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**SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN SPORT:
A LITHUANIAN CONTEXT REVIEW**

Master's thesis

Prof.dr. Vilma Čingienė

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UNIVERSITY OF MYCOLO ROMERO
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Master's thesis on sports managements

Governance and Administration of Leisure and Sports

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CoE	Council of Europe
CPSU	Child Protection in Sport Unit
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
ISCS	International Safeguards for Children in Sport
IOC	Internacional Olympic Committee
LFF	Lithuanian Football Federation
NOC	National Olympic Committee
UEFA	Union of European Football Associations
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
WA	World Athletics

1. Introduction

Sport is a widely known phenomenon recognised by its positive impact on physical health, psychological development and social integration, especially for children (Mountjoy et al., 2016). However, recent research shows that safeguarding issues repeatedly happen to children that are involved in sports (Lang & Hartill, 2015). Cases of sexual abuse or systemic failures in youth sport, seen in gymnastics or football, per example, have moved international initiatives to fight this issue, highlighting that no sport or country is immune to this matter and that there is a big concern on issues like abuse, neglect, and maltreatment (Kerr et al., 2019).

Researchers argue the need for a more comprehensive and holistic approach to protect children in sports, by focusing on individual behaviours, dynamics of groups and systemic influences (Lang & Purdy, 2024).

In the recent years, different sports organisations and governments started to create and establish safeguarding policies and measures. World Athletics (WA), as of 2023, defined in their world plan that every member federation must have a safeguarding policy in practice, with reporting mechanisms, codes of conduct, and training and education (World Athletics, 2023). Also, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) adopted a safe sports program where athletes can report online any harassment or abuse case (IOC, 2022).

While these are good initiatives, they don't really reflect directly the protection of children in sport. According to Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere (2020), the implementation of safeguarding policies has been often lacking conviction, and the guidelines have been sometimes confusing. Due to that, there is a gap between a policy on theory and on the practice. International sports organisations, even though with good intentions, have unclear impact down the structure due to limited enforcement and follow through.

There are a few stakeholders involved in sport that have responsibilities to ensure the wellbeing of young athletes. Federations, clubs, and national sports organisations must define clear guidelines and protocols; coaches and staff must provide a safe training environment and be alert for indications of abuse; and parents, and the community should be given the authority to speak up and learn for the protection of children (Brackenridge et al., 2010; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). Therefore, a successful safeguarding culture in sports depends on the dedication and participation of all stakeholders.

In Lithuania, this situation has been recently targeted by some stakeholders. The Lithuanian Football Federation (LFF), in 2021, adopted a child safeguarding strategy to promote safe and fun participation in football activities in the country. Also, some UEFA online courses regarding safeguarding children in sport had been translated to Lithuanian and are available to all (UEFA, 2023).

To add on it, the National Olympic Committee of Lithuania (NOC) is participating in a European Union funded project called GUARD, that has the aim to safeguard children in sport through establishing child safeguarding officer structures to the national sport system (GUARD, 2024)

These recent developments show that Lithuanian sports organisations are beginning to understand how important it is to safeguard young children. However, there are still some works to be done.

Considering that establishing a safe sports environment is a recent addition to Lithuania's sports organisations programme, research that looks at the situation in Lithuania and suggests ways to improve it, is needed.

The main problem addressed in this thesis is the gap between child safeguarding policies and their actual application in Lithuanian sports. While some basic guidelines and recommendations for safe sport exist within sports organisations, it remains unclear how well these are understood, accepted, and implemented by key stakeholders such as coaches and administrators. The practical reality suggests that safeguarding may not yet be a consistent priority at grassroots level. This raises concerns about whether children's rights are being effectively safeguarded in sports activities.

The problem statement is then to guarantee that every child's rights and wellbeing are properly safeguarded in practice, because there is an urgent need to better understand and reinforce this application in the Lithuanian sports environment.

This study aims to analyse the experiences from sports stakeholders and to improve the practices to protect children's rights in Lithuanian sport. Stakeholder awareness, practices and experiences are used in this qualitative applied study. The following are the specific research objectives:

1. Review and critique the awareness of frameworks and concept of child safeguarding in sport and specifically in Lithuanian sport.

2. Discuss effective practices and areas where improvements are necessary.
3. Identify perceived challenges in implementing safeguarding measures at the grassroots and institutional levels.

Every objective highlights the purpose of developing improved methods for protecting child's participating in sports in Lithuania.

This dissertation uses a qualitative approach, using focus groups as the data collection method. The research is focused in two groups, one that analyses coaches' perspectives, and another one that analyses sports administrators' points of view. These groups aimed to explore the participants awareness of child's safeguarding in sports, and their practices and challenges regarding policies and practices.

The data was collected by recording devices, transcribed by Microsoft teams AI tool, and analysed using a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This allowed to identify patterns and topics relevant to the subject.

The structure of this thesis begins by introducing the context, research problem, and objectives of the study. This is followed by a literature review that reflects previous research on safeguarding in sport. The methodology section explains the research design, participant selection, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations. The results are then presented according to four main themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. These results are then interpreted and discussed in relation to the literature in the discussion. The thesis concludes with the key findings and offers practical recommendations to promote child safeguarding practices in Lithuanian sport.

The research has a practical significance to Lithuanian sports governance as it provides empirical evidence on the current gaps and opportunities in safeguarding in sports. Also, it gives the opportunity to stakeholders that work directly with children to approach and discuss the current environment in the country.

Although there are positive recent moves towards policy creation, framework implementation, and regulations mechanisms, there is still the need to understand how these policies are applied in practice, the challenges faced by the stakeholders, and its effectiveness in protecting the children's rights. At the end of this research, it will be identified actionable recommendations adapted to the country's content, ready to be implemented in Lithuania, that will help these challenges.

2. Literature review

Over the last years, the issue of child safeguarding in sport had increased international attention, both in academic literature and institutional practice. While sport gives several developmental benefits for children, it also presents risks of abuse, neglect, and exploitation if safeguarding measures are not in place.

The literature reflects an increasing effort to conceptualize, regulate, and implement safeguarding principles across different sports systems. However, these efforts remain uneven across countries, sports, and institutions.

This review provides an overview of how child safeguarding has been defined and addressed, highlighting best practices, implementation challenges, and the context of Lithuania. It also identifies key research gaps that this thesis aims to address.

2.1 Conceptualisation and awareness of child safeguarding in sport

This subchapter introduces the concept of safeguarding within sport, showing how it has expanded from basic child protection to a broader rights-based approach. It summarises the initial role of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and outlines how academic literature defines safeguarding as both prevention of abuse and promotion of well-being. It also highlights that awareness and conceptual clarity about safeguarding vary significantly between contexts, which can influence how policies are interpreted and applied in practice.

The concept of child safeguarding in sports has been evolving in recent years, reflecting that, although there is a knowledge of this rights of children, and despite their benefits, sport may sometimes be a place where young athletes are in risk (David, 2004).

The measures and regulations aimed to promote children's wellbeing and reduce risks inside sports organisations are generally referred to as safeguarding in the academic literature (Lang & Hartill, 2015).

Research indicates that there is a significant discrepancy between countries, sports, and legal systems related to child safeguarding in sports, indicating that although it is an important topic, there is still no commonly agreed-upon definition for this concept (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020).

The principles of human rights such as those articulated in UNCRC are often used to build child protection systems. Article 19 of the UNCRC obliges nations to protect children from all forms of maltreatment, abuse, injury, neglect, or exploitation. This responsibility in sports extends to building safe contexts that promote children's mental, emotional and physical well-being from the beginning rather than just reacting to abuse after this happen (UNCRC, 1989).

According to Brackenridge et al., (2010) there are a few types of damage that need to be addressed by safeguarding, including exploitation, neglect, and harassment as well as physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Also, safeguarding should not only address acts of commission, which is intended abuse, but also address acts of omission, which is failure to protect (Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

The International Safeguards for Children in Sport (ISCS) (2016) introduced an comprehensive framework based on eight key pillars to operationalise safeguarding: (1) developing a safeguarding policy; (2) addressing safeguarding concerns; (3) offering guidance and support; (4) reducing risks; (5) establishing behaviour guidelines; (6) putting training and education into place; (7) collaborating with other organisations; and (8) monitoring and evaluating safeguarding practices. These pillars are accepted standards that help sports organisations create strong safety procedures.

However, a persistent issue in research is that successful protection is not directly related to just policy implementation. The prevention of abuse is most effective when it's part of the organisation's values, as a real safeguarding environment, where the values of protection and child empowerment shape the principles and actions of the organisation (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020).

Also, the commitment of leadership, ongoing training, open dialogue, and inputting safeguarding practices into organisational practices are all critical to achieve an organisational change (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020).

New initiatives should highlight the importance of a child-centred approach which should ensure that young athletes have a say in what constitutes a safe sport environment (Lang & Purdy, 2024). By taking children's point of view into account, protection measures would be sensible to children's real lives and appropriate to their settings.

According to Mountjoy et al. (2016) there are also difficulties between the implementation of safeguarding standards across national sport environments. Obstacles like insufficient

funding, unfair policy enforcement, cultural resistance, and weak accountability mechanisms are particularly serious in countries or sports systems where protection has only recently risen to the top of the political agenda.

Safeguarding measures in Lithuanian sports have been recently added through initiatives like the policy of the LFF and Lithuania's NOC participation in the EU-funded project GUARD (UEFA, 2023; GUARD, 2024). However, there is currently a need of a systematic review of Lithuanian sport stakeholders' comprehension and implementation of safeguarding practices in the country.

A major problem among Lithuanian stakeholders is their lack of knowledge and awareness of formal safeguarding policies considering that there is a lack of initiatives and policies related to sports in the country this investigation will exam how safeguarding concepts are viewed, comprehended, and used in Lithuanian sports organisations.

2.2 Best Practices on Safeguarding in Sport

This subchapter presents international best practices that have emerged to support effective safeguarding in sport. It introduces various frameworks such as the ISCS and UNCRC based strategies developed by organisations like FIFA, UEFA, and the IOC. It shows how these models serve as benchmarks and resources for national sports bodies.

At the same time, it recognises that strong policies are not sufficient if they remain symbolic rather than applied in daily practice. The review mentions that safeguarding must be both systemic and contextually adapted to work effectively, and that participatory, child-centred approaches are central to best practice.

As seen above, initiatives from international organisations like the ones made by World Athletics and the International Safeguards help guide the way to other organisations inspire from and implement their own good practices.

Diving deep into one of these initiatives, the ISCS programme, launched in 2014, is one of the most important one. The safeguards, developed together by more than 50 organisations, are divided into eight key safeguarding components. These criteria have since been tested and advanced on multiple continents and are now used as a reference across the global sport community (Lang & Hartill, 2015; International Safeguards, 2016).

Also, the UNCRC continues to be the foundation document supporting child protection initiatives worldwide, Articles 3 and 19 highlight the need of prioritising the child's best interests in all decisions concerning to them, different international sport organisations such as FIFA and the IOC have developed their own sport-specific guidelines based on these principles (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024).

According to Mountjoy et al. (2016), another initiative is the IOC's Consensus Statement on Harassment and Abuse in Sport, where topics such as behaviour guidelines, educational initiatives, and transparent reporting procedures are mentioned as crucial.

Also, UEFA and FIFA created policy templates, online courses, and toolkits to help national federations in placing safeguarding measures into practice (UEFA, 2023; FIFA, 2021). As seen in the LFF case, national organisations can find detailed instructions on creating safeguarding procedures.

Other institutions, like the European Union and the Council of Europe (CoE), have been involved in taking safeguarding practices across nations into practice. By joining raising awareness with legislative and practical suggestions, the CoE Start to Talk campaign initiative highlighted the government's obligation to safeguard children in sport (Council of Europe, 2018). Additionally, the EU and CoE safeguarding in sport project promoted capacity-building and shared learning by collaborating with participating nations to create personalised safeguarding system roadmaps (Council of Europe & European Union, 2022).

