

# SAFEGUARDING OF CHILDREN IN SPORT

HUNGARY

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# CONTENT

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>5</b>
Glossary	5
Data collection	7
Questionnaire	8
Sample	8
Sample Based on Participation in Sports	12
<b>EXPERIENCE IN ORGANIZED SPORTS</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>ABUSE IN SPORT</b>	<b>26</b>
Emotional abuse	27
Physical abuse	35
Sexual abuse	42
<b>SELF-IMAGE DEVELOPMENT</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>THE PREVALENCE OF ABUSE IN ORGANIZED SPORTS</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>AS A PARENT IN SPORTS</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH RESULTS</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>60</b>
Sport is joy	60
The pressure to perform undermines motivation	60
The role of the coach is of key importance	61
Changing perceptions of abuse	61
Missing tools	62
Parental support is essential	62
Experiences last for a lifetime	62
Summary	63

# INTRODUCTION

Regular physical activity, team sports and developing physical fitness are important parts of childhood. There is no doubt that **joyous sporting experiences are very important, and are often decisive factors in healthy physical and mental growth and personality development.** Sport, like any other activity involving children, must be safe and in the best interests of the child, because childhood is a unique and unrepeatable experience. **During childhood, it is of paramount importance that children have good experiences and a supportive environment while playing sports, as this can determine their future attitudes towards sport and physical activity.** Of course, sport is challenging, difficult and often hard and tiring work, but abuse, humiliation, harassment or imposition should never be used as a means to achieve a goal or improve performance. During preparation or competition, situations that create opportunities for 'motivation' that cross healthy boundaries, physical and psychological abuse or other forms of abuse in the guise of discipline easily arise (e.g. competition, pressure to perform, lack of motivation, etc.).

Negative experiences in sport and incidents of abuse have been the subject of numerous international studies and research. In Hungary, there is little factual information, and in many cases, only the media reports

linked to cases of a particular sports organization are available. The first national survey on abuse in sport in Hungary was conducted by UNICEF in 2014. Due to the research methodology, the results cannot be considered representative, though they do draw attention to a number of phenomena. One of the most important of these is that **children** are often helpless against abuse, because they **do not recognize it as abuse and hence think that it is a part of the sport.** The research has also shown that **the public is more tolerant of sports-related abuse,** which is often seen as an acceptable means to achieve a goal. Nonetheless, the results highlight that **for the majority of children, sport is a defining and positive experience.**

The basis of the current research is the 2014 UNICEF survey. The main goal of this research is to map the incidents of abuse experienced by children in organized sports and to use the results to develop effective tools to prevent and handle such incidents. When interpreting the results, it is important to note that several of the advertisements used to distribute the questionnaire focused on sports-related abuse, thereby addressing those concerned more effectively. Our research indicates very important trends, but further representative data collection is needed to fully assess the situation.

# METHODOLOGY

## GLOSSARY

This report is a translation of the original study in Hungarian. Consequently, there may be discrepancies in terminology and word usage when compared to internationally accepted standards. In the Hungarian language, multiple terms are employed to

describe violence. In many contexts, the literal translation of “abuse” can also be interpreted synonymously with “violence.” Therefore, the glossary aims to provide precise definitions of these concepts.

## Glossary for Violence Against Children in Sport

### Abuse

The improper usage or treatment of a child, often to unfairly or improperly gain benefit. In sports, this can manifest as physical, emotional, or sexual maltreatment or neglect by coaches, peers, or other individuals in a position of authority. In this report (since it is a translation from Hungarian), this term is used as a synonym for violence.

### Bullying

Unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. In sports, bullying can occur between teammates or by coaches, and it may include physical assaults, verbal harassment, or social exclusion.

### Emotional Abuse (Emotional violence)

The regular mistreatment of children that may not leave visible signs, but can have a serious and long-lasting negative impact on a child’s healthy development. This may include teasing, humiliating, threatening, mocking, ostracizing or any behavior that was difficult for you emotionally.

## **Harassment**

A form of discrimination that includes unwanted physical or verbal behavior that offends or humiliates. In the context of sports, this can involve repetitive, unwanted behavior towards a child by teammates, coaches, or other figures in authority.

## **Hazing**

An initiation process involving harassment, abuse, or humiliation used as a way of initiating a person into a group. In sports, hazing may include tasks or behaviors that degrade, embarrass, or harm new team members.

## **Neglect**

The failure to provide for a child's basic needs, whether physical, emotional, educational, or medical. In sports, neglect may occur if a coach or organization fails to provide adequate supervision, equipment, or care.

## **Physical Abuse (Physical Violence)**

An intentional act or negligence that results in or may lead to the physical injury of a child. Physical abuse means causing physical pain or injury. It does not include physical injuries that occur during training or accidentally, such as strains, bruising or ankle sprains that occur while playing. This may include when a child has been pushed, hit, beaten up, or forced to continue training or playing, despite his/her pain etc.

## **Self-image**

By self-image we mean the mental image we have of ourselves, which can be influenced by external expectations. Self-image is closely linked to confidence and self-awareness, and affects the image we show to others about ourselves.

## **Sexual Abuse (Sexual Violence)**

The involvement of a child in sexual activity to which the child has not given his/her genuine consent. It also includes cases where the child is unable to give meaningful consent because of his/her age, maturity or power imbalances between the actors. Abuse can occur between an adult and a child, or a child and a child. This may include making jokes with sexual content, touching intimate parts of the body, touching that is unpleasant, as well as comments with sexual content and messages, and coercion into sexual intercourse.

## **Violence**

The use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a child that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, or deprivation. In sports, violence can be perpetrated by peers, coaches, or other adults involved in the child's sporting environment.

# Data collection

**The aim of data collection was to assess incidents of child abuse in organized sports.** However, due to the sensitivity of the topic, we did not interview children, but **conducted a retrospective survey of adults who reported their childhood experiences in the questionnaire.** The questionnaire was promoted online, mainly on social media, through paid advertisements. We also sent targeted enquiries to various sports organizations, asking them to spread the questionnaire. The benefit of this method is that it is cost-effective and reaches the affected target audience. Its disadvantage is that it is not suitable for developing a representative sample. The data collection was anonymous and did not include any questions that would allow for the identification of the respondent. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, the questions may have been disturbing, so respondents were made aware of this before each section of the questionnaire and were reassured that they were free to skip any question or to stop completing the questionnaire at any time. In addition, the telephone number of a free helpline was also published in the questionnaire, should the need for help arise.

