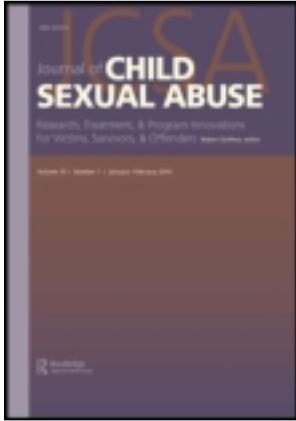


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### Disclosure of Sexual Abuse in Sport Organizations: A Case Study

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## CASE STUDIES

# Disclosure of Sexual Abuse in Sport Organizations: A Case Study

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*The disclosure of sexual abuse in the world of sports is a process that has not been widely documented. This article presents the results of a document analysis of sport organization policies and interviews conducted with 27 sport stakeholders. The interviews focus on these stakeholders' perceptions of how the disclosure process would unfold if a case of sexual abuse were to arise in their organization and their perceptions of the actual cases experienced in the sport organizations participating in this study. The results reveal several problems affecting the disclosure of sexual abuse in sport organizations.*

*KEYWORDS* sexual abuse, sport organizations, disclosure, policies and complaint procedures

The fact that sexual abuse occurs in the world of sports has been documented in numerous studies (Fasting, Brackenridge, & Sundgot-Borgen, 2003; Kirby, Greaves, & Hankivsky, 2000; Leahy, Pretty, & Tenenbaum, 2002; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001). For example, the results of a national-level study conducted among elite Canadian athletes indicate that 8% of the athletes had experienced this type of abuse (Kirby et al., 2000). Current research demonstrates that the prevalence of sexual abuse in sports impacts between 2% and 8% of all athletes (Leahy et al., 2002; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001). Moreover, several authors have demonstrated that sexual abuse experienced by athletes results in serious consequences in their physical and emotional

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health and affects their sports career (Fasting, Brackenridge, & Walseth, 2002; Leahy, Pretty, & Tenenbaum, 2008). These authors also found that the consequences are more severe when sexual abuse is perpetrated by people in positions of power or authority. It has been also shown that sexual abuse has important consequences for the victims, such as drug abuse and psychological problems (Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2004; Briere & Elliott, 2003; Chartier, Walker, & Naimark, 2007; Dube et al., 2005; Filipas & Ullman, 2006; Kinnear, 2007; Putnam, 2003).

It has been demonstrated that several factors influence the consequences experienced by victims of sexual abuse (Jonzon & Lindblad, 2005). One factor is the process of disclosure (Arata, 1998; Everill & Waller, 1995; Jonzon & Lindblad, 2004, 2005). Thus, victims who face disbelief or a lack of support on the part of their family and friends experience more negative general consequences than do victims who receive a positive response and support from significant people around them. For example, Lange et al. (1999) found that negative reactions to disclosure and a negative evaluation of the disclosure by the victim are strong predictors of psychopathology.

Disclosure in the sport community is a process that has not been widely documented (Brackenridge, 2001). Victims of sexual abuse can be impeded by fear that nobody will defend them and that they will be ostracized (Kirby, 1995). They may eventually be pressured into dropping their complaints or leaving the team (Kirby, 1995). Given the particular culture of some sports, athletes may normalize inappropriate behaviors and therefore not perceive sexual abuse by the coach as inappropriate (Johns, 1998; Stirling & Kerr, 2009; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001; Volkwein-Caplan, Schnell, Devlin, Mitchell, & Sutura, 2002; Volkwein, Schnell, Sherwood, & Livezey, 1997). As a result, sexual abuse perpetrated on these athletes may not be revealed. Sport organizations also appear to have very few policies and complaint procedures in place (Brackenridge, 2004; Brackenridge et al., 2004; Parent, 2005, 2008), thus making the disclosure process more difficult.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Sexual abuse is a phenomenon that is still difficult for the scientific community to define (Holmes & Slap, 1998; Putnam, 2003). According to Brackenridge (1997, 2001), sexual abuse is coerced collaboration in sexual acts, involving manipulation or constraint. It can be expressed through exchanges of reward or privilege for sexual favors, forced sexual activity, rape or sexual assault, groping, etc. Within the framework of the current study, we will use the definition set by Brackenridge, although this definition can also meet in many ways other sexual abuse definitions (Putnam, 2003). Although definitions of sexual abuse vary, theoretical models nevertheless exist, allowing us to better understand its manifestation in a sport context. Sexual abuse in sport appears to follow a very specific temporal

sequence, as suggested by [Cense and Brackenridge \(2001\)](#) in their model titled *Temporal Model of Sexual Abuse with Children and Young Persons in Sport*. These authors documented the stages of sexual abuse in a sport context, based on previous literature ([Cense, 1997](#); [Finkelhor & Araji, 1986](#)).

