents.

The section of Hellstedt's parental involvement continuum labelled 'underinvolved/disinterested parents' might well be used to identify possible problems for the daughters, including sexual abuse by a coach or other adult in the sport setting, for it is those daughters who feel distant from their parents or carers, for whatever reason, who are most vulnerable to the grooming process which precedes actual sexual abuse (Brackenridge 1997b). Hellestedt characterises this type of family organisation as one with 'a large psychological space between members' (p.155), where there is little supervision of the child in the home and young athletes are left to 'do their own thing.' Where

the athlete is distanced from the parent(s), either emotionally or through conflict, then she may look to the coach as a substitute or surrogate parent, or even to fantasise that the coach is in fact her substitute father or mother. Indeed, several former victims of abuse interviewed by the researcher have expressed precisely these sentiments (Brackenridge 1997b).

## **PROTECTION FROM SEXUAL ABUSE IN SPORT**

Theoretical and empirical investigations into the potentially abusive nature of coach-athlete relationships grew out of 1970s and 1980s work on sexual discrimination in sport, driven largely by feminist analyses yet carried out by both men and women researchers. It is probably fair to say that this work is still at the earliest stages of its development and that there is a great deal still to be known. However, those researching in the field share a common concern to improve the quality of life for young athletes - both in and beyond sport - by transforming gender relations *within* sport.

Most of the work undertaken thus far has concentrated on abuse of women and girls by men since men constitute by far the greater proportion of reported perpetrators of abuse and women/girls by far the greater proportion of victims (Fisher in Morrison *et al.* 1994). The study reported here also focusses on young women although it is readily acknowledged that the complex inter-relationships between males and females, and between coaches and athletes, both in same-sex and in cross-sex situations in sport, also need investigation.

There are four commonly understood categories of abuse: sexual, physical, neglect or emotional (Crouch 1995). For the purposes of this paper, sexual harassment is defined as unwanted attention on the basis of sex (lewd comments, pinching, touching or caressing, sexual jokes and so on) and sexual abuse is defined as groomed or coerced collaboration in sexual and or genital acts where the victim has been entrapped by the perpetrator (see Brackenridge, 1997b, for a detailed discussion of definitions).

One common assumption about sexual abuse is that it is personally perpetrated and personally experienced behaviour. However, it is contended here that this view is not only simplistic but also that it distracts from other, important aspects of the multifaceted phenomenon which is sexual abuse. There are many stakeholders in any sexual abuse situation, including not just the athlete and her coach but also sport organisations, the police, child protection and legal agencies, other coaches, peers athletes, siblings and parents. In-depth interviews with a



number of victims of sexual abuse in sport have been used to construct a table of risk factors (Brackenridge 1997a) and to develop tentative predictive models of abusive behaviour (Brackenridge 1997b) which might eventually be used to prevent, or at least minimise, sexual abuse in sport.

Two major theories of sexual abuse are available which may assist us in understanding how to improve child protection in sport (see Brackenridge *et al.* 1995). The first is Finkelhor's Four Factor Theory (1984), in which resistance to abuse is gradually broken down by the perpetrator, and the second is Wolf's Cycle of Abuse (1984) which sets out the stages of lowered self esteem and sexual withdrawal which precede grooming and abuse by a paedophile. A mirror image of this model has also been found to apply within sport where high self esteem and over-confidence precede sexual exploitation of athletes by predatory coaches (Brackenridge 1997b) (see Figure 2). It should be stressed that examples of both profiles are found within sport.

[Figure 2 about here]

The psycho-social dynamics of sexually abusive behaviour in sport have been charted through qualitative research, using personal accounts from female victims of abuse. Interrogation of these data have resulted in the development of the table of risk factors which may have some predictive power. At this stage, more extensive studies must be done before the risk factor table can be adopted with confidence. Nonetheless, particular risk factors bear a striking similarity to those identified in a cognate setting for child abuse, that is, day care centres (Finkelhor & Williams 1988): these may well be of relevance to the development of sound child protection in sport. For example, the authors found that "...in facilities where parents have ready access to their children, the risk of abuse is decreased." (p.253). They also stressed the importance of recognising that, in the day care studies at least, children were found to be a *lower* risk of sexual abuse than they were in their own homes (p.249). Their work confirmed that the types of abusers in the day care setting did 'not fit prevalent stereotypes about sexual abusers.' (p.250) and that 'Girls are abused more than boys (62% versus 38%)' (p.251). One of the problems confronted by Finkelhor and Williams in their work on abuse in day care was the relationship of the parents to the victims.