Although there has been a lot of improvement, researchers alert that having regulations in place does not ensure good protection (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). The concept of performative compliance shows when organisations create external visible routines that answer requests from the outside without being really integrated into practice. In that sense, creating a respectful, open and responsive organisational culture, is as relevant to successful safeguarding outcomes as the formulation of specific policy (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020; Gomez & Schoch, 2025).

Cross-national comparisons also reveal differences in the safeguarding's maturity, due to the requirement of doing education courses, the nature of the training course, the separation of safeguarding monitoring and the incorporation of child protection in coach education systems, countries such as Netherlands, Germany and United Kingdom are often indicated as role models, showing different levels of maturity when compared to others (Lang & Hartill, 2015).

Accordingly, adaptive national responses are a key factor in achieving effective protection, even though international and European frameworks do provide strong norms and practical models. In order to ensure that safeguarding is effective, sustainable and responsive to the reality, local cultural, structural and resource factors must be considered. Strong policies, leadership, training, easy access for reporting, kid involvement, and regular oversight are all measures to consider having effective systems (Mountjoy et al., 2015).

Moving from policy acceptance to real, systemic change is still the biggest obstacle worldwide. By examining stakeholder perspectives, this study aims to support this dynamic process.

2.3 Challenges in implementing safeguarding frameworks in sport

This subchapter addresses the common challenges faced by sports systems when trying to implement safeguarding policies. These include cultural resistance, organisational silence, lack of resources, unclear reporting mechanisms, and symbolic compliance. It explains how safeguarding efforts are often delayed by norms and limited institutional capacity. The literature reviewed suggests that implementation gaps persist even when policies are in place and that success often depends on leadership, training, and accountability mechanisms.

Although there are some national and international frameworks and recommendations about protecting children in sport, to put this in practice is still difficult in sports. Cultural, institutional, and capacity challenges make it difficult to go from policy to successful implementation (Lang & Hartill, 2015).

The concept of symbolic compliance is a challenge that states that to align with international frameworks and to have a good review from the public, organisations create and support safeguarding policies, however they don't apply these policies into their daily activities. This serves more as of a reputational strategy than as a change in organisational cultural or athlete experience (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020).

Many grassroots sport organisations lack the financial, capacity, and infrastructure resources needed for safeguarding programs (Council of Europe, 2018). Many of the sports organisations, usually run by volunteers, find it difficult to maintain open reporting procedures, assign committed child safeguarding officers or provide needed training (Moustakas et al., 2022).

Other challenge that is recurrent and difficult to fight against is culture. The adoption of safeguarding measures can go against some wrong rooted norms in sport, such as a "win-at-all-costs" mentality, the normalisation of severe coaching techniques such as shouting or

punishments, and organisational silence on abuse to protect the structure (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Strict coaching and harsh discipline are still admired and accepted in many sports cultures which, in turn, creates difficulties when trying to address practices that can be perceived as emotional or psychological abuse. Power dynamics of a hierarchical nature and reputational risk often mitigate the reporting of offenses (Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

Also, there are a high number of coaches and volunteers that lack knowledge of their safeguarding obligations or are unaware of how to spot and handle abuse in sport (Child Protection in Sport Unit, 2018).

Reporting and enforcement systems for athletes and parents are repeatedly discouraged regarding safeguarding issues because to a lack of faith in institutional responses, fear of retaliations, and confusing reporting mechanisms (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Even with reporting mechanisms in place, organisations usually lack the independent monitoring or procedural clarity required to conduct matters in a transparent and efficient manner (Council of Europe, 2018).

The insufficient involvement of kids and young athletes in the development and assessment of safeguarding policies is a significant gap identified in the literature. Policies are frequently created with an adult-centric point of view and with insufficient input from the people they are intended to protect. For safety measures to be both theoretically solid and practically responsive to children's actual experiences, athlete voices must be included (Brackenridge et al., 2010; Lang & Hartill, 2015).

Overall, research suggests that two main factors cause most implementation challenges, the cultural norms and attitudes that resist change, and the political, organisational, and resource-based limitations (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

2.4 Lithuanian context on safeguarding children in sport

This subchapter focuses on how safeguarding has developed specifically in Lithuania. It summarises the limited policy and research attention the issue has received over the time and highlights recent developments such as the LFF's safeguarding strategy and the involvement of the Lithuanian NOC in the GUARD project. While acknowledging progress, the review highlights that safeguarding in Lithuania is still emerging and faces structural, cultural, and educational challenges.

In a report to the European Commission (EC) in 2019, where a mapping study was created regarding safeguarding children in sport and its policy advancements in Europe, this research showed that in Lithuania, safeguarding children in sports was not a priority, that there were no relevant policies and legislations regarding to it, and that laws have been recently changed to improve this area (European Commission, 2019).

However, the adoption of the first child safeguarding and well-being strategy by the LFF in 2021 was a way to fight it and become one of the biggest national developments in the country. This strategy was aimed to create safe playing conditions for all kids participating in football. It gave crucial changes such the designation of child safeguarding coordinators, the establishment of reporting systems, and awareness-raising campaigns for parents, coaches, and employees (UEFA, 2023).

To ensure wider access for Lithuanian coaches and volunteers across grassroots programs, the LFF also translated and promoted UEFA's online child protection training courses. These initiatives represent a major step regarding safety procedures in Lithuania, especially given that almost 40,000 kids play football in the country each year (UEFA, 2023).

Beyond football, another example is the Lithuania's Olympic Committee involvement in the Erasmus+ GUARD project, which promotes National Olympic Committees to develop child safeguarding officer positions (GUARD Project, 2024). This demonstrates that the country is creating the measures to uniform policy implementation across different sport federations, showing an increasing compliance to global safeguarding standards.

Concerning research development on the topic in the country, there is still a need of more empirical studies that particularly address Lithuania's experiences with safeguarding. However, recent research from Lang and Purdy (2024) investigated Lithuanian child athletes' perceptions of safety in sporting situations. Former athletes participated in focus groups for the research, raising concerns about systemic problems including corruption, overtraining, and doping demands in addition to relational abuse. According to these results, safeguarding in Lithuania must go beyond the conventional emphasis on abuse prevention to include more general athlete welfare concerns (Lang & Purdy, 2024).

This study emphasises how important it is to actively include young athletes in the creation of safeguarding policies, where participants indicated that sport systems need to be more open, impartial, and respectful (Lang & Purdy, 2024). The benefits of participatory methods, in which

children's opinions influence safeguarding measures, align with worldwide best practices guidelines (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Lithuania's sports environment is gradually changing culturally. Over the past 20 years, Lithuania's adherence to international child rights agreements and the strengthening of national child protection laws have fostered increased awareness of children's rights. However, implementing these values in the sports sector remains challenging, particularly due to rooted norms that emphasize discipline, performance, and hierarchical authority. These traditions can delay the adoption of newer safeguarding standards, such as athlete-centred coaching and zero tolerance for emotional abuse, as also seen in other contexts where power imbalances and traditional coaching practices dominate (Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

This rising understanding of the significance of child's safeguarding adopted by the developments in Lithuanian football, the involvement in EU-funded projects, and the increase in discussion in academic raises the expectations that the topic will only grow in the country.

Lithuania is in a developmental, yet promising stage of its safeguarding in sports journey, while it is establishing a foundation for safer sport environments. However, it will need consistent work to overcome structural division, lack of resource, and cultural attitudes to achieve a complete safeguarding culture.

2.5 Gaps in literature and theoretical insights

This subchapter identifies the gaps in the literature regarding safeguarding in sport. It highlights the lack of empirical studies focused on post-Soviet countries and the need to understand how safeguarding is experienced by grassroots stakeholders, not just policymakers.

The review also calls for a wider perspective that includes systemic pressures to children's well-being in sport, moving beyond isolated cases to examine deeper institutional dynamics. These gaps justify the need for this research, which aims to offer grounded insights into the practical realities of safeguarding in Lithuanian sport.

Although research on sports safeguarding has progressed globally, there is still a big scope for improvement. Studies on safeguarding in sports related to Eastern European countries like Lithuania still remain underdone. The most recent research focus and policy initiatives have been made on Western Europe, leaving other culturally significant post-Soviet systems unresearched (Lang & Hartill, 2015; Moustakas et al., 2022).

Until very recently, there has been a lack of research on how child safeguarding policies were perceived, implemented and confronted in Lithuanian sports. This study helps to fill this gap by focusing on Lithuania.

The low research of the systematic safeguarding issues that grassroots stakeholders encounter is another gap that has been found. This research aims to take a more comprehensive approach to safeguarding by looking at systemic threats to children's wellbeing instead of looking to individual safeguarding issues (Moustakas et al., 2022).

Implementation research is also a gap. While there are a few international frameworks and policy guidelines, it remains unclear what safeguarding measures mean in practice and how they are interpreted, adapted, and applied in processes at organisational and community level (Brackenridge et al., 2016; Council of Europe, 2018).

Also, there are not many empirical studies that go beyond cultural opposition, lack of resources, or lack of knowledge and awareness (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). Through the analysis of stakeholder points of view, this research aims to analyse practical experiences that might guide better implementation measures in Lithuania that go beyond these challenges.

This study takes a child-rights perspective, placing safeguarding in the larger framework of human rights as identified by the UNCRC. This approach highlights children's right to participate and be heard in choices that impact them, in addition to requiring that they be protected from exploitation and abuse (UNCRC, Articles 3 and 12). By engaging key stakeholders like coaches, that are responsible to create safe sports environments and that hear the child's concerns every day, it will be indirectly reflecting the children's interests.

Also, according to research mentioned above, implementing policies is not enough to ensure child safety. Sports organisations must suffer a deep cultural change away from hierarchical, win-at-all-costs mindsets towards a child-centred and safe environments (Lang & Hartill, 2015). This investigation will focus on whether Lithuanian sports stakeholders show signs of cultural change or if they undergo performative compliance, a situation in which official regulations are in place but have low influence in practice (Gomez & Schoch, 2025).

Finally, a multi-perspective approach is necessary due to the multidisciplinary character of safeguarding in sport (Mountjoy et al., 2016). The research will attempt to offer a comprehensive view of safeguarding awareness, practices and challenges in the Lithuanian environment by combining experiences from different stakeholders from different sports.

Concluding, this literature review highlights the important gaps of the research. By focusing on an under-represented area, stakeholder perspectives, and exploring the challenges of successful safeguarding implementation, the study will aim to provide new information while building on preexisting ideas and findings.

3. Methodology

This chapter describes the study's methodology, including the context, participant selection, data collecting, and analytic procedures. Understanding the awareness and knowledge of present safeguarding practices in Lithuania, identifying gaps, highlighting best practices, and suggesting future goals based on stakeholder views served as the guidelines for the study approach. The study's focus on contextualised and comprehensive views from important stakeholders in the Lithuanian sports system.

3.1 Contextual Settings

With a particular focus on safeguarding policies and practices relating to children and young athletes, the study is carried out within the Lithuanian sports environment. Lithuania is still in the early stages of adopting and implementing child safeguarding standards in sports, even though safeguarding is becoming more and more recognised on a worldwide scale. However, there is still a lack of empirical data on perceived difficulties, actual execution, and stakeholder awareness.

Two qualitative focus groups with representatives from sports organisations in the country, such as federations and national governing bodies, and sports coaches were arranged to discuss these concerns. The supervisor Professor Vilma Čingienė, supported the organisation of the focus groups. This investigation took place on April 3, 2025, and were conducted in English. During the morning, at 11am, the focus group with seven coaches was conducted. In the afternoon, at 3.30pm, the focus group with twelve sports administrators was held.

The objectives of each session were to evaluate participants' knowledge and awareness of safeguarding policies, to identify the best practices in the country, the perceived obstacles and current procedures, and provide recommendations for future developments. Therefore, the study follows the principles of an applied qualitative research that aim to comprehend complex social experiences in a real-world applied environment (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The research questions for both focus groups were developed based on previous research conducted in the same settings in Luxembourg, that is still been made. As part of an EU-funded project, CRC-Sport, a combination of goals was outlined and after consultations with academic researchers and project partners, the questions were elaborated. The aim of these questions was to generate open-ended, accessible questions that would promote reflection on awareness, challenges, and possible improvements in safeguarding practices in Lithuania. Questions were

guided informally to ensure clarity and adjusted to adapt the background and role of each target group, coaches and sport administrators.