In addition to the questionnaire, we also conducted focus group research, involving two focus groups. The two focus groups served different purposes: one was formed of sports professionals and the other of parents. In the focus group of sports professionals, we discussed the main findings of the questionnaire survey. The reflections from them are presented as highlights/frames in the report, thus nuancing some of the findings of the research. The parental focus group was designed to supplement the research with the experience of parents. The results of the focus group are thus also included as highlighted/framed sections in the chapter 'Parents in sport'. The focus group research took place in November 2022, following the evaluation of the results of the questionnaire survey. Participants of the focus group of sports professionals (six participants) were recruited on an invitation basis, while participants for the parental focus group were recruited through a call on the Foundation's online platforms. The focus group discussion was attended by 10 parents whose child is currently participating in organized sports.



# Questionnaire

The questionnaire was based on the 2014 UNICEF questionnaire, “Children’s experiences in sport”, mostly retaining the structure of the original 2014 questionnaire, with modifications in certain areas. Some groups of questions were removed (e.g. initiation, fan violence) and replaced by new questions (e.g. experiences of parents of a child playing sports). The survey focused not only on the abuse experienced, but also on the respondents’ general memories of playing sports as a child. The questionnaire first asked about **participation in sport** (e.g. how old was the respondent when he/she started playing sports, what he/she played, why he/she started playing sports, etc.), and then assessed the **experiences in general** (atmosphere, attitude of coaches and parents). A small block of questions concerned the **impact of sport on self-image**. This was followed by questions on abuse, **split into the different types of abuse (emotional, physical and sexual)**. We also asked a few questions on how widespread the respondents thought abuse

was in organized sports. The questionnaire ended with a **demographic block** and a **questionnaire for parents** of children under 18. At the beginning of each block of questions, respondents were provided with the relevant definitions, which are also included in the research report.

The questionnaire mainly consisted of multiple-choice questions, but respondents could also provide written responses on each topic.

A pilot survey was conducted on the revised questionnaire, the results of which were discussed in a focus group in January 2022, with participants who had participated in organized sports as children. Taking into account the comments received, we developed the final version of the questionnaire and started collecting data. An advisory board made up of sports professionals and a panel of children helped to compile the questionnaire.

## Sample

During the data collection period from 26 January 2022 to 10 May 2022, altogether 6450 valid responses were received, however, 21.3% of respondents (1374 individuals) did not participate in organized sports activities as a child. They were not entirely excluded from the data collection as we wanted to find out whether there was someone among their acquaintances who

had experienced some kind of sport-related abuse during their childhood. Moreover, we also asked them about their minor children’s participation in sports. However, the research report is primarily **about the 5076 respondents who did participate in organized sports as a child**.

**To whom does this questionnaire apply? What is organized sport?**

Organized sport means a regular and voluntary participation in a sporting activity outside of school (kindergarten) lessons, with supervision and coordination by an adult.

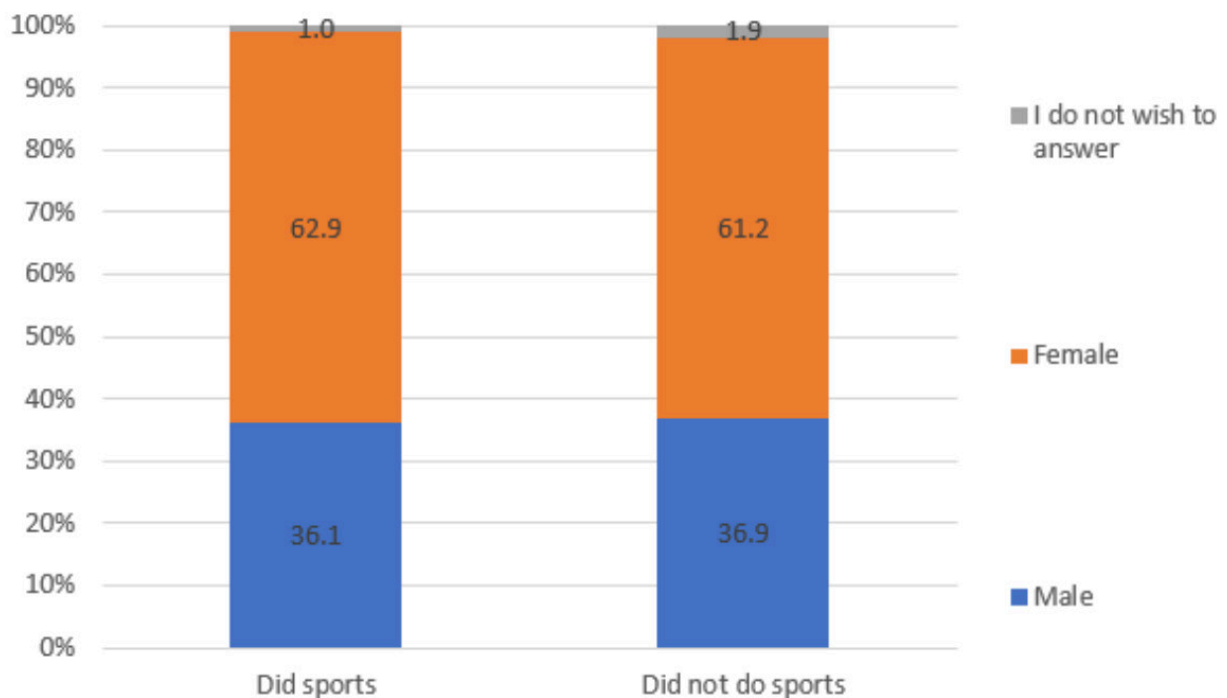
This includes regular sporting activities practiced in any sports organization (federation, association, club), including activities organized in schools by school sports clubs outside of physical education lessons.

