

Exploring wellbeing and harm in children's sport: reflections from a youth rugby club

Ruth Barnes, PhD Candidate
Moray House School of Education and Sport
ruth.barnes@ed.ac.uk

Supervisors: Prof. Debi Fry & Prof. Kay Tisdall



ROADMAP

01 INTRODUCTION
About me, about the study

02 BACKGROUND
Context and key concepts

03 METHODOLOGY
Research design and methods

04 EARLY THOUGHTS
Discussion of preliminary findings

01 INTRODUCTION – ABOUT ME



SPORTS CHILDHOOD ● CHILD RIGHTS WORK ● THE “WE CAN” STUDY

Junior and college
sportsperson

Child rights law and
policy consultant

PhD: **Wellbeing,**
consent and **agency** in
children’s sport



01 INTRODUCTION – ABOUT THE STUDY

Research aim: to examine constructions of and interactions between children's **wellbeing and harm, agency and consent**, and **parental consent**, in competitive sport



Wellbeing and
harm

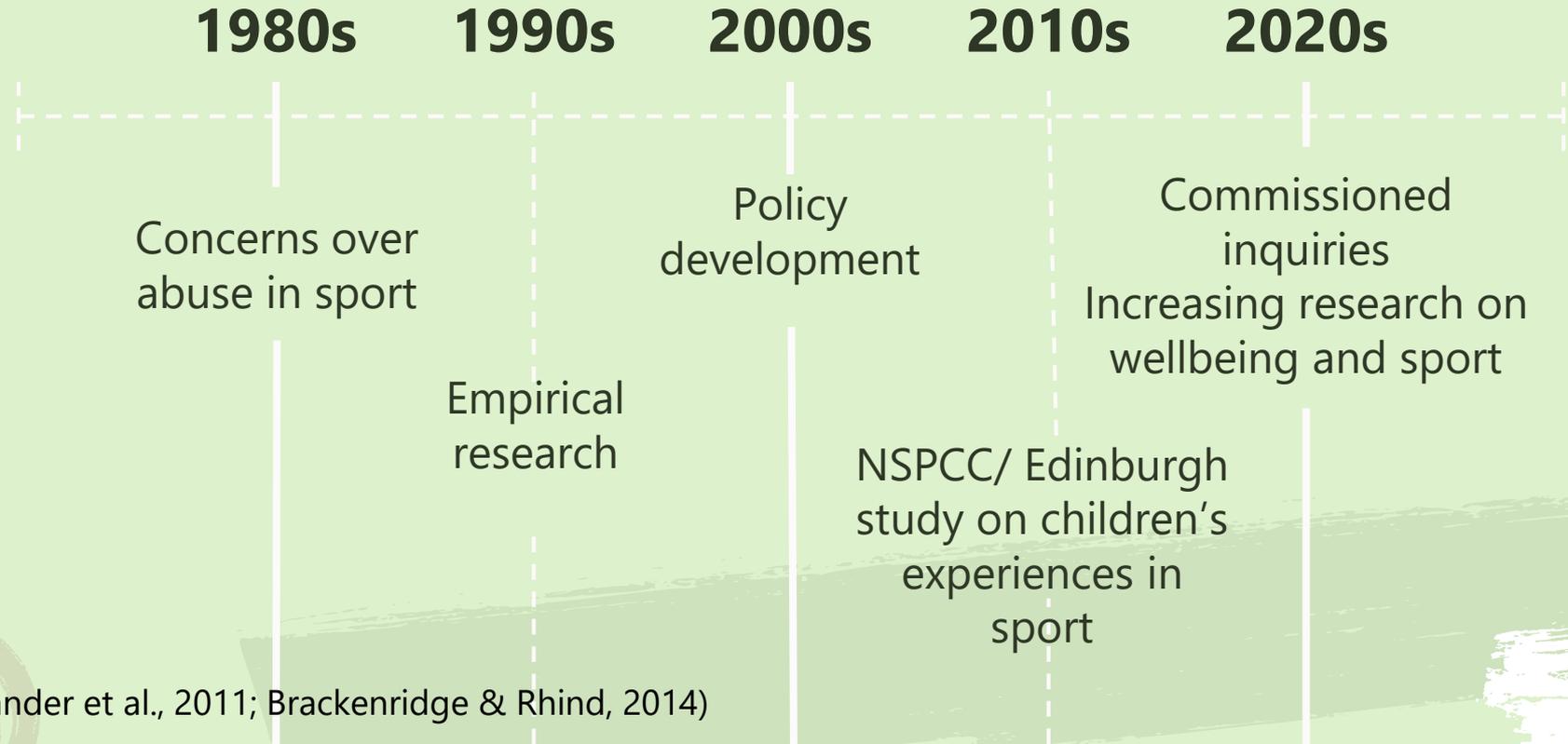


Children's
agency and
consent



Parental
consent (and
impact)