According to this model, a predator must first of all have the motivation to abuse. When the predator is motivated and manages to overcome his or her inner inhibitions and general external barriers such as punitive measures, he or she is then ready to select a victim. Once the victim has been selected, the predator must then overcome the external barriers specific to the sport such as staff supervision and regulations related to athlete protection in the sport organizations before starting to groom his or her potential victim through trust and seduction ([Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001](#)). Unfortunately, these general external barriers are known to be scarce in sports organizations ([Brackenridge, 2004](#); [Brackenridge et al., 2004](#); [Malkin, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2000](#); [Parent, 2005, 2008, 2011](#)). The stage of abuse follows this grooming stage.

For abuse to take place, the predator must overcome the athlete's resistance. This resistance can be overcome by exploiting the vulnerability of the selected athlete but also by exploiting the coach-athlete relationship. This fact is supported by many other studies ([Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussalli, & Tapp, 2008](#); [Fasting et al., 2003](#); [Fasting, Brackenridge, Miller, & Sabo, 2008](#); [Leclerc, Proulx, & McKibben, 2005](#); [vanden Auweele et al., 2008](#)). For example, athletes with low self-esteem and eating disorders are especially at risk of sexual abuse when in a context where the coach has great power over the athlete and the athlete is dependent on the coach ([Cense & Brackenridge, 2001](#); [Sundgot-Borgen, Fasting, Brackenridge, Torstveit, & Berglund, 2003](#)).

If there is no intervention by a third party (e.g., parents, other coaches, sport administrators) or if the athlete does not have the emotional resources to expose the predator, then the abuse will develop and continue. This is problematic, knowing that the parents have a blind trust in the coach but also because violence is frequently normalized in the sport community ([Brackenridge, 1997, 1998](#); [Brackenridge, 2003](#); [Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnston, 2006](#); [Cense & Brackenridge, 2001](#); [Leclerc et al., 2005](#); [Stirling & Kerr, 2009](#); [Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001](#); [vanden Auweele et al., 2008](#)). The abuse ends when the athlete leaves the sport, receives support, or is prepared to come forward. It appears that athletes tend to reveal the abuse they have experienced once they are older, more experienced, and less focused on their sport ([Cense & Brackenridge, 2001](#)). However, despite the termination of the abuse, the athlete might continue to be victimized if the abuser has not been removed from the sport organization. For example, the athlete might then be subject to harassment. When the abuse ends, the abuser might also select another victim, in which case the process will resume again.

Although various data on sexual abuse in the sport community are available, very little information is known to date about disclosure or the

interventions that have been carried out by sport administrators in cases of sexual abuse that have occurred in sport organizations. This article thus aims to document the perceptions and actions of various sport stakeholders with regard to hypothetical and real cases of sexual abuse.

## METHOD

This research project was conducted in three Quebec sport federations and three clubs in the Quebec City region, each affiliated respectively with one of these federations. In each of these sport organizations, sport stakeholders were targeted to participate to the study. The results presented here come from a broader study aimed at describing and analyzing the measures used to prevent sexual abuse in sport organizations and the perceptions of the sport stakeholders affected by these measures (Parent, 2008). The current study focuses particularly on the analysis of interventions carried out by sport organizations in cases involving sexual abuse as well as the perceptions of the sport stakeholders working in these organizations regarding this issue. To obtain results that are representative of sport participation in Quebec, different sports were selected. To maintain confidentiality, the sports chosen are not indicated in this article.