However, it does not include physical education classes at school, or informal sporting activities organized in one’s spare time, such as impromptu football in the park, hiking in nature, cycling, or going to the gym.

There is no significant difference with regard to the major demographic features between those who participated in organized sports as children and those who did not. Of those

who participated in organized sports, 62.9% are female, 36.1% are male and 1.0% did not wish to provide this information. (Figure 1)

**Figure 1 - Distribution of respondents by gender (%) N=6450**

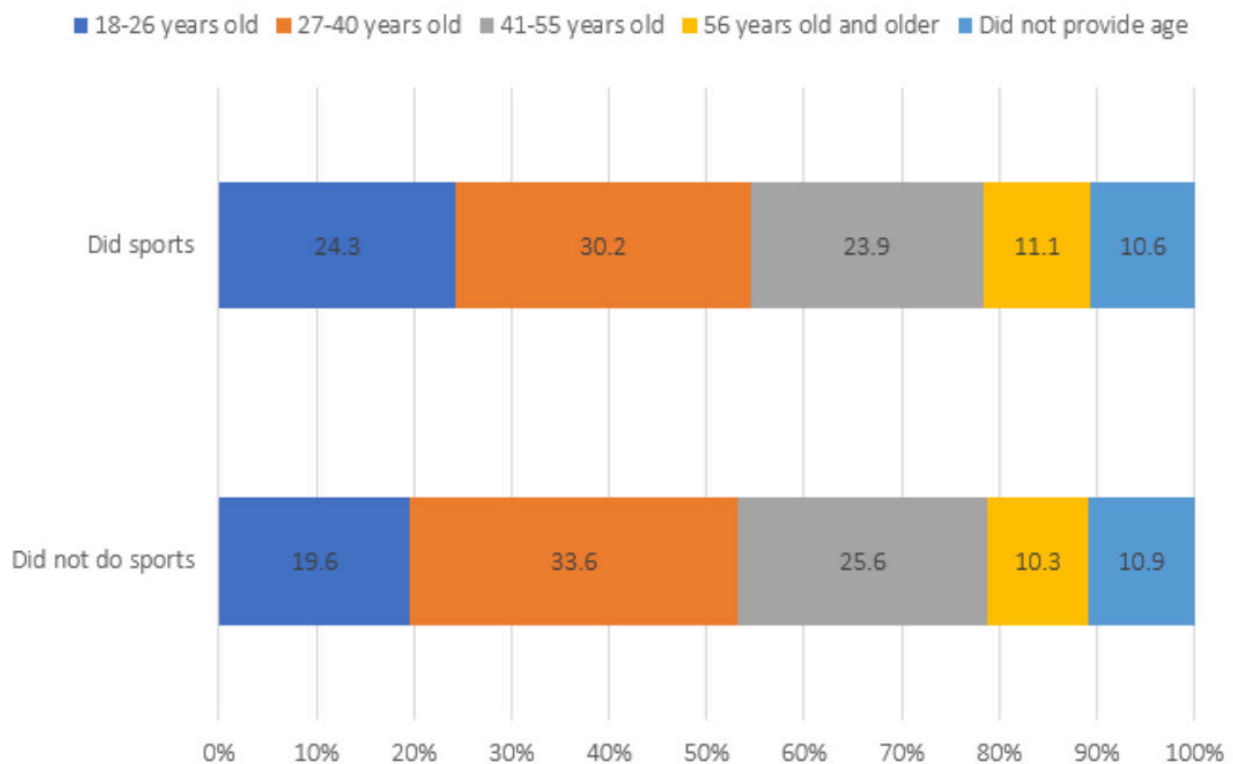




When defining the age groups, we took into consideration that UNICEF's "Experience of Children in Sports" survey was conducted in 2014, therefore, the youngest age group includes those who turned 18 in 2015 or later. The definition of this age group was particularly important because the differences in the answers of the members of this group may indicate a change in trend, despite the fact that the methodology of

the 2014 survey and this research report are not suitable for comparison in time. Of those who participated in sports as children, 24.3% belong to the youngest age group between 18 and 26, 30.2% are between 27 and 40, 23.9% are between 41 and 55, and 11.1% are 56 or older. Unfortunately, a significant number (10.6%) of respondents did not provide their age. (Figure 2)

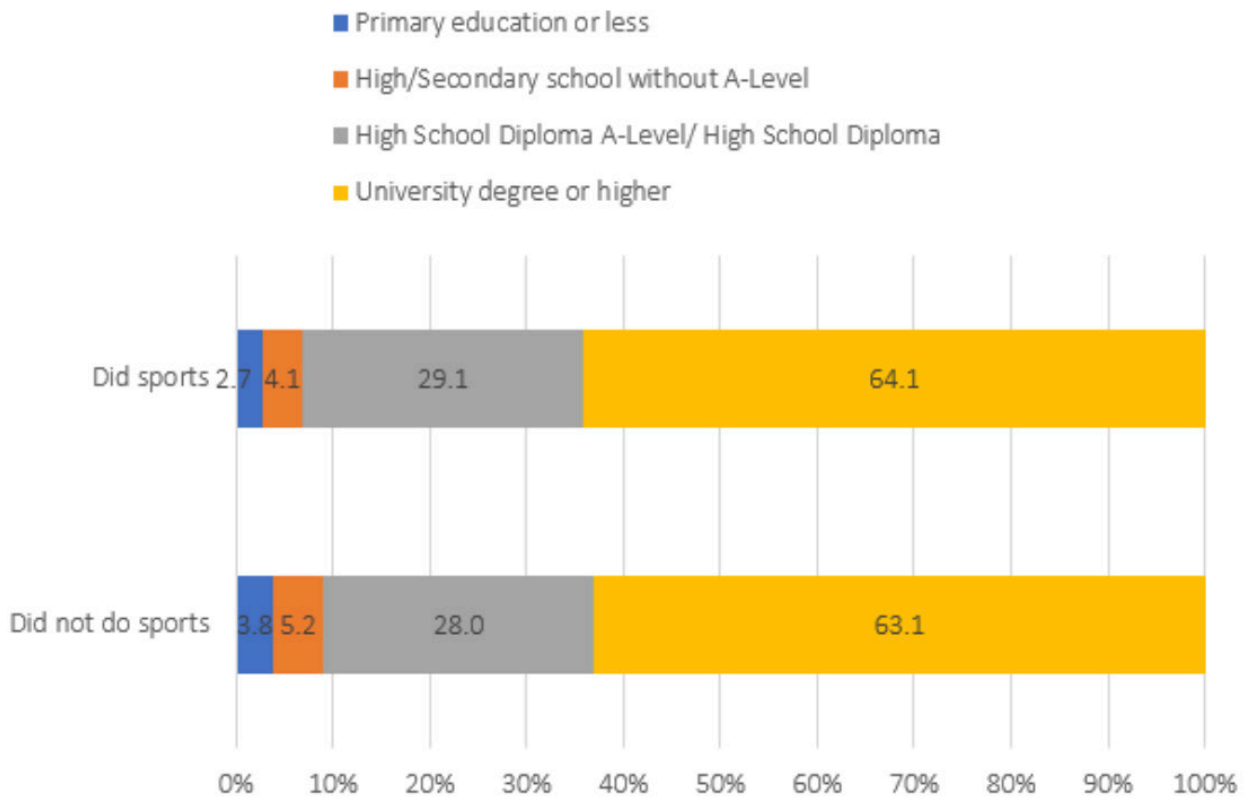
**Figure 2 - Distribution of respondents by age (%) N=6450**