Although both investigators and parents sought to protect children and see justice done, they frequently found themselves in an adversarial relationship. (p.254)

They also found

...some disturbing patterns of behaviour on the part of some parents...parents failed to believe their own children's allegations. In other cases, parents who believed their children's disclosures tried to arrange informal solutions... that would avoid the need for a formal report or an investigation.' (p.252).

In a recent investigation of a sports coach in Britain, exactly the same process occurred, with parents signing a petition to get their children's coach reinstated after he was suspended, pending police enquiries into sexual crimes against his athletes. This reinforces the view that parents, as well as children, may be groomed by the coach as he develops his alibi.

### **THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN PREVENTING SEXUAL ABUSE IN SPORT**

No attempt is made here to address the vexed question of how intrafamilial sexual abuse suffered by young girls influences their susceptibility to experience abuse in sport, nor indeed how suffering and victimisation in the one setting compounds that in the other. In presenting information about the National Childminders Association's registration scheme for childminders, Louisa Young (1996) argues that parents know very little about their children's childminders and Bruce Clark of the NSPCC (1996) has also made the point that sport is not alone in being a social practice which requires more effective child protection and registration.

Lee estimated that 30% of the athletes participating at the Los Angeles Olympics were under the age of 20 (1993 p.xii) and that over 100,000 coaches contribute to the development of children in sport in Britain yet he remarks that only rarely do national governing body (NGB) coaching awards include elements which help coaches understand the people they are going to deal with.' (p.xiii). Only in 1995 did the the major British coach education organisation, the National Coaching Foundation (NCF), produce a booklet setting out good practice advice about child protection and even that emphasised recognition and referral rather than coach responsibility. Not until June 1996 did the NCF produce its first leaflet on the subject for general distribution about child protection, entitled 'Protecting Children From Abuse: A Guide For Everyone Involved in Children's Sport' which offers parents and carers step-by-step advice about protecting their daughters from sexual and other forms of abuse in sport (see Table 1).

Hellestedt's solutions to the problems raised by under-involved parents included: increasing parent participation in various ways, such as orientation evenings at the start of the season, and setting clear limits on the relationships between athlete and coach to avoid the coach becoming cast as a substitute parent. Finkelhor & Williams (1988) set out a series of recommendations for prevention and detection of child abuse in day care settings (p.256-7), some of which might well also have efficacy in sport settings:

#### **Prevention**

- preventive education for children which helps them to resist the perpetrator or to overcome the fear of telling their parents about improper touching or insistence on secrecy by an adult;
- 'increased attention by parents' to the staff and immediate family members and adolescent children of day care staff;
- decreased reliance on police checks (criminal record vetting or screening) which are found to be 'expensive and inefficient prevention techniques'
- discouragement of reliance on paedophile profiles (since most abusers in the study did *not* fit the established profile of paedophile), but instead screening on a wide range of background factors;
- the encouragement of free access by parents to any facility at any time, with no area or time being off-limits.

#### Detection

- increased awareness of female abuse which, whilst not yet documented in sport, may occur;
- education about warning signs since 'Parents are the ones who detect the majority of abuse.' (p.257). This might include written information to parents, offering them access to the facility;
- regularly-repeated staff awareness raising in order to help them overcome the 'inertia, loyalties and fear of reprisals' which often prevent them reporting a colleague;
- discouragement of informal solutions and the adoption of an approved plan for handling allegations.

Sexual abusers are rarely caught (in Finkelhor & Williams' study only 20% of *confirmed* cases resulted in a custodial sentence), skilled at developing alibis, very rarely convicted and even then highly resistant to rehabilitation. We must therefore accept that we cannot stop individuals becoming sexually aroused to children but we can play a part in strengthening the barriers which will keep abusers out of sport. One such barrier is the involvement of parents in their daughters' sport, both materially, through helping with events and functions, and emotionally, through communicating their interest in and support for her. In this exploratory study, then, it was deemed important to explore a wide range of contextual aspects of parental involvement in their daughters' sport.

