

Researchers: Many Australian kids abused in sports won't ever speak up. It's time we break the silence

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Sport is supposed to be a safe place for kids to learn and play.

Too often, however, sporting clubs can be places where [children](#) are [abused](#) psychologically, physically or sexually.

Imagine, then, a child in your life had been abused, but never told an adult about it.

Our [new research](#) shows that's the case for many children who've experienced abuse in a community sport club.

Here's what we found about how children talk about—or don't talk about—their experiences of abuse in sport.

Survey shows abuse goes undisclosed

Our [research](#) is the first to explore how often children tell adults about abuse in community sport.

Before this, we knew very little about how children spoke about their experiences of abuse.

This data builds on our previous study, focusing on the responses of the 800 adults who had all experienced abuse in community sport as children.

In our new study, our survey tool asked about childhood experiences of abuse in sport. These ranged from [psychological violence](#) (excessive criticism and humiliation), [physical abuse](#) (throwing equipment, striking someone), [sexual violence](#) (sexualized comments or acts) and neglect (ignoring a child after a poor performance).

We found more than half said they never spoke to an adult about it.

Three in four children never spoke to an adult about abuse from a coach.

Rates of disclosure were even lower when the abuse was from a parent, with eight in nine children not speaking to another adult about their experiences.

We also found boys disclose peer abuse in sport less frequently than girls, while girls had lower rates of disclosing to an adult within the sport club (coach/club manager) than boys.

The evidence shows delayed disclosures of abuse (or never disclosing) can have severe and [long-lasting impacts](#) on a child's mental health.

This makes these findings highly concerning.

Having a policy is important, but not enough

Clubs often try to stamp out abuse by having policies aimed at protecting children.

But we found while policies can provide guidance on who to report abuse to, even getting that far can be difficult.

First, a child victim/survivor (and adults around them) needs to recognize their experience as abuse. In community sporting clubs, a child would then need to talk to an adult (a club member protection officer, for example). Finally, the adult/child would need to formally report the abuse for the policy to be enacted.

In an environment where abuse has become so normalized, children may not even realize they're experiencing it.

The response system [relies on reports of abuse](#), but participants are often afraid to come forward, or aren't believed when they do.

Even when children are aware and able to say something is wrong, we found they think twice before speaking to an adult.

The children often questioned whether their experiences were bad enough, especially when they saw other kids going through the same things.

One participant shared bullying was so widespread that:

"[...] it's [violence] a cultural thing in the sport. And so you just learn to live with it, ignore it."

How we respond to children matters

Often children will not have the words to say "I am experiencing abuse".

In [our study](#) children would simply tell their parents they weren't enjoying sport.

They often didn't even think they were talking about abuse. One of the people we spoke to said, "I didn't know I was disclosing [...] I just thought I was reiterating what happened during the day."

In most instances, the responses from adults normalized or rationalized the [child's](#) experience of abuse.

A participant shared her parents' response was, "Sorry you're experiencing this, but time to just be resilient. Like, just don't think about it."

Sometimes, the adult offered a supportive and empathetic response, but this was rarely followed up with long-term support or lodging an official report of abuse.

This leaves the experiences of abuse undocumented and unaddressed.

Taking action against abuse in sport

We need to talk more about abuse in sport.

The issue is gaining some traction, with the launch of international and national campaigns.

[Start To Talk](#) encourages people to have conversations about poor behaviors and improving safety in sport.

Our team in Australia is running workshops on [abuse](#) with community sporting organizations.

We have passionate volunteers who want to change the culture, but need support to do so.

Abuse thrives in the shadows, and it is time for more significant action to realize real change. [Here is what you can do to help](#):

- listen to children, really listen to what they say
- believe them when they say they are uncomfortable, not enjoying sport or feel unsafe, and ask them how you can help
- [seek support](#) for them and yourself
- when it's safe to do so, call out poor behaviors.

Sport has so much power for good, but we all must play our part in ensuring it is first and foremost, a [safe environment](#).

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