3.2 Participant Selection

Purposive sampling, a method used in qualitative research for choosing people most capable to provide rich, relevant information, was used to recruit participants (Patton, 2002).

The following criteria was used to choose members for the coaches' focus group:

- Active participation with young athletes under the age of 18
- At least two years of coaching experience.
- Basic understanding of safeguarding ideas.
- Representation from a variety of sports disciplines.

Sports such as football, basketball, athletics, swimming, gymnastics, martial arts, volleyball, handball, figure skating, tennis, and physical education instructors serving as coaches were all taking into consideration and got an invitation to participate in this research. However, due to different issues such as no response back, lack of availability, or not meeting the criteria, there were not that many participants.

The final focus group regarding the coaches' perspectives had seven participants, three male and 4 female, from three different sports, and with government stakeholders than handle safeguarding issues to help moderate the discussion.

Regarding the focus groups for sports organisations, following a similar criterion than the focus group for coaches, but adapted to this new group, it was:

- Active participation in an administrative role on activities for young athletes under the age of 18.
- At least two years of experience.
- Understanding of safeguarding measures and policies.
- Representation from a variety of sports disciplines.

Representatives from organisations such as the Lithuanian National Olympic Committee, educational representatives from sports schools, federations with Olympic and non-Olympic status, and governmental and policy institutions (including the Ministry of Sport and national integrity bodies) were invited to this discussion. In order to provide a wide range of

organisational experiences and capacities regarding safeguarding, special attention was made to include both big and small organisations.

The final focus group regarding the sports administrators perspectives had twelve participants, eight female and four males. This group had representatives from ten different organisations and sports.

While sending the invitations, the aim of this study and goals was explained, checking the participant availability and willingness to participate in open conversations about the topic.

3.3 Data Collection

Two semi-structured focus groups, each lasting around 90 minutes, were the main technique used to gather data. Before starting the focus groups, it was explained the goal of this research and asked to the members present if they accepted the recording of the meeting.

To make the recording more feasible, three devices were used to record both meeting, one of them being through Microsoft Teams. The Microsoft Teams platform was used to record sessions, and its AI-based transcription service was used to automatically create transcriptions. Later, minor adjustments were made to enhance the transcripts' accuracy and readability.

Four major topics that emerged from the research served as the framework for the discussion guide: The present national policies and strategies were reviewed and critiqued; best practices and possible improvements are discussed; challenges and barriers in the implementation of safeguarding were identified; and a preliminary set of priorities for advancing child safeguarding in sport were mentioned.

In accordance with standard practices for qualitative research, the discussions were fluid and allowed for interesting insights and themes, even though a discussion presentation was produced and shared before the meeting.

Some practical difficulties influenced the data collection process. Scheduling participants to participate in the focus groups was challenging. It is believed that to the topic being something “new” in the country, the invitees were not comfortable in discussing it. Also time constraints and workload in sports organisations, especially during competitive seasons was a problem.

Additionally, language differences presented a limitation, although the sessions were conducted in English, this was not the first language of most participants, potentially affecting

the fluidity of responses and its understanding. To moderate this problem, prompts were simplified, and participants were encouraged to clarify when needed.

3.4 Data Analysis

The focus group transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis approach, following the six-phase method of Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach is usually used in qualitative research to identify, examine, and interpret patterns or themes within textual data. It offers a structured and flexible way to explore participants' experiences and perceptions.

Given the applied nature of this study, a primarily deductive approach was used. The initial coding framework was informed by the structure of the focus group guide, which included four main themes: awareness, best practices, challenges, and future priorities. These themes provided a starting point for coding, but sub-themes were refined through close reading and inductive analysis of the transcripts.

The researcher became familiar with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts. Initial codes were generated manually by identifying relevant phrases that aligned with the research objectives. These codes were then grouped into larger themes that represented the major areas of discussion across both focus groups. Attention was given to similarities and differences between the responses of coaches and sport administrators, to capture both operational and structural dimensions of safeguarding in sport.

Coding and categorisation were conducted manually due to the manageable size of the dataset and the researcher's familiarity with the topic. Ethical principles were strictly taken into consideration where participants' identities were anonymous, and all data were handled confidentially and respectfully.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

The study complied with basic ethical standards, such as verbal informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Participants received information explaining the study's objectives, the fact that participation was voluntary, and their freedom to discontinue participation at any moment. The recorded information was safely kept and utilised just for this study.

4. Results

This chapter presents the results of the focus groups according to the four main categories of the two different focus groups: awareness of policies and understanding of safeguarding, best practices and possible improvements, challenges and barriers, and priorities and future actions.

4.1 Coaches' perspectives focus group

4.1.1 Awareness of policies and understanding of safeguarding

The coaches focus group demonstrated lack of awareness of national safeguarding policies related to sport in Lithuania. When it was asked to answer about these questions, coaches mentioned that they don't know any standardised child safeguarding policy in sports in Lithuania *"I only know about general child protection rights, not any sport-specific rules or procedures"*. And related to safeguarding awareness, they mentioned it is important to create a safe a trusting environment for children. This answer is more based on their experiences and not in any knowledge they might have on any specific policy.

In practice, coaches follow internal club regulations: *"We have an internal [policy], it's not that broad, but we have [rules for] what kind of behaviour is unacceptable,"* as described by a coach. In the absence of existing safeguarding policies, coaches follow the basic principles like promoting a safe space for practice, to be respected and to be trusted, as mentioned here: *"If there is no trust between [the] children and [the] coach, then it's a big problem... If they don't feel safe or have any issue, I think the first person is the coach that they can go to and discuss [it with]"*.

Also, coaches mention that the current national measures are not enough for sports, making the connection with the education sector, where *"In schools, we have specialists and algorithms for what to do when bullying happens... we see a lack of these rules in sports organisations,"* meaning that the coaches feel that there is no strategy related to sports in Lithuania, being left behind in policy making and structure. Another added *"no safeguarding person who would be responsible for... dealing with these issues"*, stating that there is no responsible safeguarding officer in his club. *"At least we could have a person, perhaps [from] different sport organisations, to whom we can address [issues] if we have a problem, maybe get some consultation,"* is a suggestion from a coach.

Coaches described that there is a lack of current policy making regarding to safeguarding children's rights in sport, and that the actions that happen are more related to their individual initiatives.

4.1.2 Best practices and possible improvements

Since policies are lacking in Lithuania, coaches often use their personal initiatives to protect the welfare of children. One good practice was the clear code of conduct and mutual agreements made at the beginning of the season by one coach *"We have kind of strict agreements [with parents and children] about what kind of behaviour we tolerate, what we don't"*.

By having this initiative, per example as one athlete should act with the team, or on how a parent should interact with the coach, the coach creates a controlled environment for practice, sets expectations, and gives a compromise to when someone goes against these rules, where they can address the agreement and mediate the conflict.

To add on it, a coach also described a parent orientation and conduct policy in youth tournaments, where although it was incomplete, it was an initiative to try to prevent bad conduct and behaviour from parents.

The coaches also mentioned the importance of open communication and child participation, where they stated that a good coach should be approachable and listen to the children's concerns, *"Maybe sometimes five minutes at the end of the training... [for] children [to say] what they would want to be changed,"*

This represents having a child-centred approach, where children ideas and feelings are taking into considerations by the coach. Normally, coaches don't take the time to listen to them directly, and this could also help to identify changes in their behaviour and understand the reasons for that. Building strong relationships and keeping open communication with children are good practices mentioned by the coaches that help protect children.

An improvement needed mentioned by the coaches is related to the education and training of coaches, as mentioned before. This was a recurring topic as *"We need to help coaches [with this],"* and *"Sometimes they're not educated enough, we don't understand enough [about these issues]"* were stated by some coaches while they discussed the workshops on topics such as psychology, managing issues in safeguarding, or identify abuse in sport. Nowadays, there is a lack of training, and these improvements should be implemented as part of the normal coach development curriculum.

Improved cooperation between organisations and federations was also mentioned by the coaches, in a matter to solve safeguarding issues as *“Maybe if there is some issue, then some upper institution should consult [the club],”* a coach said. *“Right now, I have to decide based on my personal [experience] what is correct, what is not... that’s not good.”* This shows that clear guidelines and connection between organisations and responsible safeguarding institutions is needed.

4.1.3 Challenges and barriers

Some challenges were identified by the coaches, starting with the insufficient training and education of coaches. Some coaches admitted they often feel no able to handle sensitive situations involving children. *“Sometimes coaches... just do their job, but they don’t want to see how each [child] feels,”* one coach said, adding *“I think sometimes coaches are not educated enough on the mental and psychological side, which is often more important than just the sport side.”*

Also, another added *“There is a very thin line between behaviour which is good, and which becomes bad, and it’s very difficult [to judge] ... sometimes coaches do not have much knowledge of how to react in different situations.”* This feeling was shared between them, where the lack of knowledge leaves them unable to respond to certain delicate cases such as bullying or emotional violence.

Another challenge was the absence of formal reporting procedures and supporting mechanisms. Coaches mentioned that they understand Lithuanian law and that its mandatory to report cases of child abuse, however one coach mentioned *“We see underreporting of cases”*, and another said *“All coaches, teachers who work with children and see violence... have to report to police or child protection service, but sometimes cases are not reported,”*. This is related to some of the discussion of keeping the problems inside the club, not having clear protocols and trying them to solve the issue.

Also, there is no standard process for reporting or addressing safeguarding concerns in different organisations, *“There’s no procedure for where to go, who to address [with] the issue”*, as well as a person that could help solve it, per example a safeguarding officer, *“I don’t think I’ve met any federation that has a specialist who could advise on this kind of issue... even the sports schools don’t have these kinds of specialists. Nobody has it”* one coach mentioned. This reflects that the coaches ultimately end up taking care of the problem, which in many cases, they don’t have the capacity to handle it.

Another challenge mentioned was the attitudes and cultural factors present in Lithuania. Parents' behaviour was mentioned a lot, where coaches face pressure from parents that only focus on winning and performance, and not in the overall development of the children, as one coach said, *"we implemented rules for parents on how they should behave on game day... but we don't have any [rules for] how they should act off the court [or] how they should speak with coaches."*

Also, parents have an unrealistic expectation from their children and act aggressive according to it. Parents create a bad environment for children where, as a coach said, *"they think their kids have so many rights... but sometimes they don't see where [the limits are]"*.

To add on it, the coaches discussed also the strict and harsh methods that is culturally imbedded in some parents (and even old coaches) have, where the constant shouting and pressure is applied to children, maintaining the winning at all costs mentality and not creating a safe space for the children.

Finally, the last challenge identified by the coaches is their job overload and burnout, where *"The schedule is crazy, sometimes [coaches] work from 8:00 AM in the kindergarten, [then coach in the evenings] ... they don't have time,"* which in these conditions, coaches don't have the capacity to individualize the attention to each child, or detect any warning sign because they are just exhausted.

The lack of financial and institutional investment from the government, by having specialist staff for safeguarding per example, could help coaches in this aspect as they would have a person responsible for this area.

Lack of coach education, no formal policies or reporting mechanisms, lack of safeguarding officers, problematic parent pressures, culturally harsh mentality and investment problems, are the main challenges identified by the coaches.

4.1.4 Priorities and future actions

According to the above challenges and improvements that need to happen in the Lithuanian sports system regarding to safeguarding children, the coaches had some actions and future priorities that they would like to see implemented.

A clear priority for the coaches is to create formal safeguarding policies and roles across all sports organisations. They want to change for the improvised, informal practices to have a clear

framework where they know and understand how to act and what's their responsibilities. This would include written policies, codes of conduct, reporting procedures, and responsible staff.