#### THE STUDY

##### Research questions:

The main research question for this exploratory study was 'What do parents of elite young sportswomen know about their daughter's coaching situation?' The question derives from previous analysis of victims' accounts which

indicates that one potential risk factor for the sexual abuse of girls in sport is the closeness, or lack of it, of the athlete's relationship with her parents. This study, therefore, was particularly aimed at finding out the extent to which parents were involved in and knew about their daughter's sporting activity. Two supplementary questions were addressed by the literature review, namely: 'Are assumptions by parents that sport is a healthy activity for healthy girls justified?' and 'How far might knowledge about sexual abuse in day care settings assist parents who wish to play a more effective role in preventing sexual abuse of their athlete daughters by sport coaches?'

### **Sample:**

The sample was opportunistic: access was arranged via the Sports Council (South West) who invited 93 young women athletes between the ages of 13 and 19, from 13 different sports to attend an Elite Young Sportswomen's Forum. Each girl was originally nominated to the Sports Council by their regional governing body because she performed at international or national level or was considered to have the potential to do so. Written notification of the research study was distributed with the invitations to girls and their parents to attend the Forum. During the Forum a Parents Workshop was also offered, during which an inductive group interview was conducted to explore issues around athletes' general safety, parental knowledge of and involvement in their daughters' sport. All those present (n = 9 sets of parents = 18) were invited to sign a consent form to be contacted again at a later date by telephone to complete a survey and asked to give their address on the consent form if they wished to receive a copy of the results from the study. All did so. In recognition of the fact that very few children now live in traditional two-parent, co-habiting households (24% according to the General Household Survey 1993 p.8) the study was titled parents/carers and parents were invited to participate as individuals rather than as couples. All parents who had *not* attended the Forum were sent the survey by post (n = 84 pairs = 168). The total population for the survey was therefore 186.

### **Method:**

The group interview with parents at the Forum interview was audio-taped and lasted approximately one hour. It was used inductively by the researcher to explore a range of issues about parents' knowledge and views of their daughters' involvement in sport and the parents' own participation in sport as participants and supporters.

Specifically, the schedule addressed the parents':

- own involvement in sport, as children and as adults
- involvement in administrative roles in the daughter's sport

- perception of importance of sport for their daughters
- perceived benefits/disbenefits of the daughter's sport
- perceived relative importance of daughter's sport compared with other aspects of her life (schoolwork, hobbies, friendships)
- satisfaction with daughter's current level/standard of performance
- perceptions of how much they encourage, pressure, or praise their daughters
- frequency of spectating at daughter's coaching sessions and competitions
- knowledge of the daughter's coach
- reactions to daughters complaints about a coach
- reactions to their daughter visiting a coach's home or going away overnight with a coach
- estimate of the annual cost of maintaining their daughter's involvement in sport

The tape was transcribed and responses compared with the extant literature on children and sport and used to generate a semi-structured survey questionnaire. Those parents who had attended the Forum were contacted by telephone to complete the survey and those who had not attended the Forum, and who had thus not communicated personally with the researcher before, were sent the survey by post. The questionnaire addressed parents':

- personal participation in sport (as performers), present and past
- involvement in coaching or organisation of their daughter's sport
- knowledge of the daughter's coach and her coaching situation
- closeness of personal and siblings' relationships with their daughter
- employment and expenditure on daughter's sport

Separate appointments were made with each parent contacted by telephone. Parents contacted by post received the two questionnaires in one envelope but with separate reply-paid return envelopes and were asked to complete and return their own questionnaire without conferring.