02 BACKGROUND – WELLBEING IN SPORT



02 BACKGROUND – KEY CONCEPTS



WELLBEING

Children's perspectives,
accidental and non-
accidental harm (what is
accepted and acceptable)



CONSENT

Various frameworks,
information, freedom and
capacity to consent, ongoing
and voluntary



AGENCY

Complex, relational,
autonomous decision making



03 METHODOLOGY - RESEARCH DESIGN

Constructionist/Interpretivist

Qualitative approach

Single embedded case study

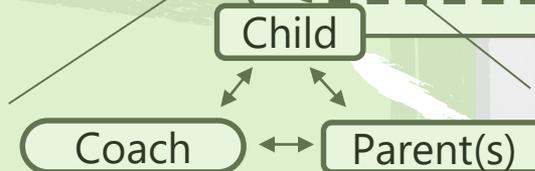
🏉 Youth rugby club in England

🏉 Players aged 14-17

🏉 Player-parent-coach triads as embedded units of analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis

Living ethical protocol*



*Ethical approval received from MHSES

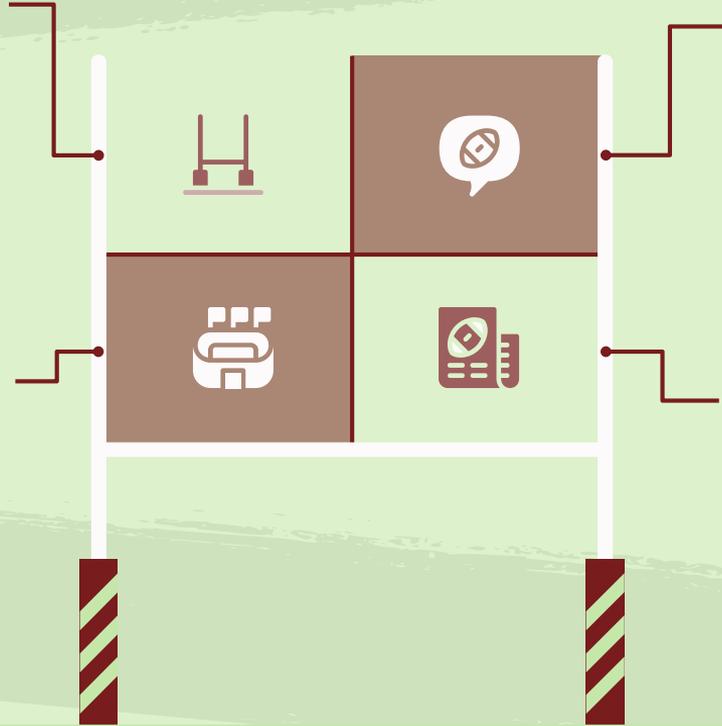
03 METHODOLOGY - RESEARCH METHODS

OBSERVATIONS

Non-participant
Five: U15Bs, U16Gs, U16Bs,
U18Gs, U18Bs
Context and iterative approach

GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Six: U14Gs, U15Bs, U16Gs,
U16Bs, U18
Data on wellbeing, agency
and consent



INTERVIEWS

7 Officials
8 'Triads' (8 players, 9
parents, 6 coaches)
Data on wellbeing,
agency and consent

DOCUMENT REVIEW

40 RFU/Club
documents
Context and data on
wellbeing, agency
and consent

03 METHODOLOGY - PARTICIPANTS

METHOD	DETAILS	# OF PARTICIPANTS
Pilot	Player interview, parent interview and group discussion	9
Group discussions	U14Gs, U15Bs, U16Gs, U16Bs, U18Gs, U18Bs	29
Interviews	Officials, players, parents and coaches	29
Observations	U15Bs, U16Gs, U16Bs, U18Gs, U18Bs	59 (111)

03 METHODOLOGY – WELLBEING

3. Club story

3.1. I'm going to give you some time to tell me about your rugby club. How did it happen that you started playing for this club?