### Instruments

A multiple instrumental case study design was used (Stake, 1995, 2006). According to Stake (2006), multiple case studies can be combined to investigate a phenomenon, a population or a general condition. Two research methods were used: Semistructured interviews and an analysis of written materials or documents.

Semistructured interviews were chosen for data collection because of the nature of the subject dealt with and to allow the answers to the research questions to be fully developed. The semistructured interviews were conducted with all the sport stakeholders targeted in the study: (a) Administrators of the Quebec sport federations, (b) administrators of the affiliated clubs, (c) athletes of the affiliated clubs, (d) coaches of the affiliated clubs, and (e) parents of athletes in the affiliated clubs. The interview guides used were based on work in the field as well as on various authors' recommendations regarding prevention (Brackenridge, 2002; Brackenridge, 2004; Brackenridge et al., 2004; Cense & Brackenridge, 2001; Malkin et al., 2000; Parent, 2005; Volkwein & Sankaran, 2002). The interview guides were specific to each type of stakeholder and each organization, and questions could be changed or adapted based on the factors raised in the questionnaires and the analysis of written documents. All the guides nevertheless dealt with the same themes; that is, the sport environment surrounding the athletes, the stakeholders' perceptions regarding sexual abuse, and preventive

measures. Only the interview guides used with the administrators of the sport organizations contained additional themes aimed at augmenting the information gathered from the questionnaires and written documents. On average, the interviews lasted 90 to 120 minutes.

Last, the body of written materials on prevention of sexual abuse held by the Quebec sport federations and the affiliated clubs were analyzed. The documents examined were policies, prevention programs, codes of ethics and conduct, rules and disciplinary action of organizations regarding this issue, awareness-raising materials, training materials, and general regulations.

### Participant Characteristics and Selection

A total of 27 sport stakeholders participated in the project, including sport administrators, coaches, athletes, and parents of athletes involved in these organizations. Five sport administrators (four men and one woman) participated in the study. Two of these administrators worked for the provincial federations, two worked for the affiliated clubs, and one was both the general manager of the provincial federation and the president of an affiliated club. Ages ranged from 29 to 59 (mean age: 41) and had been in their current position in the organization for an average of six years (data range: 2 to 12 years). The sport administrators participating in this study had several years' experience in this area. They had, on average, 15 years of experience (data range: 6 to 35 years). All the administrators held a certificate from the National Coaching Certification Program (NCCP) issued by the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC; two administrators held a Level 2 certificate and three held a Level 3 certificate). All of the administrators held university degrees, and four out of five administrators had studied in the field of physical and sport education.

Six male coaches aged between 26 and 41 (mean age: 33) participated in this study. Four of these coaches completed a Level 3 NCCP certificate, one had a Level 4 certificate and another had a Level 5 certificate. At the time of the study, they were coaching athletes at the national and international levels. The coaches had, on average, 14 years of coaching experience in their sport (data range: 10 to 19 years) and had been involved in the targeted organizations for an average of 10 years (data range: 4 to 15 years). Three of the coaches had a university-level education while the other three had a college-level education. Only one coach had studied in the field of physical and sport education.

Nine athletes (seven women and two men) participated in the study (three athletes from each sport organization). The athletes were aged between 18 and 22 years old. One athlete was attending high school, six were in college, and two were pursuing university studies. These athletes had between eight and 15 years of experience in their sport (average of 11

years) and had been involved in the targeted organization for an average of five years (data range: 1 to 10 years). Their competition levels differed. Five athletes were involved at the provincial level, three at the national level, and only one at the international level.

A total of six parents participated in this study, two parents from each sport organization (three women and three men), aged between 44 and 55 (mean age: 48). Three of the parents had studied at the college level and three at the university level. On average, their children had been practicing their sport for nine years (data range: 6 to 13 years) and had been involved in the targeted organization for three years (data range: 1 to 6 years). Their children were involved at the provincial and national levels.