72% of parents (6 mothers and 7 fathers) responded to the telephone contact: the rest could not be contacted. 54% (46 mothers and 44 fathers) replied to the postal contact. No follow-up took place since an agreement was given to the Sports Council to destroy all names and addresses within one month of the questionnaires being posted. The overall response was therefore 103 parents from the 186 invited to participate or 55% which is

acceptably high for this method of approach. 12 questionnaires were returned uncompleted (3 mothers and 3 fathers) and a further two individuals telephoned the researcher to explain their reasons for declining to participate. The survey results were entered into EXCEL and DATADESK packages. Chi square analyses and selected cross-tabulations were carried out to search for cross-sex and cross-sport significance.

[Table 2 about here]

## PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

### Participation in sport:

Both parents were likely to have been active competitors as children but fathers (91%) much more so than mothers (64%,  $p < 0.003$ ) with fathers having competed at a higher level (see Table 2). About half the fathers still maintained involvement in competitive sport compared with only a quarter of the mothers ( $p < 0.02$ ), a much lower general level of sporting activity for both parents than in Hellestedt's 1990 study of parents of USA young skiers but nonetheless one which reflects the same differential in activity between mothers and fathers and which also equates with sports participation data for adults in Britain more generally (Department of National Heritage 1993).

### Involvement in coaching or the daughter's sport organisation:

Data here reinforce the findings of the British TOYA study (Rowley 1986). One in ten of the parents coached sport but, of these, only a couple of the fathers were involved in coaching their own daughters. Mothers were much more involved in organisational roles than fathers, with 60% of them taking on a role compared with 28% of the fathers (see Table 2). One father wrote simply "My wife does that", echoing Rowley's findings (1986 p.96):

there appeared to be a clear division of labour within the family as to who took responsibility for these provisionary supporting roles. Although it was the father who usually initiated sports participation, it was left to the mother to provide the supporting role and therefore to enable the child to continue.

Roles ranged from driving, to fund-raising to committee work. The most commonly held roles, in rank order, were: general administration and "helping out", judging, officiating and scoring, driving and official committee work.

### Knowledge of the coach and the coaching situation:

All parents knew the sex of their daughter's coach and nearly all - slightly fewer in the case of fathers - knew the coach's name (see Table 2). Three quarters of the daughters were coached by men. Mothers were much more likely than fathers to have met the coach 'regularly' but 17 fathers (33%) failed to answer whether or how regularly they had met the coach.

Slightly more than 41% mothers (n=23) and slightly fewer than 39% fathers (n=20) knew the qualifications of their daughter's coach but, of these, only four mothers had seen proof of these qualifications. Over 80% of all parents did *not* know whether their daughter's coach was required by the governing body to sign a code of ethics or practice. Of those who did know this (15% overall), fathers were more likely to know than mothers (18% as against 12%) and all had read the code. It is difficult to judge whether these figures are surprising or not but they do reveal a very low level of awareness by parents of the behaviour that is expected of their daughters coaches.

86% of parents always knew *where* and at what *times* their daughter's coaching took place with slightly fewer fathers knowing coaching times (79%). Whilst both parents were keen supporters of competitions, fathers got along to watch competitions (24% always and 63% occasionally) half as often as mothers (52% always and 37% occasionally, see Table 2). Few parents of either sex always watched training sessions (4% fathers and 12% mothers) but about half of all parents did do occasionally. This shows a high level of interest but may perhaps reflect the necessity for parents to transport their daughters to training and wait to take them home again.

The majority of parents of both sexes (84%) knew that other adults or coaches were around when their daughter was being coached, which might be interpreted as either a good thing or a bad one. The day care studies by Finkelhor *et al.* (1988) indicate that ancillary adults (helpers, relatives, drivers, janitors) may pose a threat to children and engineer themselves into such roles with the express intention of gaining sexual access to children. On the other hand, the presence of other adults might also act as a policing check on the behaviour of the coach, provided that the norms of coach/athlete interaction are already 'safe'. Some sport-specific 'norms' might be regarded as violating the norms of wider society with respect to relationships, touching and invasion of privacy: it remains for sport organisations themselves to determine whether and what norms are acceptable and how far they match or contradict those experienced by the young athlete in other areas of her life. There was no difference in the confidence that mothers and fathers had in their daughter's safety (socially and emotionally) when she was being coached: 61% were 'completely happy' and 31% 'fairly happy' with only two parents not sure. Again, this could imply either safety or complacency depending upon the overall context in which the coaching took place.