This responsible staff is also a priority for coaches as they mention that every organisation or club should have a trained safeguarding officer, even if a part-time one, that helps and takes pressure from coaches, and deal with the situations that might happen.

Also, coaches mentioned that education and awareness campaigns should be a priority. They mentioned that safeguarding training modules should be mandatory for all youth coaches in their licencing process or for personal development. This training should cover how to recognize signs of abuse, how to answer to a child who shares a problem, limits in coach–athlete interactions, and ways to build positive team culture.

To add on it, coaches mentioned that workshops and seminars for parents and young athletes can be a good action for the future. These activities will let the community know on how to have the appropriate behaviour in sports, on how parents should support their children without pressure, and some others.

These workshops and seminars could be implemented at every scale, such as local parents' meetings to government led initiatives. Basically, this would create capacity to all stakeholders involved, from coaches and parents to athletes and administrators.

Another priority mentioned by the coaches was to try to stop the excessive competitive culture and the result-oriented pressure. Coaches mentioned that their job is connected to their own funding. One mentioned that in municipal sports schools, a coach's salary bonus can depend on how many champions or high-performing athletes they produce, which indirectly encourages pushing children too hard. This creates a culture of wining at all costs. Coaches recommend to a policy change where this evaluation systems are changed to reward coaches for providing a safe space and long-term development.

Inter-organisational cooperation and accountability also are part of the coach's advice as they proposed that federations, clubs, schools and child protection agencies establish better communication channels. Per example, if a serious incident happens, there should be a direct contact to a child protection service or the direct involvement of a law enforcement. Also, federations should check the clubs if they have basic safeguarding measures in place.

Reflecting the immediate next steps, coaches prioritize awareness and commitment, by every sports organisation in Lithuania acknowledge that child safeguarding is a priority, and it should

be dealt with. This could be initiated by a national conference where then more concrete steps could happen. Coaches mentioned that they are ready for a change and want to have new practices and procedures, but only if they are supported.

The coaches prioritise the establishment of formal safeguarding structures such as policies, procedures, report mechanisms and officers, comprehensive training and awareness, cultural change and stronger collaboration between organisations.

The findings can be clearer seen on Figure 1.

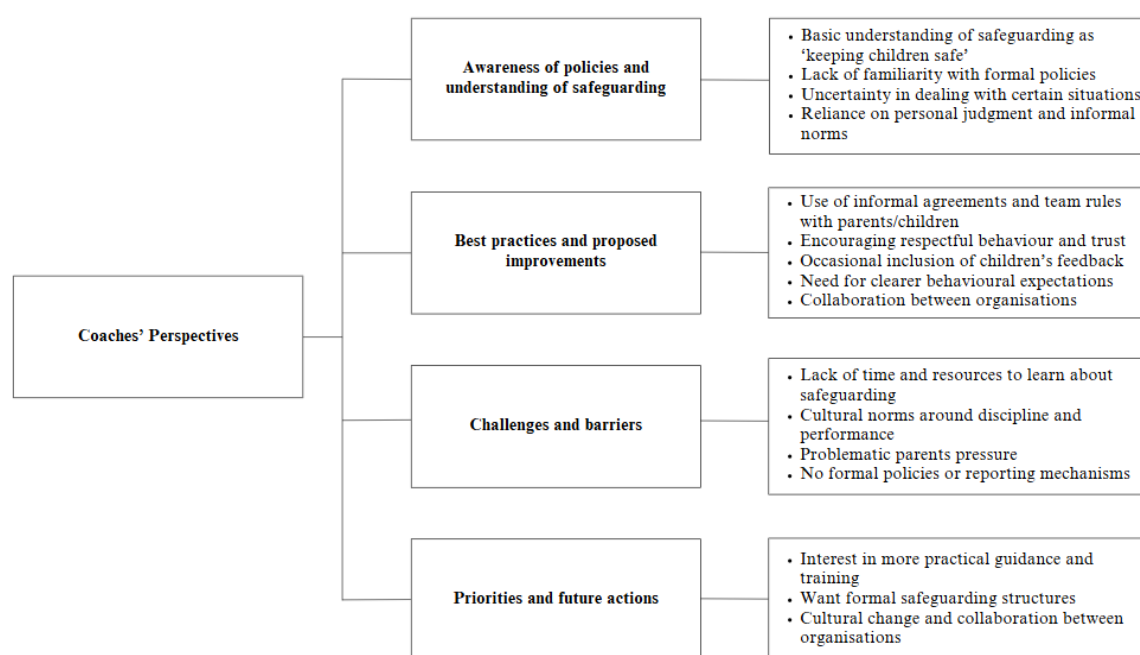


Figure 1 - Coaches' Perspectives findings according to each theme

4.2 Administrators' perspectives focus group

4.2.1 Awareness of policies and understanding of safeguarding

The focus group with sports administrators gave some insights about the current state of child safeguarding policies and awareness from a leadership point of view. Different from the coaches, some administrators were able to share specific policies or strategies that they had implemented in their organisations, showing some awareness on the topic.

The administrators mentioned that Lithuania has begun developing national safeguarding frameworks specifically for sports, one government stakeholder mentioned *"we have a child safeguarding policy as well as an action plan, [but] we have quite a few areas which need to be further developed."*, however, they are still in the initial phase.

Regarding to more specific club and organisations policies, a lot of administrators mentioned they have some things in practice. One mentioned *“what we have is a [safeguarding] policy which describes in general what safeguarding is, what actions are appropriate by the coach, by the parent, by whoever is involved, and which are inappropriate and forbidden.”*. This indicates that in that federation, clear definitions of acceptable behaviour and boundaries with children have been stated. This administrator went on to detail that their organisation’s policy includes practical guidelines and rules, such as limits on one-on-one interactions. *“It is forbidden to be one-on-one in a room with a child, or for coaches to enter the dressing room alone.”*.

They also explained how the policy tries to moderate common risks, per example as unsupervised situations that could lead to misconduct. Also, they have established reporting mechanisms: *“in our policy, it is stated that if something happens... you must report it. It has clear guidelines,”*. Having such a policy and procedure is significant because other administrators don’t have such specific rules and procedures in Lithuanian sport until recently.

The administrators also demonstrated that the safeguarding policies are uneven across different sports, with some being more developed than others. One example came from the LFF they mentioned that their safeguarding policy was first approved in 2021 and that they were updating it in 2025, showing an ongoing commitment. They mentioned *“now we have top division clubs, 10 clubs, which actually have child safeguarding policy within their strategies, and they have clear action plans of what they will do to ensure that the children are safe.”*

This shows that the national federation not only created its own policy but also guided clubs to adopt similar policies and action plans. It was highlighted as a best case scenario and a model for other sports in the discussion.

However, other administrators implied that many sports still lack formal safeguarding strategies at the federation or club level. The group acknowledged that football’s initial start might not yet be corresponded by smaller or less resourced sports. In those contexts, child protection might still be addressed informally or not at all, as the coaches said.

Something that was also discussed was the fast evolution and attitude towards safeguarding awareness, where administrators mentioned that in the past, safeguarding was not discussed in sports *“When I was a child, the picture of this safeguarding was almost not there... It’s very underdeveloped, but I hope this is a beginning platform [for change].”*

Also, one administrator mentioned *“We should consider that we are also a post-Soviet country”*, which states that the legacy of Soviet-era sports culture is related to very authoritarian coaching style and single-minded pursuit of victory, which still influences some attitudes today.

There was the feeling that Lithuania is catching up to international standards, however a bit late. However, the fact that exist discussions and exists formal safeguarding policies shows that the environment is changing and safeguarding in sports can be strengthen soon.

Current national policies and procedures for safeguarding children in sport are emerging but they are not fully implemented yet. Some documents and guidelines are drafted, especially in specific organisations, however there is a need to further development.

4.2.2 Best practices and possible improvements

During the discussion, the administrators shared some examples of best practices that have been implemented in their organizations, as well as proposed improvements to strengthen child safeguarding.

One example came from the football federation, which other administrators held up as leaders in this area. The LFF has established mandatory safeguarding measures for coaches and staff involved in youth sports. *“Within our events... every coach has to pass training on child safeguarding and then gets a certificate. Only when you have the certificate... that means that you understand what it is, you understand what actions you can do”* she explained.

This is a clear best practice, as formal training and certification in safeguarding should be required before adults can work with children in sports programs. The training covers appropriate conduct and how to handle various situations, effectively raising the knowledge and awareness of all coaches.

The federation also provided written guidelines, describing prohibited behaviours, like one-on-one unsupervised contact. Other administrators reacted positively to this example, and some indicated that their sports could adopt a similar model.

Beyond formal training, administrators highlighted awareness campaigns and educational initiatives as effective tools. One administrator gave an example of a social campaign they had at sports events to promote positive values. *“We had kids escorting the players, [saying] ‘Yes to respect, yes to equality, yes to fair play, and no to racism and no to hate speech.’*

These campaigns serve to raise public awareness about child protection and respect in sport. They engage the children as ambassadors of the message and remind coaches, parents, and fans about the values of safe sport.

Administrators considered such initiatives as good practice because they set an example and indication that safeguarding and respect are important in sport.

Another practice mentioned by the administrators was regarding their mechanisms for reporting, where someone mentioned *“Usually parents [are] reporting... we then have some investigation, nothing too scary so far.*

This reflects that this organisation encourages the reporting of any miss behaviour. Also, being dealt after the reporting, means that the organisation opens a case and investigates what happened.

It's a change from the old approach of ignoring and hiding the problems. The fact that parents are ready to report issues in this federation indicates a level of trust that their reports will be acted on. Additionally, one administrator mentioned that their federation was starting to collect data and track incidents, which helps in understanding the scope of problems and monitoring progress over time.

Collaboration was also a best practice. Some administrators described how their organisations began working with external experts or partnering with child protection agencies to improve safeguarding. For example, because of not having experts in the organisation, a federation might invite specialists to conduct workshops or advise on specific cases.

This will look for help outside of the organisation was mentioned as a positive development, breaking from the tradition of sports handling everything internally. By connecting with national child protection services, sports bodies can ensure that serious cases are dealt with by the appropriate authorities.

One administrator also said that they have started aligning their strategies with practices and guidelines recommended at the European level. This kind of cross-sector and international collaboration is a promising improvement that can raise the quality of safeguarding in sport in the country.

Another point, more related to improvements, was the fact that currently there are no standardisation of policies and guidelines, where organisations act alone and on their areas. For

example, the football federation has their own training and certification program, however, the other federations lack on these measures.

The improvement would be to implement similar mandatory training across all sports federations in Lithuania. The agreement was that every coach, whether in basketball, athletics, swimming, or any other sport, should take basic safeguarding training and be certified.

Some suggested that this could be regulated by the National Olympic Committee or by the government entity related to sport, making licensing a requirement. Also, codes of conduct and safeguarding policies need to be adopted by all sports clubs, not just by some.

Another improvement mentioned was the need to engage and educate parents and young athletes. Best practices in this include organizing parent meetings, distributing educational flyers, or even asking parents to sign behaviour agreements.

Administrators think that formalising parent education is important, for example, introducing a short orientation for all parents when their child joins a sports program, to explain the club's safeguarding policy and expected conduct.

A proposed improvement was to create a parent code of ethics across all sports, so that it becomes normalized that parents also have responsibilities in creating a safe sport environment. Additionally, empowering children through education about their rights is crucial.

One administrator mentioned that children should be made aware of what is acceptable and how to seek help "*The kids should know where they can go to speak with someone in their club*" he said.

Also, the administrators discussed about monitoring improvements. They mentioned that having policies is not enough, as they need to be reviewing them regularly and check their effectiveness.

The football federation's update of their policy after five years was given as an example. Some administrators suggested that federations report annually on safeguarding measures taken, for example, the number of coaches trained, number of incidents reported and resolved, etc., as a way to monitor the issue.