As for the education level of respondents, those with university degrees or postgraduate training are overrepresented in the sample; 64.1% of respondents participating in sports as children have a

higher education qualification, 29.1% have a high school diploma, 4.1% have a vocational qualification, and 2.7% have finished primary education at most. (Figure 3)

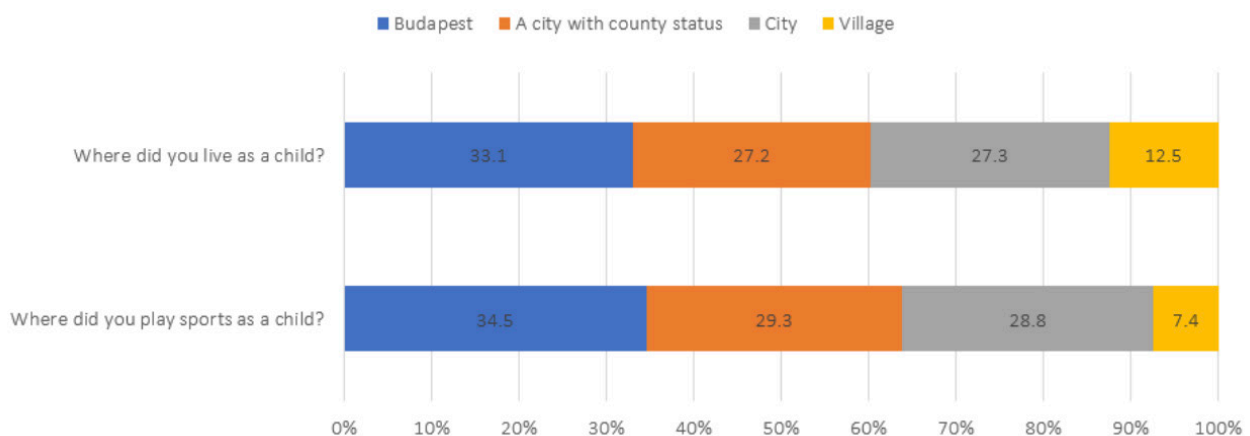
**Figure 3 - Distribution of respondents by education level (%) N=6450**



In relation to domicile, we asked about the type of settlement they lived in during childhood and the location of the sports organization. Although respondents who grew up in villages are underrepresented in

the sample (12.5%), it is clearly visible that there are fewer possibilities for sports in these settlements as only 7.4% of them did sports locally. (Figure 4)

**Figure 4 - Distribution of respondents who „participated in sports” by type of settlement for childhood residence and location of the sport organization (%) N=5076**



Of those who have participated in organized sports, 32.2% have a child under 18, while this figure is 29.4% for those who did not participate in organized sports.

Additionally, we wanted to find out what kind of experiences the respondents living with childhood disabilities had in sports. Of respondents that answered, 3.4% said that they had a disability from childhood.

## Sample Based on Participation in Sports

**On average, respondents started to do sports at the age of eight.** Of them, 36.1% at the age of 6–8, and 22.9% at the age of 9–11. Therefore, based on the data collected, **it is most likely for children to take up an organized sport in the lower stage of elementary school,** it is a lot less likely in the upper stage and in high school.