Half the sample said that their daughters accepted lifts from their coach but fathers (42%) were far less likely than mothers (96%) to be 'completely happy' about this ( $p < 0.01$ ) (see Table 2). Youth workers are not allowed to give

lifts to their charges and the recent advice from the NCF (1996) suggests also that 'it does not make sense' for a coach to take children alone in a car on journeys, however short'. Many youth workers and coaches may violate this rule because they want to protect youngsters from other dangers, missing busses home, long walks or inclement weather: in other cases, especially where the parents live in remote areas and/or have no access to a car or the funds to pay for their daughter to use public transport, it is common for coaches to be called upon to act as a driver.

28% of fathers and 35% of mothers reported that their daughters sometimes went to the coach's home and, again, of these, fathers were far less likely to be 'completely happy' about this than mothers but none said they were 'not very happy' or 'not at all happy' about it ( $p < 0.02$ ) (see Table 2). About half of all parents indicated that their daughter went away overnight with the coach and, again, fathers demonstrated slightly more anxiety about this than mothers ( $p < 0.08$ ), with ten of them as against three mothers saying that they were unhappy about it. In sum, the mothers were more trusting and the fathers more suspicious.

#### **Relationship with daughter:**

In terms of the closeness of their relationship with their daughters, 70% parents of said they were 'very close' and 24% 'quite close' with only six parents in total indicating they they were 'not sure' or that they were 'not very close'. This would indicate, for this sample at least, a positive parental safety barrier against abuse by coaches. This safety barrier of emotional closeness was also found in the replies about sibling relationships. Only one in ten of the daughters had no siblings and the mothers and fathers agreed that their relationships between those who did have siblings were 'very close' (50%) or 'quite close' (31%). Only 7% reported that the daughter's relationship was either 'not very close' or 'not at all close' or were 'not sure' and 11% did not answer this question.

When questioned about their daughter's level of achievement fathers indicated a higher level of ambition for them, with 79% saying they would like to see them go further and 21 % saying they would like their daughter to remain at her present level. For the mothers, these figures were 64% and 34% respectively (see Table 2). This might indicate either that mothers are more wary of the implications of greater success for their daughters and show more protectiveness or could show that they have seen the strain that it would place on everyone in the family. Indeed, in the TOYA study Rowley (1986 p.97) found that "Many of the parents...had at the outset little idea of the extent of the commitment necessary to enable a young athlete to train and compete regularly. However, in this



study no parents wanted their daughter to drop back in standard and several in the telephone survey commented that it was the daughter's personal choice whether or not she pursued higher goals. This shows a degree of autonomy for the daughters which might not have been present for those who dropped out of their sport at a younger age.

Parents were asked whether they felt that they ever put pressure on their daughters to perform well and, although there were no statistically significant sex differences there was a very wide distribution of responses from 'no, never' to 'yes, a lot' with a slight cross-over effect with more mothers than fathers (65% against 60%) responding 'no, never' and 'very rarely' and fewer mothers than fathers (31% against 51%) responding 'sometimes' or 'yes, a lot' ( $p < 0.2$ ) (see Table 2). Interestingly, when cross-tabulated with the data on parents' sports participation, fathers who had competed competitively in sport as children were more likely to put pressure on their daughters ( $p < 0.2$ ), again confirming previous research. A similar, and significant cross-over effect ( $p < 0.017$ ) was observed in response to the question of whether parents ever criticised their daughters, with fathers replying 'never' (14%), 'rarely' (28%) and 'sometimes' (53%) and mothers 'never' (17%), 'rarely' (44%) and 'sometimes' (33%). When asked whether they praised their daughters no significant sex differences were observed between the parents, with the vast majority replying 'sometimes' (37% fathers and 21% mothers) or 'a lot' (59% fathers and 73% mothers) and the mothers more inclined to give 'a lot' of praise.

In comparison with other aspects of their daughters lives, parents felt that schoolwork ranked most highly but that sport was close to this in importance; they thought that sport and friends were equally important and that hobbies were definitely less important than their daughter's sport. No differences were apparent between fathers and mothers in these views. However, a number of telephone interviewees commented that school exams were increasingly of concern and that choices might soon have to be made. One father said that sport was a useful way of keeping his daughter from developing an interest in boyfriends! One interpretation of these data is that the parents have the interests of their daughters at heart *beyond* sport.