Integrating safeguarding measures into club accreditation or annual evaluations was another idea, which would promote clubs to maintain standards or risk losing good classification. The

administrators identified that safeguarding is an ongoing process, and improvements will come through a cycle of implementing actions, evaluating outcomes, and defining approaches.

The administrators identified some best practices and improvements in addressing safeguarding children in sport, such as institutionalisation of safeguarding through training, clear policies, and procedures, expanding successful models across all sports, actively involve parents and children in the safeguarding process, and establishing mechanisms for accountability and continuous improvement.

4.2.3 Challenges and barriers

The sports administrators identified some challenges in their practices and experiences. One of the biggest challenges faced is the inconsistent implementation and enforcement of safeguarding measures in different organisations. Just having the policy on paper doesn't guarantee the practical change, which stated by some administrators that is difficult to ensure compliance by all coaches and volunteers.

For example, one administrator mentioned that top clubs have taken on safeguarding strategies, while smaller clubs or local sports schools may not yet follow the same path, due to lack of awareness or resources. This creates a gap between the planned strategy and actual practice. Until policies are adopted collectively and supported by monitoring systems, children in some sports remain vulnerable.

The administrators also mentioned some resource and capacity gaps at the organisational level. One stated *"we don't have [dedicated] people, nobody"* to carry out safeguarding work. In many sport organizations, there is no staff member assigned to child protection responsibilities, neither external experts available to consult.

They recognize that expecting admins to take on safeguarding in their spare time is unrealistic. However, hiring new staff or assigning such roles requires funding and commitment that not all organizations have. Therefore, lack of trained personnel and budget for safeguarding initiatives remains a challenge.

Another gap discussed was the cultural and mindset barrier. Some administrators mentioned about the frequency of the win at all costs mentality among coaches, parents, and sport organisations, which can lead to the justification or overlooking of abusive behaviours. One administrator said *"Because of either mental or physical harassment, children tend to retreat from sports. They just stop going to practices... and stop practicing sports in general."*

This highlights that the concerns of these cultural issues are very high, where children are quitting sports entirely when the environment becomes too intense or harmful. However, traditionally, success in sport has been measured by champions produced, not by retention or well-being of participants.

Changing that measure of success is difficult. The same administrator continued saying that especially in the past, a child leaving sport might not have been seen as a red flag, where now it's understood as a sign that something went wrong.

Parents behaviour and involvement was another challenge mentioned by the administrators in which they described scenes of extreme parental pressure. One administrator said, *“you cannot imagine how much bad words [I hear] ... parents yelling at the referees and [at] kids, [children] ashamed of [their] parents' behaviour, and sometimes it's becoming brutal.”*

These experiences highlight that abusive behaviour by parents is a consistent problem. Administrators see it not only as a series of individual incidents, but as a pattern that needs addressing through policy, per example with spectator codes of conduct, sanctions for violations, and education where teaching parents about sportsmanship and child psychology should be taught.

The cultural aspect was mentioned as well as older generations of parents, who grew up in the Soviet system, might have a different perception of what is acceptable at sports events, sometimes treating a children's game like an Olympic final. The challenge is to change these behaviours towards a more child-friendly sporting culture.

Also, lack of reporting was mentioned as a challenge. Even though the administrators promote reporting in their official policies, they know that in reality many incidents never reach their desk. One administrator said, *“I wish [safeguarding] would come from the clubs... not just as a requirement from the top”*.

This reveals a concern that people that deal with safeguarding issues might be hesitant to report problems to the leadership, perhaps out of fear of repercussions or belief that it will be ignored.

Administrators also mentioned the lack of knowledge sharing on safeguarding between organisations. While a few federations are moving ahead, there isn't yet a central body or forum in Lithuania that coordinates safeguarding efforts across sports.

The absence of a national coordinating mechanism or at least a regular exchange between sports on child protection was seen as something to be changed. For example, an administrator suggested that outcomes from this investigation could lead to collective tools that everyone can use.

The administrators identified some challenges in addressing safeguarding children in sport, such as irregular implementation of policies, lack of dedicated staff and resources, cultural attitudes that prioritize results over wellbeing, problematic parent behaviours, underreporting of issues, and insufficient communication among sports organisations.

4.2.4 Priorities and future actions

According to the above challenges and improvements that need to happen in the Lithuanian sports system regarding to safeguarding children, the administrators had some actions and future priorities that they would like to see implemented.

One of the first priority mentioned was to ensure that every sport federation and club formally adopts child safeguarding policies and standards. Administrators proposed developing a national safeguarding framework or guidelines that would serve as a reference for all sports organizations.

This could be created by the ministry of sport or federations. By having a common set of practices such as codes of conduct, coaching guidelines, reporting mechanisms, etc., regularity can be achieved.

Each organization would then implement these standards in their own context. As part of this, administrators prioritized the appointment of safeguarding officers, commissions, or close connection to the government ombudsman. These people would be in charge of control the policy implementation, handling reports, and take care of ongoing improvements.

Making safeguarding an explicit part of organizational structures is seen as non-negotiable moving forward. In practical terms, one administrator suggested a timeline in which within the next year or two, all federations should name a safeguarding responsible and confirm that a basic policy is in place.

After, the administrators prioritised education. They discussed a future where certified safeguarding training is mandatory for all coaches, as well as for staff and volunteers who work with children in sports.

This training would be a regular requirement where people would have to retake it every few years, integrating this into the coaching license renewal process. The focus group participants discussed collaborating with educational institutions or using the resources from the EU project to develop a standardized training curriculum that can be delivered.

Additionally, they mentioned educational awareness to parents and athletes. A concrete action item was to create educational materials about child safeguarding in sport that can be distributed to every club to deliver it whenever someone new enters the club.

They also mentioned creating national campaigns and media to spread key messages about preventing abuse and promoting respect in sport, developing public awareness alongside formal training.

Another priority mentioned is to ensure that once policies are in place, there are proper mechanisms to enforce them and manage violations. Administrators highlighted the need for establishing clear disciplinary processes for safeguarding violations, which might involve collaboration with national child protection authorities.

For example, if a coach is found to have violated the code of conduct, through harassment or abuse, there should be a transparent process that could lead to sanctions such as suspension, mandatory training, or in severe cases, legal action and banning from coaching.

This requires each federation to have a disciplinary board or procedure aligned with child protection law. Also, administrators prioritised creating accessible reporting channels at national and local levels. They suggested a national hotline or digital platform where incidents can be reported anonymously if needed, which would then send the concern to the relevant federation's safeguarding officer.

Promoting these channels so that athletes and parents know how to use them is part of this effort. The goal is that no issue is dismissed due to uncertainty about where to report.

Finally, the administrators mentioned the importance of stakeholder collaboration. As a priority, they want to set up a national working group or task force on sport safeguarding that joins together representatives from various federations, the sports ministry, child protection agencies, and athlete and parent representatives.

This group would lead the implementation of the roadmap, share best practices, and discuss how to manage challenges. By working together, sports can share resources, for example,

sharing training programs or both funding a specialist who can advise multiple federations can be a practice.

Another action point was to align with European and international initiatives. The data and insights from this project will be combined with those from other countries, and administrators want to combine those findings.

They expect using the self-assessment toolkit, developed through the project, as a standard instrument for all clubs in Lithuania, which would be a practical step toward continuous improvement. The idea is that each organisation would regularly self-evaluate its safeguarding capabilities, identify weaknesses, and address them, with support from the national working group.

The administrators' priorities for safeguarding children in sport are establishing common policies and roles, managing education and training, create solid enforcement and reporting systems, and promoting collaboration for continuous improvement.

The findings can be clearer seen on Figure 2.

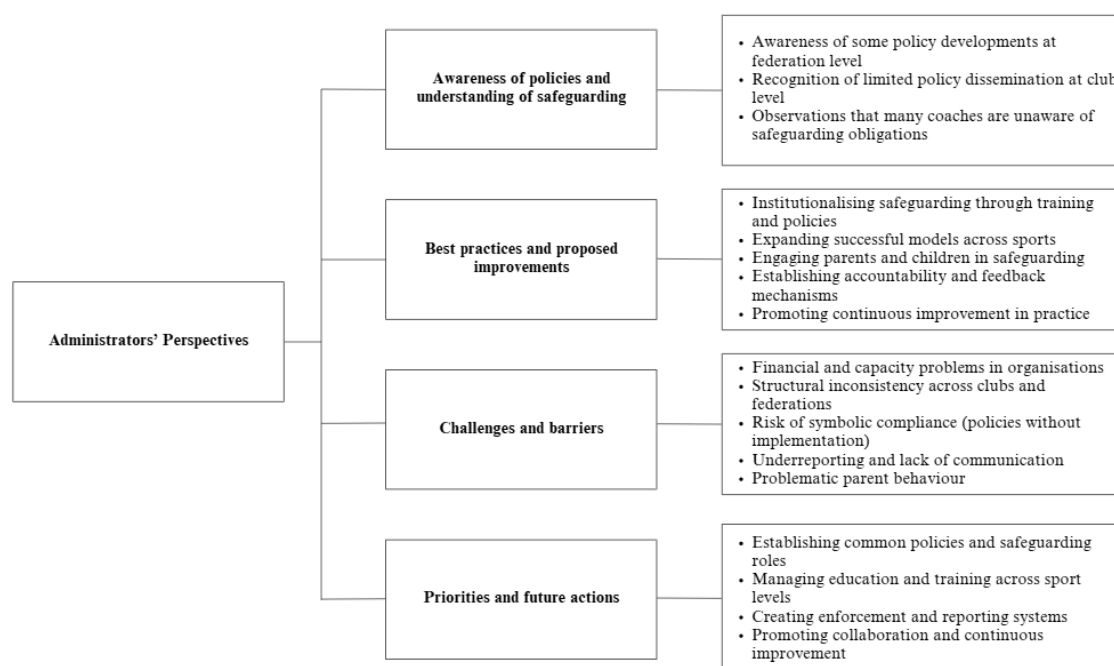


Figure 2 - Administrators' Perspectives according to each theme

5. Discussion

In this chapter, the discussion provides an analysis of the study's findings on safeguarding children in sport, connecting them within the literature review and the context of Lithuanian sport.

Through a formal thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), the chapter identifies key themes that were showed from the different focus groups data, and that got joined together as sub-themes. The Table 3 specifies the merging and creation of the sub-themes. Then, it uses them as a basis for comparison with literature review and policy frameworks. In doing so, the discussion not only mentions what coaches and sport administrators said but also aggregates them and evaluates how these perspectives align with different knowledge on safe sport.

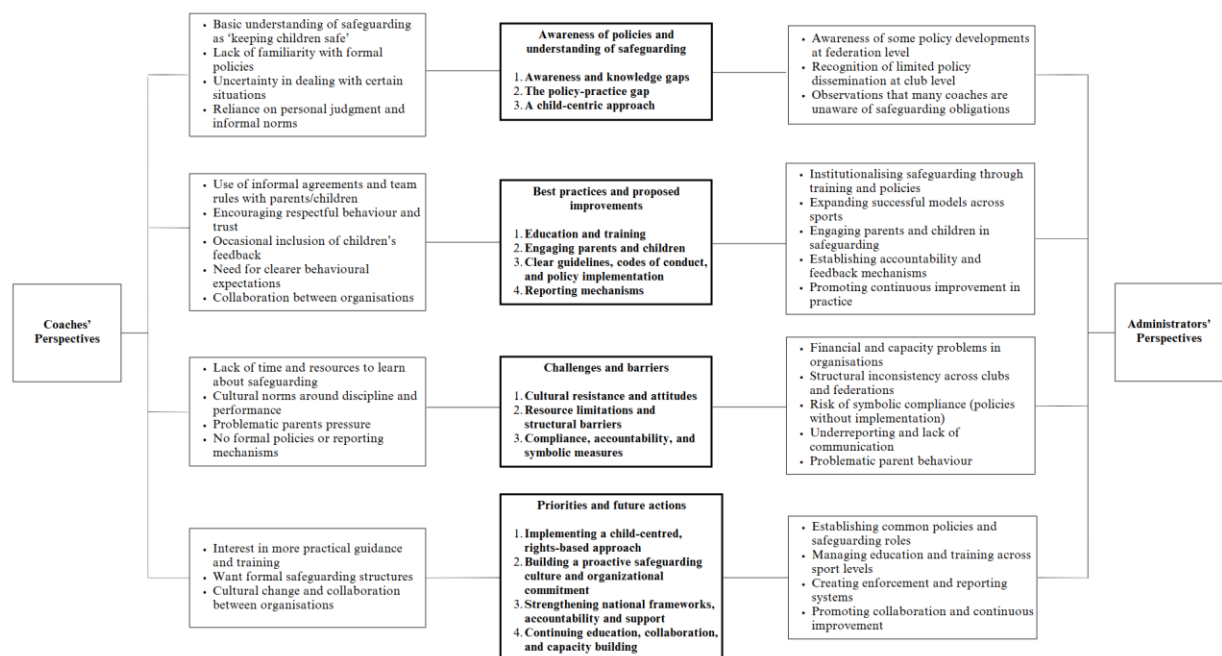


Figure 3 - Sub-themes findings merge

5.1 Awareness of policies and understanding of safeguarding

5.1.1 Awareness and knowledge gaps

Stakeholders in Lithuanian sport acknowledged that child safeguarding is a relatively new focus in their country. Some coaches and administrators demonstrated basic awareness of formal safeguarding policies.