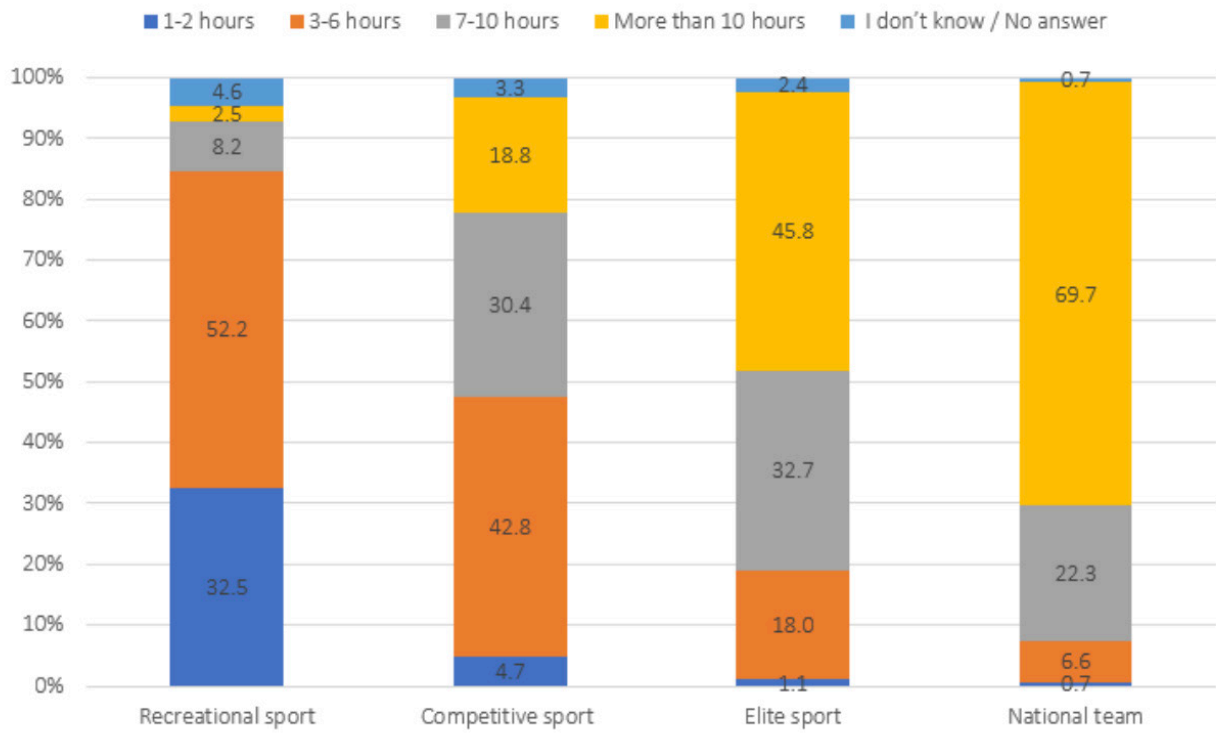
Most respondents (34.8%) were active in one sport, 24.3% took part in two, and 16.5% took part in three sports. Respondents chose 1) swimming (31.7%), 2) athletics (23.5%), 3) handball (20.6%), 4) basketball (20.0%), 5) dance (19.9%), 6) football (18.3%), and 7) combat sports and martial arts (16.1%) in most cases from the listed sports<sup>1</sup>.

**In the case of most respondents (59.7%), competitive sport** – i.e. doing sport in the framework of a sports association's competition system – **was the highest level of sport they did as a child.** Of

respondents, 23.2% did **recreational sports** – in their free time to relax, protect their health, increase their performance, or as a hobby. Of respondents, 11.2% participated in **elite sports** – doing sport as an amateur or professional with a contract –, and 5.4% of them were members of the **national sports team. The majority (40.2%) of the respondents had 3-6 hours of training per week when they did sports at the highest level.** 24.9% did sport 7-10 hours per week, and 20.8% did sports for more than 10 hours per week, while 10.5% did sport 1-2 hours per week. The level of participation is strongly related to the time spent with sport training. While in the case of those who did recreational sports, 3-6 hours of training per week is the most frequent, those who attended competitions had 7-10 hours of training per week. Those who participated in elite sports, especially the members of the national sports teams, spent more than 10 hours per week training. (Figure 5)

<sup>1</sup> Similar to the methodology of the 2014 UNICEF research, we do not examine the data according to sport types in the research report because we would like to avoid certain sports being shown in a negative light given the limitations of sample collection.

Figure 5 - Hours of training by the level of participation in sports (%) N=5076



# EXPERIENCE IN ORGANIZED SPORTS

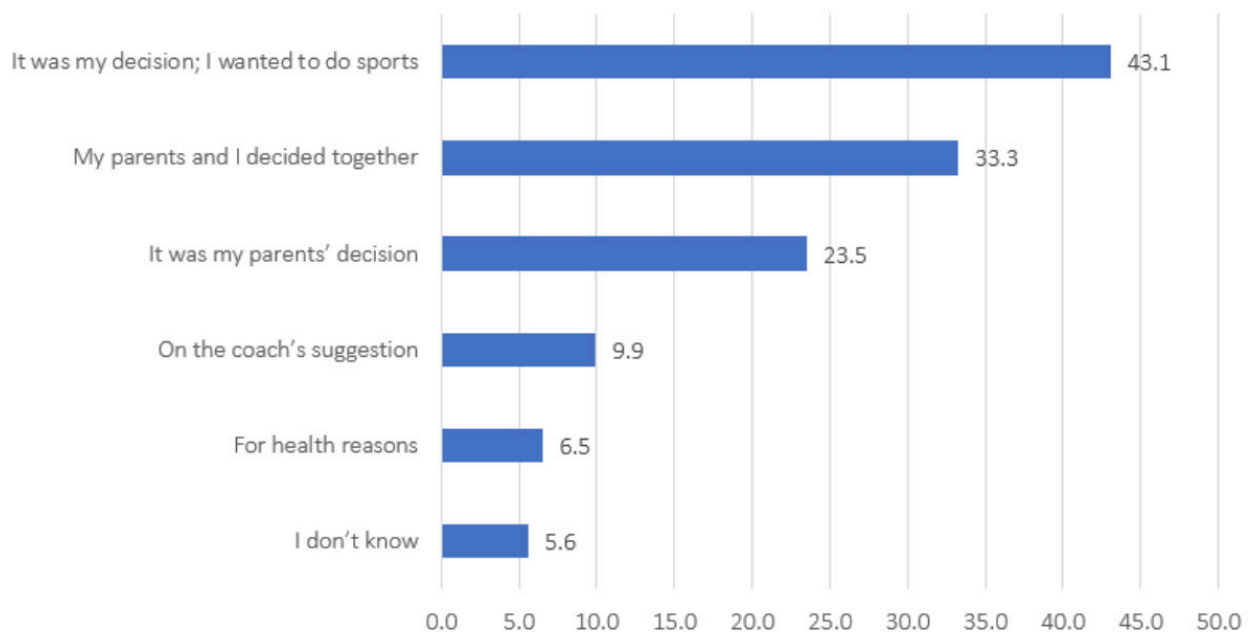
*"We can live without sports, but why would you?" (45-year-old woman, recreational sport)*