A letter presenting the project was sent via electronic mail to the sports organizations targeted for the project. All the organizations that were approached agreed to participate in the project and signed a consent form. The questionnaire used for the study was sent at the same time as the consent form. An appointment was then made with those responsible for sexual abuse prevention (often the sport administrator) to collect the completed questionnaire as well as the written documents to be used for the study. A second appointment was then scheduled for an interview with each person responsible for sexual abuse prevention. A list of the parents of athletes, athletes over 18 years old, and coaches were then provided by each organization. The sport stakeholders were chosen based on the study's selection criteria. Before meeting the targeted individuals, two separate letters presenting the project were sent. First, a letter presenting the project was sent by the organization to all sports stakeholders to inform them of the organization's participation in the project. Subsequently, another letter presenting the project was sent requesting the participation of the targeted stakeholders. Those who agreed to participate signed a consent form prior to the interviews. Last, to prevent any psychological risks associated with participation in the research, contact information for a psychologist and a sport psychology consultant were transmitted to the participants via the consent form. This project was approved by the Laval University research ethics committee.

### Data Analysis

The data gathered were analyzed using content analysis (L'Écuyer, 1987). This type of inductive analysis brought out the themes and categories that were specific to the perceptions of these sport stakeholders regarding their sport environment, the phenomenon of sexual abuse in sport, and the prevention of this phenomenon in their sport organization. L'Écuyer (1987) distinguishes three steps in content analysis, namely: (a) Preliminary reading and establishing a list of statements, (b) choosing and defining classification units, and (c) the categorization process. These steps were followed in this study.

Content analysis was used to analyze the written documents. When undertaking this type of analysis, it is important to first identify the relevant documents to be analyzed and then determine the information to be sought in these documents (Gratton & Jones, 2004). In this study, the documents identified were: (a) The general regulations of the organizations; (b) the policies on sexual abuse; (c) the codes of ethics or conduct; (d) materials related to awareness-raising, information, or training regarding sexual abuse; and (e) any other document deemed relevant by the researchers. The information sought in the documents identified had to pertain to sexual abuse and included rules regarding behavior management, policies and codes of ethics, disciplinary action, or disciplinary measures.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Issue of Disclosure in Sport Organizations

When the sport stakeholders were questioned about the actual cases of sexual abuse they knew about as well as what they would do if such a situation hypothetically occurred, it was found that several obstacles may impede the process of disclosure and cause the victims to remain silent. These obstacles were prejudice, beliefs, and myths that seemed to perpetuate a culture of inaction and silence. The results obtained show that sport stakeholders (including athletes) minimized and trivialized the problems experienced by the victims, blamed the victims for the acts perpetrated against them, or even challenged the victims' credibility. These results are in line with the conclusions of studies on myths and perceptions surrounding rape (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; [McMahon, 2007](#)). The following quotes clearly illustrate the results mentioned previously. The first quote is by an athlete and refers to the phenomenon of sexual abuse:

Sometimes, and I mean the girls too . . . you go to a bar, or whatever, and there are girls who act sexy and everything, and they're not afraid to flaunt their sexuality. So, some are more or less aware of the effect they may have on people. They are not really careful, they are a bit more vulnerable [to being abused]. For sure, those who are assaulted may be partly [responsible], a bit through their behavior.

The second quote by a sport administrator refers to a case of sexual abuse that occurred in his sport organization where several victims came forward following an official complaint filed by one of the victims:

What really helped in the case in my view, was when the second [victimized athlete] came forward. If there had just been the first girl

[the victim who filed the first complaint], a girl who is a bit emotionally unstable. . . . Only girls who are kind of [emotionally] weak wouldn't realize when this happens that it is totally unacceptable. That girl who was a bit unstable at the time . . . I'm not sure she had the credibility to have him [name of the coach] formally accused and then found guilty.

It is thus easy to understand why the athletes seemed to fear that they would not be believed if they were to experience such a situation. Moreover, it was noted that the athletes in the present study were very concerned about this and all agreed that if such a situation were to occur, they would want to be sure they could provide concrete evidence of the sexual harassment or abuse they experienced in order to have credibility in the eyes of the people in the organization and those close to them. The following quotes clearly illustrate this thinking:

The person [who] wanted to talk about that [disclose the abuse by a coach], afterwards . . . she didn't know who to talk to about it. If she talks about it, well you're always afraid you won't be believed, that people won't believe what you say.

I'd make sure I did it in a subtle way. I'd go see the police, and I'd say, look, don't arrest him right away, get the evidence first. Find a way to put in cameras, or something hidden. Then as soon as it happened, the police officers would come out immediately.