For example, one coach mentioned safeguarding simply as *“how we should work with the kids in order that they will feel safe”*. This aligns with a basic child protection view of the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989).

While this reflects a positive understanding of the concept, it also suggests knowledge gaps regarding to specific policies and procedures. According to the GUARD (2024), Lithuania is still implementing sport-specific safeguarding measures.

Participants also showed doubt about taking care of specific safeguarding situations: *“there is a very thin line between the behaviour which is good and which comes to bad... sometimes not much knowledge how to react in different situations”*. This type of comments suggest that many stakeholders lack clear guidance on what is inappropriate conduct and how to respond or report issues.

This finding aligns with academic research that shows to the limited integration of safeguarding into coach education and daily sport practice (Lang & Hartill, 2015; Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). The CPSU (2018) has highlighted that, in many European contexts, volunteers and coaches often do not understand their safeguarding responsibilities or have the skills to identify and respond to abuse effectively.

Lang and Purdy (2024) further argue that while child protection is a legal obligation, its operationalisation in sport requires contextual adaptation, training, and a proactive approach from governing bodies.

5.1.2 The policy-practice gap

There is a limited understanding on the practice about policy and procedures in place, which leads to a policy-practice gap. This is a recognised issue in sport safeguarding systems (Lang & Hartill, 2015). In other words, even when policies exist, they may not be fully implemented into everyday practice. The gap is often attributed to poor dissemination and insufficient training around existing safeguarding frameworks (Lang & Hartill, 2015).

Some administrators noted that comprehensive policies had been developed, for example, a federation’s child protection policy *“describes... what safeguarding is, what actions are appropriate by the coach, by the parent... and which are inappropriate and forbidden,”* followed by guidelines and reporting procedures.

However, these measures may not be often implemented in practice, as a club manager admitted their organisation has only a rudimentary internal code: *“we have internal... it’s not that broad but we have what kind of behaviour is misacceptable, for example”*.

This suggests that smaller sports clubs often count on informal rules rather than structured policies, leaving interpretation and enforcement highly subjective to their common sense. This

aligns with Parent and Vaillancourt-Morel (2021), who found that many organisations across Europe adopt reactive approaches rather than formal safeguarding practices.

The difference in awareness is significant among coaches and administrators, where some might be entirely unaware that a national or federation safeguarding policy exists. This was shown by participants' frequent focus on personal experience solutions rather than focus on any official guidelines during the discussions.

The difference in awareness between coaches and administrators is also significant. Some coaches looked unaware that national or federation level safeguarding policies existed. This was evident when they mentioned personal solutions rather than institutional procedures during the focus groups.

Such tendencies can be understood through the concept of symbolic compliance, where organisations may adopt policies to satisfy formal expectations without implementing them into practice (Gomez & Schoch, 2025).

Another concern is inconsistency and hesitation in identifying or addressing problematic behaviour. Coaches mentioned scenarios such as children fighting or a coach shouting in training, where *"sometimes [coaches] do not know what to do"*.

Without clear training, they count on personal judgment about whether an incident is serious enough to address. Several indicated a tendency to handle issues internally or informally. As one coach said, *"we have some situations but in my mind they are manageable... you can [resolve it] between children or between adults or between parents"*, so *"we don't have anything to report"*.

This response reveals a culture of keeping problems inside the organisation, which can be problematic if it means under-reporting potential abuse. As Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere (2020) indicate, internal resolution without transparency often perpetuates unsafe environments.

A stakeholder in the discussion observed that sports cases often go unreported to authorities, *"because under the child protection law... [if reported] you have to report to police or child protection service, so we see underreporting"*.

This indicates aligns with the limited understanding of mandatory reporting obligations to escalate issues to external authorities unless necessary (Lang & Purdy, 2024). It highlights that

safeguarding awareness is not only about knowing the existence of policies, but also about understanding its legal and ethical responsibilities.

5.1.3 A child-centric approach

The UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) affirms the children's right to be heard in situations affecting them and to be protected from all forms of violence. In theory, Lithuania's safeguarding practices should be based in these child rights commitments.

In practice, however, the stakeholders do not mention a lot a child-centred rights language. They spoke about safety and protection, but not about empowerment or participation rights. This can be because of the early stage of awareness, where the focus is on managing risk, such as preventing abuse or handling incidents, rather than developing a larger rights-based approach that also emphasizes the child's voice.

There were small signs of movement towards a more child-centric approach. One administrator mentioned that *"the main thing is that a child should feel good, safe... [and] should trust"* the people in the sports environment. Also, a coach suggested giving children a say in evaluations *"maybe sometimes at the end of training... have the children [say] what they would want to be changed"*.

These suggestions align with recommendations from the CoE's *Start to Talk* campaign, which calls for the inclusion of children in decisions affecting them and encourages sports organisations to consult directly with young athletes (Council of Europe, 2018).

However, such examples were rare and seemed to be individual initiatives rather than systematic practice. Research in other European sport contexts has found that even when policies recommend children's rights, coaches and children often lack knowledge of the agreement's content, and children's voices remain not heard (Lang & Hartill, 2015).

5.2 Best practices and proposed improvements

Despite the gaps in awareness, the participants and the literature highlight some best practices and improvements that can promote child safeguarding in sport. The discussion identified what is working well and what more could be done, combining around sub-themes of education and training, engagement with parents and children, clear guidelines and codes of conduct, and strengthening reporting and omission through dedicated roles.

These align with international safeguarding frameworks, suggesting that Lithuania's path forward can build on both local understandings and international standards.

5.2.1 Education and training

One of the findings was the value of education and training in closing knowledge gaps. Participants agreed that coaches, because of having close contact with young athletes every day, need systematic training in safeguarding.

An example came from football, where *“within our events organized by the LFF, [everyone] has to pass the training on child safeguarding and then gets a certificate, only when you have the certificate ... that means you understand what it is, you understand what actions you can do”*.

This requirement that coaches and staff complete a child safeguarding course and be certified is a model of best practice. It not only raises awareness but also sets a clear expectation of competence as recommendations by the CoE and FIFA (Council of Europe, 2018; FIFA, 2021).

By 2023, the federation had even launched Lithuanian language versions of UEFA's online child safeguarding courses to increase the access to such training. This initiative aligns with UEFA's (2020) safeguarding framework, which promotes national associations to develop localized training and implement safeguarding principles across all levels of football.

In Lithuania, while such structured and mandatory training systems remain limited to football, both focus groups expressed a strong desire to see similar frameworks working out in other sports. Administrators mentioned to incorporate safeguarding modules into coaching curriculum at the university level, along with federations seminars and workshops.

One participant mentioned the idea of linking safeguarding training to the renewal of coaching licenses, a method already in use in countries like the United Kingdom and the Netherlands (Lang & Hartill, 2015). This recognition suggests that systematising safeguarding education is a fundamental step towards better protection in Lithuanian sport.

5.2.2 Engaging parents and children

Parental involvement appeared as another crucial element of best practice. Parents are key stakeholders in youth sport and can either be supporters in safeguarding or, if uninformed, sources of pressure and conflict (Furusa et al., 2021).

Coaches in the focus groups mentioned that problematic parent behaviour is a challenge. An administrator admitted *“we don't have any... rules for parents, how they should behave on game day and support... we see a lack of these rules”*.

Establishing codes of conduct for parents was so a proposed improvement. Such codes would set expectations and outline consequences for abusive behaviour by parents, which is recommended by international guidelines (Council of Europe, 2018).

Some international organisations have implemented parent codes forms or brief parent orientation sessions each season to communicate these standards. The participants indicated that similar measures don't happen in Lithuania currently but would be welcomed.

In fact, one administrator described attempts to educate parents informally “*we try to... educate the parents so that they have this information... how to approach [certain] situations*”. Another gave an example of organizing meetings with parents titled “*how to grow your kids to be professional sportsmen,*” These practices aim to engage parents as partners in safeguarding rather than opponents.

In the International Safeguards for Children in Sport (2016), one of the expected policies is the development of guidelines for behaviour covering not just coaches and children but also parents and other staff. Providing parents with clear guidelines helps create a holistic safeguarding environment.

Also, involving parents in safeguarding education can help identify issues early, as parents are often the first to hear of a problem from their child. In the focus groups, it was mentioned that usually “*parents [are] reporting*” minor issues like a coach shouting excessively or a child being bullied, which then triggers an internal follow-up.

Rather than viewing this as interference, sport organizations can channel parent reports into formalized feedback and incident reporting systems. A suggestion from participants was to provide parent workshops or materials at the start of the season. For example, distributing a simple flyer or holding a short meeting to explain the club's child safeguarding policy, including how parents can raise concerns, what behaviour is expected of them, and how they can support their child's welfare in sport.

This approach is in line with the European Commission's recommendations that safeguarding strategies include all relevant stakeholders, not only sport professionals but also parents, children, and volunteers (European Commission, 2019).

5.2.3 Clear guidelines, codes of conduct, and policy implementation

In the discussions, stakeholders mentioned the importance of implementing clear, concrete guidelines. Coaches and administrators want more practical direction on “*what is ok and not*

ok” in different scenarios. One administrator discussed for establishing “*general rules [for] what is ok, what is not ok, at this age, at this age, and at this age – the same for everybody*”.

This reflects the concept of policy-practice alignment, where clear standards not only guide behaviour but also provide accountability (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). Standardisation of safeguarding codes and protocols is a critical factor for consistency across sport environments, as emphasised in frameworks such as the ISCS (CPSU, 2018). These safeguards recommend the development of clear behavioural expectations and codes of conduct as foundational policies in all sport organisations.

Some participants mentioned some rules that already exist in their organisations “*Coaches have to go to a certain training... [learning] that it is forbidden to be one-on-one in a room, for coaches to enter the dressing [room alone]*”. These kinds of rules, which come from international best practices, are starting to be implemented into Lithuanian sport through federations like LFF.

Also, a federation’s policy was described as one that “*clearly outlines what safeguarding is, what actions are appropriate by the coach, by the parent... and which are inappropriate and forbidden.*” This aligns with the International Safeguards recommendations for defining acceptable conduct for everyone involved (CPSU, 2018).

Participants proposed that federations change their statutes or licensing requirements to mandate safeguarding policies and codes of conduct at the club level. This is consistent with good governance standards in sport, which suggest that policy development should be accompanied by mechanisms for enforcement and monitoring (Council of Europe, 2018).

5.2.4 Reporting mechanisms

Another theme was related to the safeguarding reporting system. The focus groups showed difficulties in current reporting mechanisms and want to strengthen them through designated roles. As stated before, underreporting is an issue. Coaches often take care of things themselves which may be result in not escalate the issues.