- Probes (W): What do you like about it? Is there anything you don't like or wish was different?
- Probes (A): Did you or your parents chose this club? Or did you choose your position and whether you play? Is there anything you don't like about it?
- Probes (C): Did you/ your parents sign an agreement to play? Do you feel like you've said 'yes' or consented to playing? Do your parents have given consent for you to play?

3.2. How do you feel about matches? Do you play in what position do you normally play? Did you choose to play in that position?

4. Session story

4.1. Thinking about the training sessions you've had gone? Who takes you? When you are getting ready for a game?

4.2. Can you please tell me what you think a great training session is like?

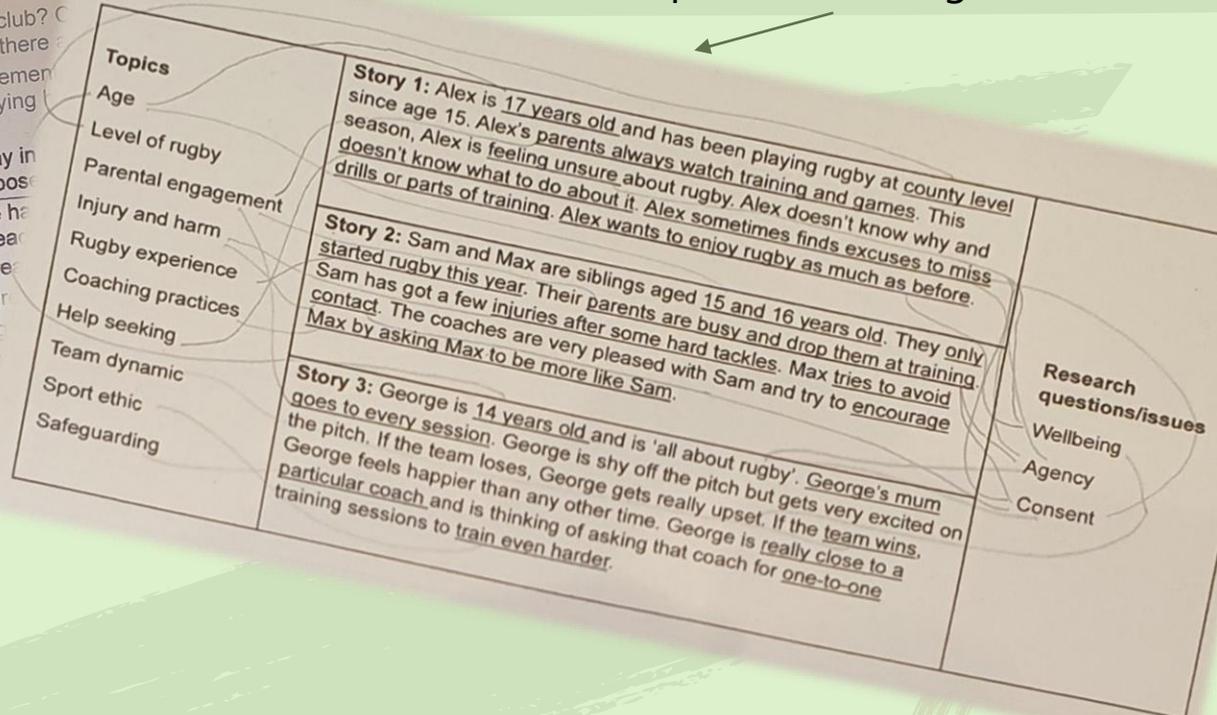
- Probes (W): What would happen to make it great?
- Probes (A): What sort of choices do players get to make?

4.3. Please can you think about what a bad training session is like?

- Probes (W): What would happen? What could you do to make it better?
- Probes (A): If sessions are going badly, what choices do you have?