However, factual and verifiable evidence of sexual abuse is often difficult to provide given the nature of these problems ([Jensen, Gulbrandsen, Mossige, Reichelt, & Tjersland, 2005](#); [Oates, 2007](#); [Oates et al., 2000](#); [Trocmé & Bala, 2005](#)). In addition, although the athletes believed they would receive strong support from their organization if such a case were to occur, they nevertheless expressed fears. For example, the athletes thought that sport administrators would be more likely to believe the coaches than the athletes in this situation for various reasons. This is aptly illustrated by the following quote:

I would be less likely to go and see [the sport administrator of the organization] because . . . I don't know . . . they [administrator and coach] know each other. [The sport administrator of the organization] might know about [the coach]'s behavior, but he wouldn't say anything, they might keep it a secret between them and hide everything. I would tell him and he wouldn't do anything.

This is significant given that the results of studies have shown that the victims' perception of other people's reaction to their disclosure has a major

impact on how they experience the consequences of the abuse ([Lange et al., 1999](#)).

The results also show that a major concern for the administrators, coaches, and parents was the search for evidence. In fact, in the actual cases discussed, the omnipresent fear of false allegations led to inaction on the part of the people around the victims, even when they had strong suspicions. According to a sport administrator who had witnessed strange behavior on the part of a coach in his own organization, he and other people were strongly suspicious of the coach's behavior but, to use his own words, "nobody wanted to expose him." Another coach thought that in a case involving sexual abuse that occurred in his organization, the administration did not react as it should have done:

I think that before this happened, there were already suspicions that he was not to be trusted. . . . Personally, I think that in the institution [where the coach worked], people kept their mouths shut, they waited until there was trouble before reacting.

When considering hypothetical cases, these sport stakeholders said that, out of fear of falsely accusing a coach, they would attempt to verify the statements and the facts, but, as pointed out by the administrators themselves, they feared they would not know who to believe. Thus, the administrators admitted that they would face the dilemma of having to choose between believing the athlete or believing the coach, both members of their organization. In the actual cases identified in this study, it was found that due to a lack of formal evidence, the organizations and the people around the athletes did not react, preferring to let things blow over and thus unequivocally contributing to the development and continuation of the sexual abuse ([Cense & Brackenridge, 2001](#)). Statistics on false allegations nevertheless show that such accusations are very rare ([Oates et al., 2000](#); [Trocmé & Bala, 2005](#)). Furthermore, fears of false allegations of abuse against coaches and authority figures have been shown to be unfounded ([Brackenridge, Bringer, & Bishopp, 2005](#)).

The results also show that the boundaries of behavior between coaches and athletes were not clear to the sport stakeholders and that few measures to regulate the behavior of the coach existed. Consequently, unacceptable situations were tolerated and no disciplinary action was taken against the offending coaches. For example, as stated by one sport administrator: "We did not know how to recognize the signs [of sexual abuse], perhaps the signs were clear, but we simply didn't know what they were." This practice of accepting behaviors that are nevertheless inappropriate leads to nondisclosure of sexual abuse ([Johns, 1998](#); [Stirling & Kerr, 2009](#); [Toftgaard Nielsen, 2001](#); [Volkwein-Caplan et al., 2002](#); [Volkwein et al., 1997](#)).

## Policies and Complaint Procedures

The sport organizations studied had in place no or few policies or complaint procedures related to sexual abuse, which constitutes another important risk factor (Brackenridge, 1997; Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997; Brackenridge, 1994; Cense & Brackenridge, 2001; Kirby et al., 2000; Parent, 2005). In fact, only two of the sport federations had a policy on sexual abuse. This type of policy did not exist in the other federation or in any of the clubs.

Where such policies existed, they only applied to immediate employees of the sport federations, which means that they only applied to the coaches of the provincial teams. Moreover, the national and provincial federations delegated the responsibility for adopting policies to lower-level organizations. In this study, none of the clubs examined had adopted their federation's policy. Therefore, existing policies applied to only a very small number of coaches. There was thus a lack of accountability on the part of higher-level sport organizations with regard to their member organizations, a fact already observed in other studies (Brackenridge et al., 2004; Malkin et al., 2000; Summers, 2000). In addition, it was noted that the athletes, parents, and even some coaches and administrators were not aware of the current policies and did not know what procedures they should follow or what resources would be available if a problem were to occur, which is consistent with the results obtained by Brackenridge et al. (2004).