*"There was no point." (44-year-old man, competitive sport)*

**Almost half of respondents (43.1%) decided to do sports on their own, but a third of them (33.3%) made this decision together with their parents.** 23.5% was the proportion of those whose parents decided

that they would start doing sports. A tenth (9.9%) started at the suggestion of a coach, and 6.5% needed to start doing sports for medical reasons. (Figure 6)

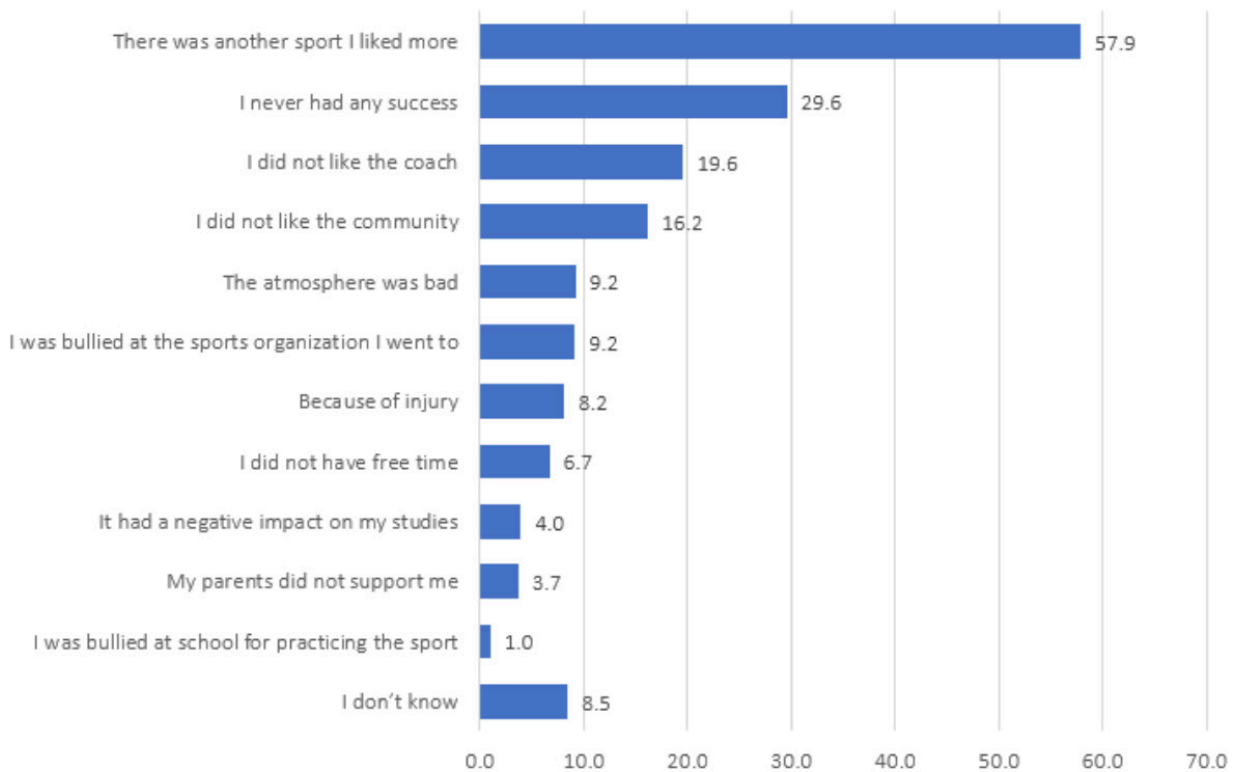
**Figure 6 - Why did you start doing sports? (%) N=5076**



**Of respondents, 51.7% changed the type of sport as a child. For most of them (57.9%), the main reason for this was that they started to like another sport.** Of respondents, 29.6% didn't experience success in the sport they had first chosen,

19.6% didn't like their coach, while 16.2% didn't like the community. Unpleasant atmosphere and abuse were also reasons for the change for 9.2% of respondents. Lack of time for recreation or learning appeared in fewer cases. (Figure 7)