[Table 3 about here]

The parents' perceived *greatest benefits* and *greatest disadvantages* of their daughters' sports, together with aspects of sport which they thought their daughters *enjoyed most* and *least*, grouped in rank order, are shown in Table 3. Lack of time and tiredness featured prominently with one exasperated parent claiming "...it can take over

your life". Parents perceived clear trade-offs between these positive and negative features of involvement and, in conjunction with their answers about exerting pressure or having higher aspirations for their daughter, appeared keenly aware of the shifting balance between them as the daughter moved through adolescence.

[Table 4 about here]

#### **Employment and costs of financing the daughters' sport:**

82% mothers and 91% fathers worked in paid employment, the majority in professional and managerial occupations (59% mothers and 81% fathers), reflecting their relatively high socio-economic status (see Table 3). The annual cost of supporting their daughter's involvement in high level sport was estimated by the mothers to be an average of £1510 (range = £100-£5000) and estimated by the fathers to be an average of £1648 (range £75-£5000) (see Table 3). This is a considerable financial commitment, especially when considering how many of the parents also had other children to bring up. It seems that girls with elite sporting aspirations would do well to choose middle class parents! In reality, of course, those without the resources to provide for travel, equipment, food and competitions fees are likely to have dropped out of sport long before reaching elite status. The geographical position of many in this sample, living in the remote areas of south west Britain, was clearly a major issue and exacerbated the financial pressure on parents. One family had even moved over one hundred miles to a large conurbation purely to facilitate their daughter's continued involvement in her sport. Only a few of the young women in this study enjoyed financial rewards from their sporting endeavours and even fewer face the option of a professional or trust-funded career in sport.

#### **Summary:**

In summary, on the basis of the results from this study, fathers of elite young sportswomen are more likely than mothers to:

- take an active part in sport themselves
- want their daughters to go further in their sport
- put pressure on their daughters to perform well
- criticise their daughters
- be concerned about their daughters going to the coach's home or away overnight with a coach

Mothers of elite young sportswomen, according to this study, are more likely than fathers to:

- take on an organisational role in their daughter's sport

- have met their daughter's coach regularly
- be content with their daughter's current level of participation
- watch their daughter compete
- be content with their daughter accepting lifts from a coach
- give their daughter praise

Both parents are likely to:

- know coaching times and venues
- be content that their daughter is safe during her sports coaching
- be close to their daughter
- be relatively financially secure

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The fact that the sample for this study was opportunistic, with access facilitated via the Sports Council, may have limited the results. However, such a sample is also rarely made available to a researcher and offered a unique opportunity to test out some of the research questions which had already been raised by the researcher's own previous work (Brackenridge 1994; Brackenridge *et al.* 1995).

The level of a child's sports participation has *not* yet been identified as a factor associated with more or less risk of sexual abuse in sport and most of the personal accounts of abuse already researched have originated from elite and former elite sportswomen who have had extensive, close association with their coaches (Brackenridge 1997b; Brackenridge & Kirby, submitted). Clearly, however, it will be important to research risk and safety at *all* levels of the sports continuum, from beginner to Olympic, in order to verify whether and what risk factors apply to young sportswomen in these contexts.

The exploratory nature of this study meant that it was necessary to investigate the broad context of parental involvement in daughters' sport and not just focus directly on issues to do with sexual abuse prevention *per se*. For example, whilst socioeconomic status might appear tangential to child protection, higher income status has been demonstrated to have some protective benefit against sexual abuse in sport (Kirby & Greaves 1996). Parents with a history of sexual abuse as a victim, or, especially, as a perpetrator, might well have chosen not to respond to the

questionnaire even though the terms 'sexual abuse' and 'child protection' did not appear as such, and this will have influenced the both the rate and the nature of the response.