When discussing policies on sexual abuse, the sport administrators all agreed that such policies were complex and hard to apply in practice. Moreover, they pointed out that they did not feel well-equipped to implement such policies or to manage complaints involving sexual abuse. They said that they would prefer to leave these tasks to experts such as lawyers. The following quote by a sport administrator clearly illustrates the results presented previously:

I do not have the ability, I do not have the necessary skills to get into that [the analysis of complaints, the investigation, the decision, etc.] . . . I think that, as administrators, we are powerless. We have no training, we're like . . . just lost . . . when I receive that [a complaint about sexual abuse] . . . what do I do as an administrator? . . . I'm defenseless, I don't have the means. . . . It's really too bad, we have no training, we have no means, it's as if we're helpless in dealing with this.

These findings clearly suggest that the processes of disclosure and complaint may often fail, resulting in negative consequences for the victims.

## The Reactions of the Sport Organizations

The analysis of the results regarding cases that occurred in these sport organizations shows that a number of measures were implemented following

these events. These measures mainly involved policies and complaint procedures. The administrators stated that these events had made them realize they were not equipped to deal with sexual abuse and that this situation could indeed occur in their organization. They said they had subsequently become more vigilant. The coaches also affirmed that they had become more careful as a result of these cases. They were thus more conscious of their vulnerability and now took greater precautions in this regard. The fact remains that, as regards the cases of sexual abuse that occurred in these organizations, no intervention took place until complaints had been filed with the police. In the cases where no formal complaint was filed, no disciplinary action was taken against the coaches who had perpetrated the abuse against the athletes. According to several sport stakeholders, the federation or the club involved reacted too late and did too little, when disciplinary action should have been taken to deal with the situation. It can thus be concluded that the sport organizations in this study tended to be reactive to sexual abuse problems. These results confirm those of studies conducted in the sports field ([Brackenridge et al., 2004](#)). In fact, based on a longitudinal study on athlete protection ([Brackenridge et al., 2004](#)), Brackenridge et al. (2005) established a Model of Activation States according to which sport organizations can be inactive, reactive, active, proactive toward or opposed to athlete protection. The sport organizations in the present study appear to correspond to the “reactive” profile of this model.

## Conclusion

This article aimed to present the perceptions of sport stakeholders regarding the disclosure of cases involving sexual abuse in a sport context and the interventions carried out by sport organizations with regard to this issue. The results show that few policies and complaint procedures exist in sport organizations. Moreover, the sport stakeholders involved in the sport community are not aware of these measures. In addition, the sport administrators in charge of these policies and complaint procedures are not trained to deal with this issue and, in their view, do not feel competent to react to this problem if it were to occur.

From a preventive point of view, various measures can be embedded to solve these problems, but the challenges remain in the choices of the best strategies. In her *Sexual Abuse Prevention Model for Sports Organizations*, Parent (2011) suggests to first consider the factors affecting the establishment of protection measures in sport organizations: The training of sports administrators, the leadership of the decision makers, and the support of the organizations in their prevention process. All of these strategies would enable sports administrators to implement appropriate policies and complaint procedures regarding sexual abuse in order to improve the interventions and support provided to the victims but also to prevent such abuse

from occurring in the first place. Moreover, help from various government levels would also be useful, given that sport organizations lack the human, financial, and material resources to better protect athletes.

To conclude, coercive measures have to better protect athletes in sport organizations. For example, perhaps an appropriate intervention would be the imposition of protection standards to all sport organizations by the government agencies. If the sport organizations want to accede governmental funding, they have to adopt specific measures to protect athletes. According to the approach proposed in public health, prevention has to incorporate important principles including the combination of behavioral and coercive modifications (Haddon, 1981; Waller, 1987). In sum, it is important to focus on the problem of sexual abuse in sport organizations in order to modify the perceptions, the behaviors, and the rules in this term. This will hopefully maximize the protection of all individuals involved in the sport context.

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