One solution raised was to appoint dedicated safeguarding officers at different levels. One coach suggested having an independent person to oversee child protection “*it should be... a part-time job [for someone] having an overview on the outside – not interfering or connected with the coaches or the kids – just... prepared to solve [issues]*”.

This idea describes the principle of a safeguarding officer's role, which is an individual who is not part of the team's, whom children, parents, or coaches can approach with concerns, and who can ensure appropriate action is taken. The CoE and EU have promoted the establishment of child safeguarding officer roles as a key strategy, recommending that each sport organization have a trained point person for child protection (Council of Europe, 2018; CPSU, 2018).

In fact, Lithuania has recently moved in this direction by participating in the EU-funded GUARD project aimed at creating child safeguarding officer positions within the Lithuanian NOC. It is important having a NOC safeguarding coordinator that will supervise and coordinate safeguarding across different sports.

The next step would be to extend this initiative into individual sport federations and major clubs, following models like those of FIFA and UEFA. For example, FIFA's Child Safeguarding Toolkit instructs national associations to designate safeguarding officers and develop clear child protection procedures (FIFA, 2021).

Enhancing reporting mechanisms also involves building trust and protection around the process. As one administrator mentioned, many athletes are hesitant to speak up because *"sport very easily and quickly names and shames"*.

Best practices to fight this include confidential reporting channels, victim protection policies, and awareness raising so that reporting is seen as responsible behaviour, not betrayal. These align with literature that indicates the need for safeguarding systems that protect the privacy and dignity of the child (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

Participants expressed that children need to feel *"comfortable enough to report"* so that issues appear early and do not lead to severe harm down the line. Also, the presence of a known safeguarding officer can encourage reporting, because when children and parents see that a person exists only to handle these issues, it validates that concerns are taken seriously.

Finally, once a report is made, clear procedures must follow as *"if something happens, if someone touches you inappropriately, you must report it... it has clear guidelines"* as an administrator mentioned.

Ensuring these procedures are followed is also important, and as a few participants shared, so far, the cases that have come up in their contexts were relatively minor and were handled through internal meetings or minor investigations. However, as awareness increases, more serious cases might happen.

It is crucial that sport organizations are prepared to respond promptly and appropriately, whether that means internal disciplinary action, or escalation to child protection services and law enforcement in line with national law.

5.3 Challenges and barriers

While the previous sections highlight progress and positive actions, some challenges and barriers also exist in child safeguarding in Lithuanian sport. These go from cultural and attitude challenges to practical limitations like lack of resources and structural support. There are also issues of compliance and enforcement. Recognizing these barriers is crucial in the discussion, as it allow to contextualize the findings and moderate expectations for how quickly improvements can take taken.

5.3.1 Cultural resistance and attitudes

Sports culture can be a good and bad for safeguarding. On one way, sport in Lithuania prides itself on values like discipline, resilience, and achievement. On the other way, if these values are misapplied or not balanced with child welfare, they can become obstacles.

A recurring theme was the persistence of a win at all costs mentality and traditional coaching methods that conflict with safeguarding principles. Participants observed that some coaches, prioritize competitive results over children's well-being.

One administrator mentioned *“we still have quite a big part of the coaches [who are] ... pushing [children] ... to reach a certain level, because if [the team] is reaching [success] ... it means that coach is better so [they] can get a higher percentage [presumably of salary or reputation]”*.

This means that when coaches' rewards are linked mainly to performance metrics, they may consciously or unconsciously disregard safeguarding considerations. Another participant highlighted *“The coaches [are] using the kids just for results and after several years, in the teenage age, they're just dropping off. Mostly girls drop off the sports, because... we [adults] are not respecting their boundaries”*.

This is highlighting the lack of respect for personal boundaries and enjoyment to athlete dropout, especially among adolescent girls. It reflects research findings that abusive or neglectful environments lead to youth athletes leaving sports (Stirling & Kerr, 2009; Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024).

Cultural resistance is a factor as well as some coaches tend to minimize issues, believing that involving external authorities is overreacting or that tough coaching is normal. There can be a mindset of “*what happens in the team stays in the team*,” which creates a code of silence.

Historically, Lithuanian sport had not been known by high profile abuse scandals, which, as the literature suggests, can sometimes lead to a false assumption that it’s not a problem in the country. This was slowly changing, with more conversations starting and an acknowledgment that abuse and maltreatment do happen. This aligns with observations by Lang and Hartill (2015), who mention that the absence of public scandals should not be interpreted as the absence of abuse, but rather as an indication of underreporting or lack of awareness.

Coaches who grew up under authoritarian systems may not see certain behaviours as problematic, where younger professionals or parents might. This generational and cultural gap can cause conflict and delays agreement on safeguarding measures.

For example, implementing a rule that coaches cannot physically discipline athletes or must avoid certain language might be met with resistance by those who feel that kids these days are too sensitive, a common attitude in transitional sport cultures.

This aligns findings from Lang & Hartill (2015) who says that resistance to safeguarding often come not from ignorance, but from cultural beliefs about coaching, authority, and performance.

5.3.2 Resource limitations and structural barriers

Other limitations identified were the lack of resources and infrastructure dedicated to safeguarding. Implementing the best practices outlined earlier is not cheap and it requires staff, time, and money, all of which are limited in Lithuanian sport.

For example, appointing safeguarding officers, as good as it sounds, means funding positions or assigning duties to new staff. A small sports club run by volunteers may not have anyone with child protection expertise, nor the budget to hire one. Even at the federation level, creating a new role can be challenging.

In many sports organizations in Lithuania, safeguarding responsibilities are probably attached into someone’s existing job without additional funding or training. This can lead to nominal compliance but little practical action. Participants did not frequently mention budget issues, but it was implicit.

Lack of training capacity is one specific resource issue as well as one administrator mentioned “*we don’t have [trained] teachers*” to deliver safeguarding education in different formats. In other words, even if they have a policy, they need skilled facilitators to translate that into workshops or sessions, and those people are few.

According to Lang & Hartill (2015), the success of safeguarding initiatives depends not only on having clear policies but also on the ability to deliver consistent and well-informed training, ideally by professionals with pedagogical and safeguarding expertise.

Another structural barrier is the lack of centralized administration systems. There is not yet a national database for safeguarding incidents in sport, nor a consistent monitoring framework across sports. Each federation might be left to its own mechanisms, meaning progress is not equal. Some may not prioritize safeguarding until a crisis forces them to, which is a reactive rather than proactive (Lang & Hartill, 2015).

Time is another issue as coaches often have multiple roles and jobs and may feel they don’t have time to attend extra workshops or develop new policies. The coaches expressed that feeling indirectly when they suggested “*5 minutes at the end of training*” for a quick educational moment, implying that dedicating large blocks of time is difficult.

Many youth sports coaches are part-time or volunteers and expecting them to learn extensive new responsibilities without support can be unrealistic. This time limitation is worse by the volunteer nature of many coaching roles, making it unrealistic to expect coaches to take on extensive safeguarding responsibilities without systemic support.

This highlights the need for structural assistance from public authorities. According to the Council of Europe (2018), governments should not only establish legal safeguarding frameworks but also provide material support for implementation. This might include grants for national federations to hire safeguarding staff, fund training for coaches, or the development of resources and reporting templates that can be used across sports.

Finally, structural barriers include the absence of enforcement mechanisms. Even when policies exist, if there is no audit or consequence for non-compliant stakeholders, they may be ignored.

For example, if a federation recommends that clubs have a child protection policy but does not require it as part of licensing or provide incentives, acceptance might be low. One participant mentioned that now “*top division clubs... have safeguarding policy within their strategies*”

because it was likely tied to league requirements or mandatory federation encouragement. But lower-division or amateur clubs might not feel the pressure to follow.

This highlights a need for consistent standards and accountability. Currently, not all organizations are held accountable on safeguarding. There is also no tradition of external inspections or independent audits in this area. As a result, clubs might not implement changes until something goes wrong, aligning with what Lang and Purdy (2024) describe as a reactive safeguarding culture.

5.3.3 Compliance, accountability, and symbolic measures

Another challenge identified in this research relates to the lack of accountability and the risk that safeguarding measures remain symbolic rather than essential. This concern, although partially connected to culture and limited resources, addresses the will of institutional commitment to safeguarding. It reflects whether organisations go beyond minimal compliance to promote protection environments.

Participants and researchers have highlighted the phenomenon of symbolic compliance, in which organisations adopt safeguarding policies or conduct training sessions to meet external expectations or legal obligations, rather than to initiate true behavioural change (Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020). For instance, a sports club may display a Code of Ethics on its website to show compliance but may not effectively enforce its principles in everyday practice.

In Lithuanian sport, this risk of symbolic compliance is evident. Some sport federations, such as the LFF, have developed safeguarding strategies and introduced trainings. However, if these measures are not consistently implemented, evaluated, and improved, they may lose effectiveness and become just performative.

Participants in this study also recognised the importance of avoiding performative actions. One recommendation shared during the focus group discussions was to “*hold all stakeholders accountable for implementing the safeguarding policy.*” This shows guidance from the Council of Europe (2019), which emphasizes the need for sport organisations to be subject to accountability mechanisms.

However, these accountability structures remain underdeveloped in Lithuania. While the GUARD project is supporting the introduction of safeguarding officers within the National Olympic Committee, there is no dedicated national body that monitors compliance across federations or clubs.

Self-regulation may be insufficient without clear frameworks and external supervision. Without formalised reporting structures, performance indicators, and incentives or sanctions attached to safeguarding efforts, organisations may fail to operationalise their own standards.

In addition, legal obligations around child protection can be unclear or inconsistently enforced in sport. Coaches may not fully understand their responsibilities under Lithuanian child protection law, and federations may not align internal policies with national regulations.

Also, stakeholders in Lithuanian sport indicated interest in strengthening accountability through regulatory innovations. Suggestions included requiring annual safeguarding reports from federations and clubs, including safeguarding in club licensing, and developing formal review processes led by the ministry or the NOC.

These steps would align with international good practices such as those recommended in the International Safeguards for Children in Sport (2016) and the Start to Talk initiative (Council of Europe, 2018), which talks about enforceable standards and regular evaluation of safeguarding implementation.

5.4 Priorities and future actions

Considering the findings and the challenges identified, this discussion points to several key priorities and future directions for strengthening child safeguarding in Lithuanian sport. Both the participants' perspectives and the reviewed literature align on the notion that safeguarding must develop from single policies to an integrated, rights-driven, and sustainable framework. In this section, its outlined four wide priority areas: (1) implementing a child-centred, rights-based approach in sport, (2) building a proactive safeguarding culture and organizational commitment, (3) strengthening national frameworks, accountability, and support, and (4) continuing education, collaboration, and capacity building.

5.4.1 Implementing a child-centred, rights-based approach

One priority addressed by the focus groups is to fully implement the principles of children's rights and child-centric view into sport. As discussed, current understanding is still changing from a reactive and risk-focused to a proactive, rights-focused one. Future activities should explicitly frame safeguarding as promoting children's rights to safety, dignity, and participation (Lang & Hartill, 2015).

The Council of Europe's guidance is clear on this point, where policies must be supported by a child-rights approach aligned with the UNCRC. In practice, this could involve including

child-friendly report mechanisms, involving youth representatives in safeguarding committees, and evaluating success not just by absence of incidents but by positive indicators like children feeling confident and heard (Council of Europe, 2018; United Nations, 1989)

Participants indirectly mentioned this priority when they spoke about making children feel safe and the importance of trust. To advance that, children's perspectives should be actively pursued. As a future direction, sports organizations could implement regular consultations with young athletes to ask their feelings of safety and well-being. This would operationalize the right to be heard in a systematic way.

Evaluation of safeguarding success should not be limited to the absence of incidents but also consider positive indicators such as athletes' feelings of safety, trust, and respect within their sport environments (Rhind et al., 2017).