With so few households now headed by two-parent heterosexual couples (General Household Survey 1993), a number of those surveyed may have chosen not to answer. The use of the term 'carer' in the instructions to respondents and in the title of the study was intended to assuage concerns about this: nonetheless, it is accepted that a remote technique such as a postal questionnaire is not likely to secure responses from anyone sensitive to their public and/or marital status. The method of approach to the research participants in this study was limited for practical reasons. A postal survey is clearly not the most effective mechanism for eliciting views on sensitive topics and certain important questions about parental assumptions of safety were omitted from the schedule for this reason. Future research on this theme will explore the use of in-depth interviews and personal accounts to give a richer picture of the involvement of parents in children's sport and to allow closer probing of sensitive issues. The decision to analyse responses from mothers and fathers separately was vindicated by the resulting evidence of some significant sex differences (see Table 2), some of which appear to contradict and others to support findings from studies of parents' involvement in daughters sport in the USA. Nonetheless, despite the satisfactory response rate of 55%, a sample of 186 is too small for any major conclusions to be drawn.

## CONCLUSIONS

Parental influence is known to be a major factor in children's participation in sport and in their selection of sport but we do not yet know how far parents' involvement in their children's sport offers them protection against sexual abuse from authority figures, such as coaches. This study has begun to explore this question first, by examining whether Hellestedt's designation of parental 'underinvolvement' in sport applies to a small sample of elite young female athletes in Britain and, secondly, by examining whether some of the protections proposed by Finkelhor and Williams (1988), in relation to child safety from sexual abuse in day care settings, exist for this sample of young athletes.

In answer to the first research question 'What do parents of young elite sportswomen know about their daughter's coaching situation?', whilst the parents in this study demonstrated high levels of interest, that is they did not fall into Hellestedt's 'underinvolved' category, their knowledge of the coaching context was very limited. Education and information for parents about child protection/sexual abuse prevention is also limited in this country

(Brackenridge *et al.* 1995) and currently official education and training courses are offered only to those who promote and deliver sport (National Coaching Foundation 1995). There is clearly a need for better dissemination of child protection training for parents, both from *non-sport to sport* settings and *within* sport itself.

Whether parents may safely assume that sport is a "healthy place for healthy girls" is a question which requires further examination. The respondents in this study interpreted safety in physical rather than sexual terms and varied in the degree of scepticism demonstrated about whether travelling away with coaches or spending time at the coach's home was safe practice for their daughters. Fathers were more inclined to question such practices yet knew less about the logistics of their daughter's competition and training habits.

How far knowledge about sexual abuse and prevention in day care settings might assist parents in preventing sexual abuse of their athlete daughters coaches is another question which requires further investigation since the contextual data gathered here illuminate only some of the prevention and detection mechanisms put forward by Finkelhor and Williams (1988). Finkelhor's work on abuse in day care has taken a central and respected place in the literature on child sexual abuse: in the realm of sport some of the same interpersonal and organisational dynamics are at work so the use of Finkelhor's framework was important here for establishing both the validity of his own work in other social contexts and for establishing the validity of child sexual abuse vulnerabilities in relation to parental roles in sport. Importantly, whereas Finkelhor worked back from data on abuse to establish safety parameters, this work began by examining the degree to which these some of these safety systems are in already in place in sport: the work will be developed later to match these findings against data from actual abuse cases. Until such time as we have a systematic analysis of large numbers of sexual abuse incidents in sport. and specific studies of prevention and detection in sport, we must rely on protection systems which have efficacy in cognate settings. At this point, Finkelhor and Williams offer the best fit model.

In conclusion, the research questions which stimulated this study have only been partially answered. Further research, both quantitative and qualitative, is required to validate the findings of this study and to explore the many unanswered questions associated with parents' role in the prevention of sexual abuse in sport. The proposals arising from Finkelhor and Williams's work on day care could very well be used as a template for parents in sport until such time as sport-specific proposals, based on sport-specific research, are available. That sport is 'healthy for girls' seems in little doubt but the answer to the main research question 'What do parents of elite young

sportswomen know about their daughter's coaching situation?' must be 'Not enough'. Whilst the daughters in this research are well supported by their parents there is scope for much higher awareness about the risks of sexual exploitation by coaches and for more attention to be paid by parents to the monitoring of standards of care afforded to their daughters.