**Figure 7 - Why did you change? (%) N=2625**

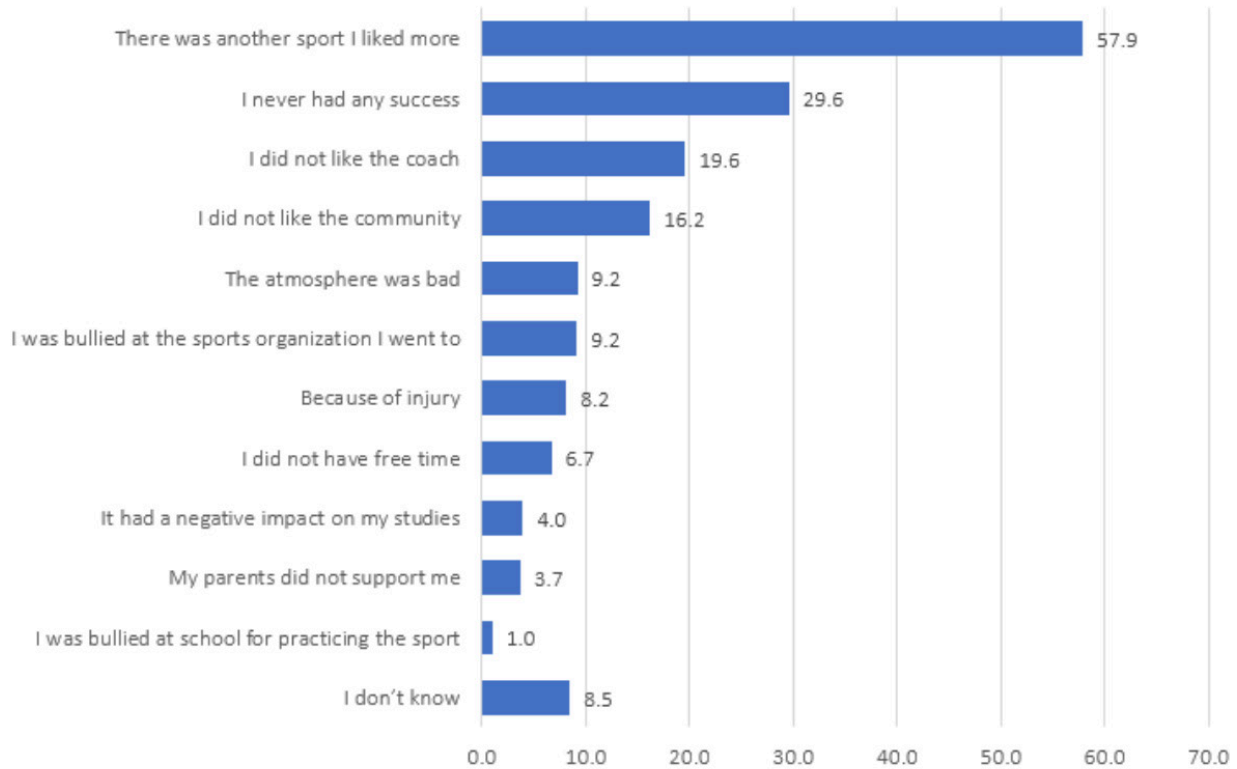


**Exactly 50.0% is the proportion of those who gave up sport as a child. The primary reason for this was that they didn't experience success (31.0%),** and they noted the lack of free time as the secondary reason (24.4%). 20.2% gave up sport, because they didn't like their coach, while 18.0% did so because they didn't like the community. 16.4% felt that doing sports came at the expense of learning, 14.1% had to give up sport due to an injury. 11.8% of those

who gave up sport as a child were abused at the sport organization they attended, which means the proportion is higher of those who gave up sport due to abuse than of those who solved this problem with a change. (Figure 8) Written answers given in connection with the experience in sport also revealed that the reason for a change or for giving up sport could be moving or changing schools.

*“My worst experience was that I had to give up basketball due to moving, even though I was one of the best.” (37-year-old man, recreational sport)*

**Figure 8 - Why did you stop it? (%) N=2536**



With regard to recalling childhood experience, we asked the respondents to first write down three words that came to mind in connection with sport. **Most commonly they associated sport with words of positive meaning, like ‘friends’, ‘team’, ‘pleasure’, ‘success’,** and expressions referring to negative experience, like ‘fatigue’, ‘anxiety’, ‘stress’ appeared in a lower proportion. We coded the written answers according to

whether they were associated to words with a positive (e.g. ‘pleasure’, ‘success’ etc.), negative (e.g. ‘failure’, ‘fear’ etc.) or neutral (e.g. ‘training’, ‘ball’ etc.) meaning in relation to doing sports as a child. We separately coded whether an expression referring to a kind of community (e.g. ‘friends’, ‘team’ etc.) appeared among the written words. The majority of respondents (47.8%) associated a positive or a rather positive meaning

<sup>2</sup> If all three words are negative, then negative. If two are negative and one is positive, then negative. If two are positive and one is negative, then negative. If three are positive, then positive. If three are neutral, then neutral. If one is neutral, then according to positive and negative (e.g. two neutral and one negative then negative, one neutral and two positive then positive etc.). If there are neutral, positive and negative words in the response then it goes in the all-three category.

with their experience in sport, 25.4% had rather negative or negative experiences, 12.8% gave answers containing neutral words, while 10.9% gave answers containing positive, negative and neutral words as well.

It is important to highlight that more than one third of respondents (35.9%) associated childhood experience in sport with words referring to community (e.g. 'friends', 'community', 'cohesion'). (Figure 9)

*"The sense of belonging to a team helped us through a lot of difficulties." (66-year-old woman, competitive sport)*

**Figure 9 - Which are the 3 words that come to mind about doing sports as a child?**

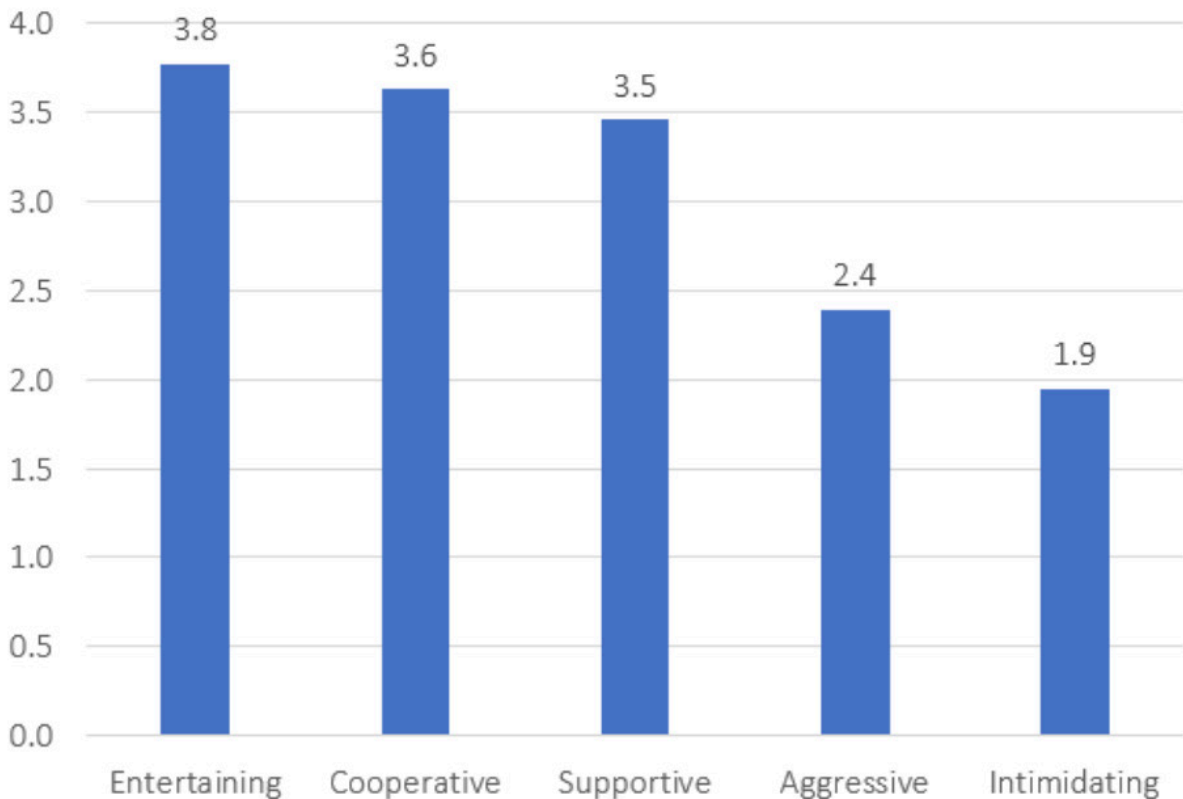


We were also curious about what kind of memories the respondents had of doing sports as a child. They had to determine on a scale of 1 to 5 how entertaining, cooperative, supportive, aggressive or intimidating the atmosphere was where they did sports. The value of 1 meant not