(could probe if contact/injury is a part of this)

Group discussion vignettes



Interview 'questions'

04 EARLY THOUGHTS - QUOTES

RB (Interviewer): *And so the last sort of thing about wellbeing is really do you... I want to ask whether... do you think rugby is good for children's wellbeing? And if so, why?*

FR: *If I've had a bad day I just come here and forget about it, because, like, only one other girl goes to my school so as soon as I go from school I know I can come here and none of the things at school follow me here if that makes sense?*

SA: *Yeah, because rugby's like a safe space.*

Discussion Group

04 EARLY THOUGHTS - QUOTES

WI: *[Describes getting taken off for bloodied nose but wanting to play]*

RB: *Are you kind of... do you just kind of expect that you'll get hurt?*

Participants: *Oh yes, yep*

SA: *I feel like every week someone gets hurt*

RB: *Is that okay?*

SU: *Yeah, I wouldn't really. Like, if you go into rugby, thinking you're not gonna get hurt...[unintelligible discussion re: positions/playful joking]...I think it's like, rugby is a contact sport so you've got to expect it, especially for contact. Even if it's not contact, still expect it.*

Discussion Group

04 EARLY THOUGHTS – WELLBEING AND RUGBY

Child participants understand wellbeing in rugby as associated with...

- Teamwork, belonging, friendships, 'family'
- Tough physical exercise, outlet, something different (a choice)

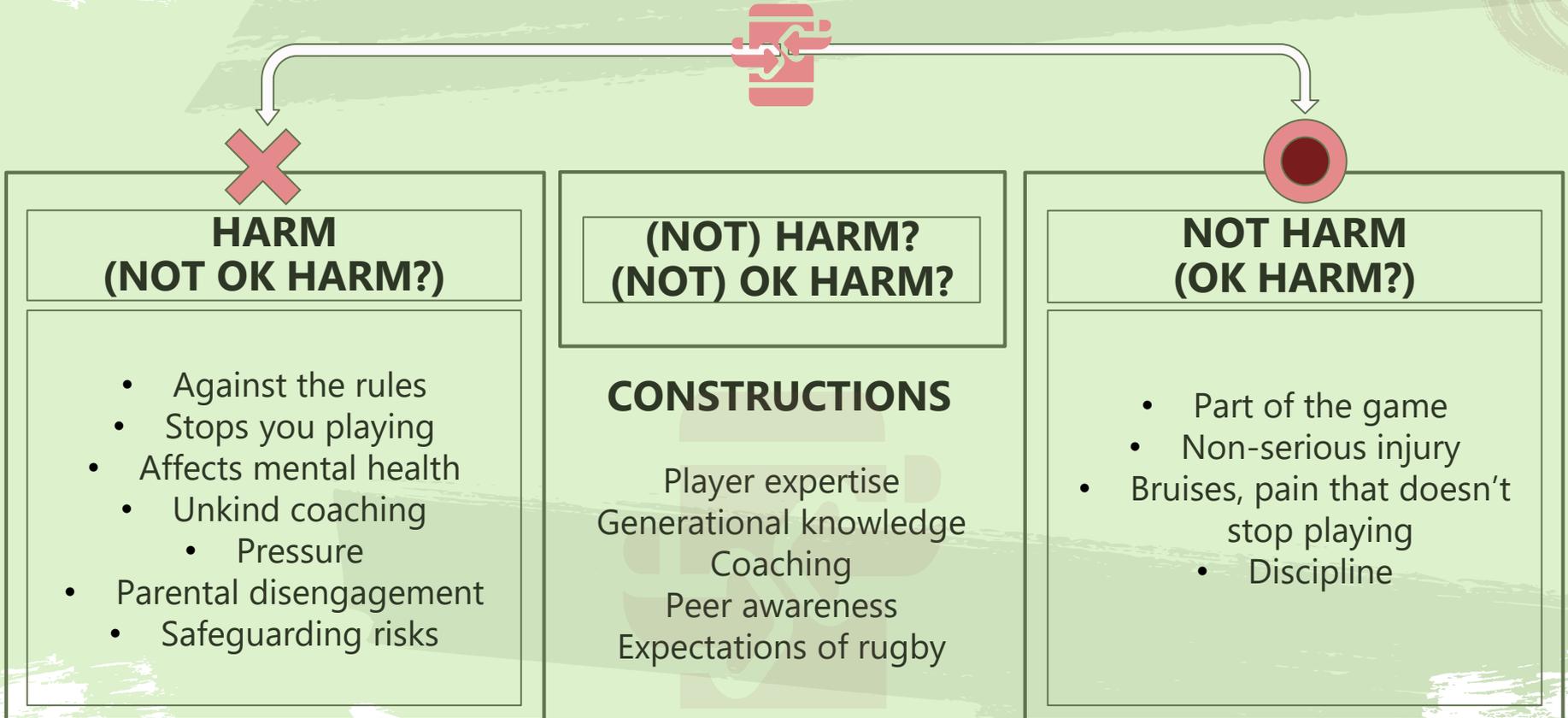
Rugby supports child participants' wellbeing as an escape from...