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Figure 1 The Parental Involvement Continuum (Hellestedt, 1987)

Disinterested parent ↑ Misinformed parent ↑	The comfort zone	Excitable parent ↑ Fanatical parent ↑
UNDERINVOLVEMENT	MODERATE INVOLVEMENT	OVERINVOLVEMENT

Table 1 Excerpt from National Coaching Foundation leaflet (1996) "Protecting Children From Abuse: A Guide For Everyone Involved in Children's Sport"

<p>"What can I do to protect my child or children in my sport from abuse?"</p> <p>If you are a parent or carer:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- check to see if the club has a policy which ensures children are protected and kept safe from harm</li> <li>- check that staff and volunteers are carefully recruited, trained and supervised</li> <li>- know how to voice your concerns or complain if there is anything you are not happy about</li> <li>- ensure your children know how to voice their concerns or complain if there is anything they are not happy about</li> <li>- encourage your child to talk to you about any worries..."</li> </ul>
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**Table 2 Summary table of selected results from the parent postal and telephone surveys**

	Population size Total response	Fathers n = 93 55% (51)	Mothers n = 93 56% (52)	Sig.
Active competitor as a child		91%	64%	**
Active competitor now		49%	23%	*
Involved in organising roles		28%	60%	***
Met daughter's coach regularly		39%	62%	**
Knew coaching qualifications of daughter's coach	39%	44%		NS
Knew of a code of ethics for the daughter's coach	20%	15%		NS
Always knew when and where coaching took place		86%	-	
Watched daughter compete...always	24%	52%	)	*
occasionally	63%	37%	)	
Watched daughter train... always	4%	12%	)	NS
occasionally	53%	50%	)	
Knew other adults were around during coaching		84%	-	
Confident of daughter's safety... completely	61%		-	
fairly	31%		-	
Daughter accepted lifts from her coach	50%			
Completely happy about this	42%		96%	**
Daughter visited coach's home	28%		35%	NS
Completely happy about this	22%		35%	*
Daughter went away overnight with coach	46%		50%	NS
Completely happy about this	22%		41%	p<0.08
Would like daughter to go further in sport		79%	64%	)
Would like daughter to stay at this level	21%	34%	)	NS
Ever put pressure on daughter to perform well:				
yes, a lot	51%	31%		*
no, never/very rarely	60%	65%		NS
Ever criticised daughter: never	14%	17%	)	
rarely	28%	44%	)	**
sometimes	53%	33%	)	
Ever praised daughter yes, a lot	59%	73%		NS
sometimes	37%	21%		NS
Significance:	* p<0.05			
	** p<0.01			
	*** p<0.001			

**Table 3 Parents' perceptions of daughter's outcomes from sport**

Greatest benefits (ranked)	Greatest disadvantages (ranked)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Psychological</li> <li>2 Social</li> <li>3 Health and fitness</li> <li>4 Cathartic</li> <li>5 Other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Lack of time</li> <li>2 Tiredness</li> <li>3 Travel</li> <li>4 Other</li> </ul>
Aspects of sport enjoyed least (ranked)	Aspects of sport enjoyed most (ranked)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Time and place of training or coaching (travel, distances, waiting around)</li> <li>2 The activity (fitness training, conditioning and practising)</li> <li>3 = Other people (judges, coaches, "pushy parents and obnoxious kids"</li> <li>3= Self (tiredness, injury, sense of anticlimax if loss)</li> <li>5 Lack of time for other activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Playing (competing, doing well, achieving, challenge)</li> <li>2 Friendship (sociability, team spirit, camaraderie)</li> </ul>

**Table 4 Employment and costs of financing daughter's sport**

	Fathers (n = 51)	Mothers (n = 52)
In paid employment	91%	82%
Professional/managerial	81%	59%
Estimated annual expenditure on daughter's sport	£1648	£1510
Range	£75-£5000	£100-£5000

Figure 2 Two cycles of sexual offending: the paedophile (based on Wolf 1984) and predator (Brackenridge 1996)

Figure 5 Two cycles of sexual offending: the paedophile (based on Wolf, 1984) and the predator (new)