Lithuanian sports organisations might consider developing a "Children's Rights in Sport" document that outlines fundamental rights of child athletes, such as the right to safety, enjoyment, inclusion, voice, etc. which all organizations should commit to. This kind of document, if recognized by the NOC or Ministry, would be a reference point for all safeguarding work.

5.4.2 Building a proactive safeguarding culture and organizational commitment

Cultural change is a long-term priority. Many of the challenges identified like resistance, silence, performance over safety, can only be minimised by fostering a new culture in sport in which values safeguarding as much as sporting success.

This requires strong leadership and role models from the top of sport. In the future, it should be seen federation presidents, national team coaches, and respected athletes speaking out about the importance of child protection. Such leadership can legitimise the topic in the eyes of those who still might not practice it (Lang & Hartill, 2015; Rhind & Owusu-Sekyere, 2020).

In practice, building a safeguarding culture means normalising the discussions and practices around it. Future actions might include national campaigns similar to the CoE's *Start to Talk* initiative which encourages breaking the silence on abuse (Council of Europe, 2018).

Another aspect is integrating safeguarding values into the mission and vision of sports organizations. When clubs update their mission reports, they should explicitly mention providing a safe, child-friendly environment. Over time, these values will be factor for decision making actions.

A future direction is also to create an environment where everyone understands that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Athletes, coaches, parents, administrators should feel they have a role to speak up if something is wrong.

Safeguarding officers, once in place, will help, but culture goes beyond any one role, it's the collective norms. One target for the future could be an increase in reporting of concerns in the short term. As trust and openness increases, more minor issues will be reported and resolved, preventing major issues. Over the longer term, with sustained leadership, the aim is that safeguarding becomes as set in as fair play or anti-doping in sport.

5.4.3 Strengthening national frameworks, accountability and support

Another priority area is the development of a strong national framework for child safeguarding in sport, complete with clear accountability. Right now, initiatives are divided, for example one federation does something, another does another thing. To ensure consistency and sustainability, a coordinated framework led by national authorities would be beneficial.

This could take the form of a national safeguarding in sport strategy or action plan, possibly under the guidance of the ministry or the NOC in collaboration with the department of child rights.

This framework would set common goals, provide guidelines and resources, and establish a mechanism for monitoring progress. The Council of Europe (2018) explicitly called on governments to establish adequate legal and policy frameworks to ensure child protection in sport. Lithuania, as an EU member, is expected to align with these directives, and while recent efforts such as the GUARD project demonstrates progress, a more formalised and strategic approach is needed.

Accountability structures go together with a framework. In the future, a scenario where sport clubs are regularly evaluated or certified on safeguarding by an independent body or an increased mandate for an existing body would be a strategy.

The creation of child safeguarding officer roles through the GUARD project is good in this framework. Ensuring those officers have a clear authority, network, and support will be important.

This can ensure that good practices in one sport are communicated to others as it's managed by the national Olympic committee. It also provides a collective voice to support for needed resources or changes. For example, if all safeguarding officers collectively observe that there

is a gap in mental health support for young athletes, they could raise that together with authorities.

5.4.4 Continuing education, collaboration, and capacity building

The promotion of a safe sports environment it's not a one-time thing but a continuous process of learning and improvement. Therefore, a key future direction is continuous education and capacity building, combined with international and cross-sector collaboration.

This research suggests that initial trainings and policies are just first steps. To truly protect children, the activities must be maintained and updated with new knowledge and challenges (Lang & Hartill, 2015).

One priority is to implement safeguarding education into regular training cycles. Coaching license renewals could need a module on safeguarding. New coaches coming out of universities or coaching courses should graduate having demonstrated knowledge in child protection principles.

Also, parents of each new youth athletes should be given orientation on safeguarding. Children themselves, as they grow, should receive education according to their age about their rights and how to speak up.

These principles are in line with recommendations from international bodies like FIFA and the ISCS, which highlight the need for continuous and specific safeguarding training (FIFA, 2021; Rhind et al., 2017).

Collaboration is another priority. Safeguarding in sport should not be fought alone, as partnerships with child protection agencies, NGOs, academic experts, and other countries' sport bodies can promote its effectiveness.

Over the next few years, a priority addressed was to promote capacity building in local safeguarding professionals. This can involve sending some individuals for advanced training who can then return and train others.

It could also involve integrating safeguarding topics into academic research and higher education, encouraging master's theses or studies to build the evidence base and local expertise. The literature review indicates that research in this field is expanding, and Lithuania should contribute to and benefit from that growth (Lang & Purdy, 2025).

The way to develop child safeguarding in Lithuanian sport is complex. It will require continuous dedication to educate everyone involved, collaborative efforts across sports, and strengthening the structures and cultures that support a safe sporting environment.

The mentions of coaches and administrators in this research, when aligned to theoretical review, shows a clear picture that safeguarding is not a one-time project but a continuous commitment.

6. Conclusions

This research explored the current state of child safeguarding in Lithuanian sport through the perspectives of coaches and sport administrators, applying a qualitative approach to examine awareness, practices, and challenges. The thesis wanted to contribute practical knowledge that can support improvements in safeguarding practices across the Lithuanian sport industry.

Regarding the objective 1 - Awareness of frameworks and concepts, the findings showed low and uneven awareness of child safeguarding frameworks, especially among coaches. While some administrators showed familiarity with national or sport-specific policies, many participants relied on informal practices. This means that structured education and clearer communication of responsibilities are needed at all levels.

Regarding the objective 2 - Effective practices and areas for improvement, both stakeholder groups named some examples of good practices, such as safeguarding training in football or parent engagement initiatives. However, these remain inconsistent and lack systematic application across sports. The results suggest that coordinated strategies involving several stakeholders are key to promoting improvements in safeguarding.

Regarding the objective 3 - Challenges in implementation, persistent barriers were identified, including limited training, lack of dedicated safeguarding roles, lack of reporting systems, and cultural resistance. These issues confirm a policy–practice gap and show that stronger institutional support and resources are essential to move policy into meaningful safeguarding implementation.

In conclusion, safeguarding in Lithuanian sport is progressing, but gaps remain in awareness, consistency, and accountability. Sustained work from institutions, supported by clear policies, capacity building, and cultural change, is needed to ensure that safeguarding becomes implemented in everyday sports practice.

7. Recommendations/Suggestions

Based on the perspectives from coaches and sport administrators during the focus groups and aligned with international frameworks and good practice principles discussed in the literature, some recommendations are made. The recommendations are related to policy and governance implementation and support, education and capacity building, reporting and monitoring, and stakeholder collaboration. These recommendations intend to support practical, systemic, and sustainable improvements that aligns with the realities of stakeholders and the rights of children in sport.

To the Government and National Authorities:

- Adopt a national safeguarding framework for sport: A unified, government supported safeguarding framework should be developed and implemented across all sports. This framework should include minimum standards for safeguarding policies, codes of conduct, roles and responsibilities, and complaint reporting procedures.
- Create a national safeguarding working group: A task force involving sport federations, government officials and child protection experts, should be created to coordinate safeguarding efforts, monitor implementation, and share resources.
- Align with European and international initiatives: Lithuanian sports organisations should continue engaging with EU projects and global safeguarding networks to benefit from models and international knowledge.

To the Sports Federations and National Olympic Committee:

- Establish safeguarding officers in all sport organisations: Each club, federation, or sport school should appoint a trained safeguarding officer responsible for coordinating child protection efforts, supporting staff, and serving as a contact person for concerns. If not possible, a safeguarding officer from the federation or national Olympic committee should be assigned to a group of clubs or schools.
- Encourage multi-sport learning and exchange: Federations should host joint workshops or webinars to share best practices, case studies, and solutions, ensuring smaller organisations benefit from the experience of more advanced ones.

- Safeguarding workshops for parents and athletes: Federations should organise regular awareness sessions that help parents understand their roles in promoting safe sport and teach children about their rights and reporting mechanisms.
- Include safeguarding in licensing and accreditation: Safeguarding education should be mandatory for the licensing of sport organisations and the certification of coaches.

To the Sports Clubs, Sports Schools, and Grassroots Organisations:

- Mandatory safeguarding training for coaches and staff: All coaches, volunteers, and sport-related staff who work with children should undergo safeguarding training. This should be part of initial education and continued professional development.
- Create clear, accessible reporting mechanisms: Every organisation should have confidential, child-friendly reporting systems, such as digital forms or helplines, with guaranteed follow-up and protection.

The recommendations mentioned above are both achievable and practical. They reflect the urgent need for systemic safeguarding structures in Lithuania's sports system while also recognising the resource and cultural challenges that stakeholders face.

Most importantly, child safeguarding should be seen not as a legal or administrative obligation, but as a shared moral responsibility to ensure that sport remains a safe, empowering space for every child.

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SUMMARY

Žaidžiant sportą, vaikams suteikiamos vertingos galimybės fiziniam tobulėjimui, socialinei įtraukčiai ir emocinei gerovei. Tačiau vis daugiau įrodymų rodo, kad sportas taip pat gali kelti vaikams riziką patirti prievartą, nepriežiūrą ar jų teisių pažeidimus. Pastaraisiais metais vaikų saugumo užtikrinimas tapo strateginiu prioritetu sporto sistemose visame pasaulyje, tačiau vis dar trūksta žinių apie tai, kaip šios priemonės yra suprantamos ir taikomos praktikoje. Ši magistro baigiamojo darbo tema yra vaikų saugumo užtikrinimo situacijos Lietuvos sporte analizė, pagrįsta dviejų pagrindinių suinteresuotųjų grupių – trenerių ir sporto administratorių – požiūriais. Naudojant kokybinį teminį analizės metodą, tyrime nagrinėjama: (1) suinteresuotųjų asmenų informuotumas apie vaikų apsaugos sistemas ir jų atsakomybę; (2) gerosios praktikos pavyzdžiai ir tobulintinos sritys; bei (3) iššūkiai, trukdantys efektyviam šių priemonių įgyvendinimui tiek vietos, tiek instituciniu lygmeniu. Duomenys buvo surinkti vykdant fokus grupių diskusijas su treneriais ir administratoriais, o analizė atlikta remiantis tarptautinėmis gairėmis ir literatūra. Rezultatai parodė, kad nors pradinės pastangos, tokios kaip vaikų apsaugos politikos diegimas futbole ar dalyvavimas ES projektuose, yra teigiamos, informuotumas ir įgyvendinimas Lietuvoje išlieka netolygūs. Treneriai dažnai remiasi neformaliais sprendimais, o administratoriai pabrėžia struktūrinius ir išteklių trūkumus. Kultūrinė rezistencija, atotrūkis tarp politikos ir praktikos bei atsakomybės stokos dar labiau komplikuoja vaikų saugumo užtikrinimą sporte. Tyrimas baigiamas rekomendacijomis dėl nacionalinės vaikų saugumo strategijos, aiškių politikų, privalomo švietimo ir stipresnių pranešimo apie pažeidimus mechanizmų. Šios išvados skirtos padėti politikos formuotojams, sporto organizacijoms ir praktikams stiprinti vaikų saugumą ir kurti saugesnę, įtraukesnę sporto aplinką Lietuvos vaikams.

ANNEXES

1. Coaches' questionnaire

Focus groups – Questionnaire

1. What is your understanding/knowledge of safeguarding children's rights in sports?
2. What are the main challenges faced by sports professionals/coaches in protecting children?

Give definition of safeguarding children in sport and some challenges in protecting children

3. Have you ever witnessed or experienced situations where the delivery of a sports activity compromised the safety or rights of a child? If yes, describe the situation.
 - a. In your opinion, what practices could be improved to ensure that children feel safe and respected during sports activities? You can use your example.
4. Did you get any curricular unit or education on safeguarding children in sports in your academic journey?
5. What kind of skills do you think are essential for coaches or sports managers to effectively safeguard children's rights?
6. How do you think organizations can be better equipped to identify and prevent situations of abuse or neglect?

Priorities

8. What should be the main goals for improving child protection in sport over the next few years?

(Prompt: If you had to choose 2 or 3 top priorities, what would they be?)