- Pressures of school, life-stages (exams, worrying about the future), difficulties at school or in life outside of rugby
- Addressing mental health challenges through exercise

Wellbeing in rugby is challenged by obstacles including...

- Contact that causes harm/injury (including future/delayed harm)
- Barriers to enjoyment such as non-selection, disappointment

04 EARLY THOUGHTS – CHILDREN’S UNDERSTANDING OF HARM



HARM (NOT OK HARM?)

- Against the rules
- Stops you playing
- Affects mental health
 - Unkind coaching
 - Pressure
- Parental disengagement
- Safeguarding risks

(NOT) HARM? (NOT) OK HARM?

CONSTRUCTIONS

Player expertise
 Generational knowledge
 Coaching
 Peer awareness
 Expectations of rugby

NOT HARM (OK HARM?)

- Part of the game
- Non-serious injury
- Bruises, pain that doesn't stop playing
 - Discipline

04 EARLY THOUGHTS – REFLECTIONS ON A TRIAD



PLAYER

Strong feelings of happiness connected to rugby and to the team but feelings of sadness and frustration connected to losing



PARENT(S)

Understanding rugby as bringing a good feeling, focus and wellbeing to player. Noticing 'lows' when out of season



COACH

Understanding of rugby as having the potential to be hugely beneficial to wellbeing, an outlet



04 EARLY THOUGHTS – PARENTAL CONSENT

Question(ish): [Prefaced with a clunkiness caveat!]

"I'm going to suggest something and see what you think – if a parent agrees to their child playing rugby, does that mean they agree to everything that happens?"

"Yes, definitely yes"

- Consent = consent
- Parameters
- *Understanding 'rugby'*
- *Player responsibility (agency?)*

"I think it depends"

- Not 'genuinely dangerous'
- To allow coaches to train
- Children make own decisions
- *Parental/children's consent*
- *Child agency to make decisions*

REFERENCES

- BERA. (2018). British Educational Research Association [BERA] Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research. (4th ed.).
- Brackenridge, C., & Rhind, D. (2014). Child Protection in Sport: Reflections on Thirty Years of Science and Activism. *Social Sciences*, 3(3), 326-340.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci3030326>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. SAGE Publications.
- Alexander, K., Stafford, A., & Lewis, R. (2011). *The Experiences of Children Participating in Organised Sport in the UK* (9781908055040).
- Camfield, L., Streuli, N., & Woodhead, M. (2009). What's the Use of 'Well-Being' in Contexts of Child Poverty? Approaches to Research, Monitoring and Children's Participation. *The International journal of children's rights*, 17(1), 65-109.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/157181808X357330>
- Channon, A., & Matthews, C. R. (2021). Communicating consent in sport: A typological model of athletes' consent practices within combat sports. *International review for the sociology of sport*, 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902211043992>

REFERENCES

- Harden, J., Backett-Milburn, K., Hill, M., & MacLean, A. (2010). Oh, what a tangled web we weave: experiences of doing 'multiple perspectives' research in families. *International journal of social research methodology*, 13(5), 441-452.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13645571003650979>
- Leonard, M. (2016). *The Sociology of Children, Childhood and Generation*. SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529714494>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Moore, A., & Reynolds, P. (Tisdall, E. K. M., Davis, J. M., & Gallagher, M. (2009). *Researching with Children & Young People: Research Design, Methods, and Analysis*. SAGE Publications
- 2018). *Childhood and Sexuality: Contemporary Issues and Debates*. Palgrave Macmillan UK.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52497-3>
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The Art of Case Study Research*. SAGE Publications.
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*. (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

THANK YOU!

Discussion/questions

ruth.barnes@ed.ac.uk