at all and the value of 5 meant definitely. **On average, respondents determined the atmosphere as rather positive as opposed to negative.** They found it rather entertaining (3.8%), cooperative (3.6%) and supportive (3.5%) as opposed to aggressive (2.4%) or intimidating (1.9%). (Figure 10)



**Figure 10 - What was the atmosphere like in the place where you did sport as a child?  
(average) N=5076**



The majority of the answers given to open questions also had a kind of emotional charge. Some described their participation in organized sports as the most positive thing

it could possibly be, while others thought that it was one of the worst experiences in their life.

*"It helped me to know myself and my boundaries. Without sport I wouldn't be the person I am now." (24-year-old man, elite sport)*

*"Wounds on my soul that I haven't been able to process to this day." (43-year-old woman, competitive sport)*

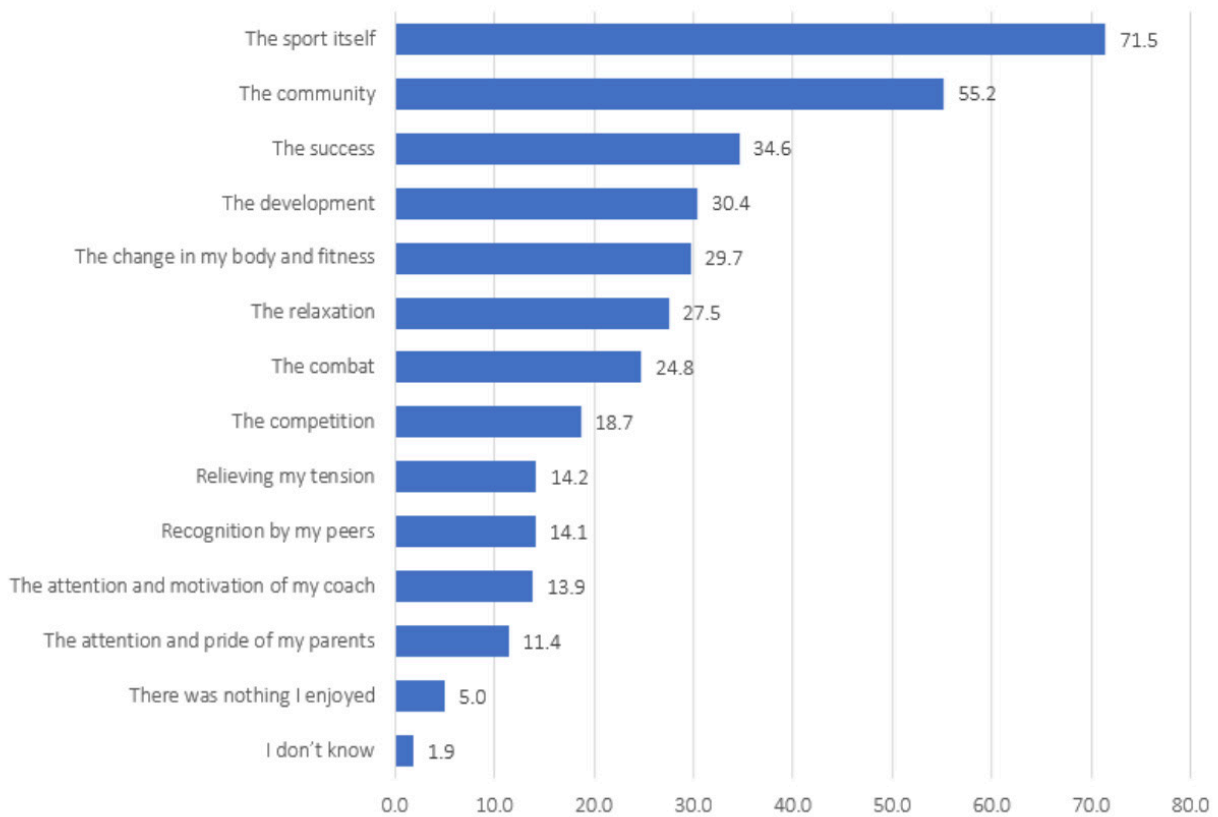
**Almost three-quarters (71.5%) of respondents enjoyed the sport itself the most in organized sports, but more than a half of them (55.2%) enjoyed the community, and approximately one third liked the success (34.6%) and the development (30.4%) as**

well. For 29.7%, it was their change of body and fitness, for 27.5%, it was the recreation, for 24.8%, it was the struggle and for 18.7%, it was the competition that they enjoyed the most in sport. The importance of the attention and recognition of the environment becomes

clear from the answers: the respondents highlighted the attention of peers (14.1%), the coach (13.9%) and the parents (11.4%). Only

5% of the respondents stated that they liked nothing in sport. (Figure 11) Most of them gave up sport as a child.

**Figure 11 - What did you enjoy most while participating in organized sport? (%) N=5076**



Many opinions highlighting the advantages and positive effects of sport also appeared in the written answers. The majority identified learning and positive effects on health among the main positives. Moreover, preparation for life, perseverance, development of self-esteem and the importance of human relations were commonly mentioned elements.



*“I received a lot from regular sport: perseverance and I feel its advantages in my attitude to work to this day.” (43-year-old woman, elite sport)*

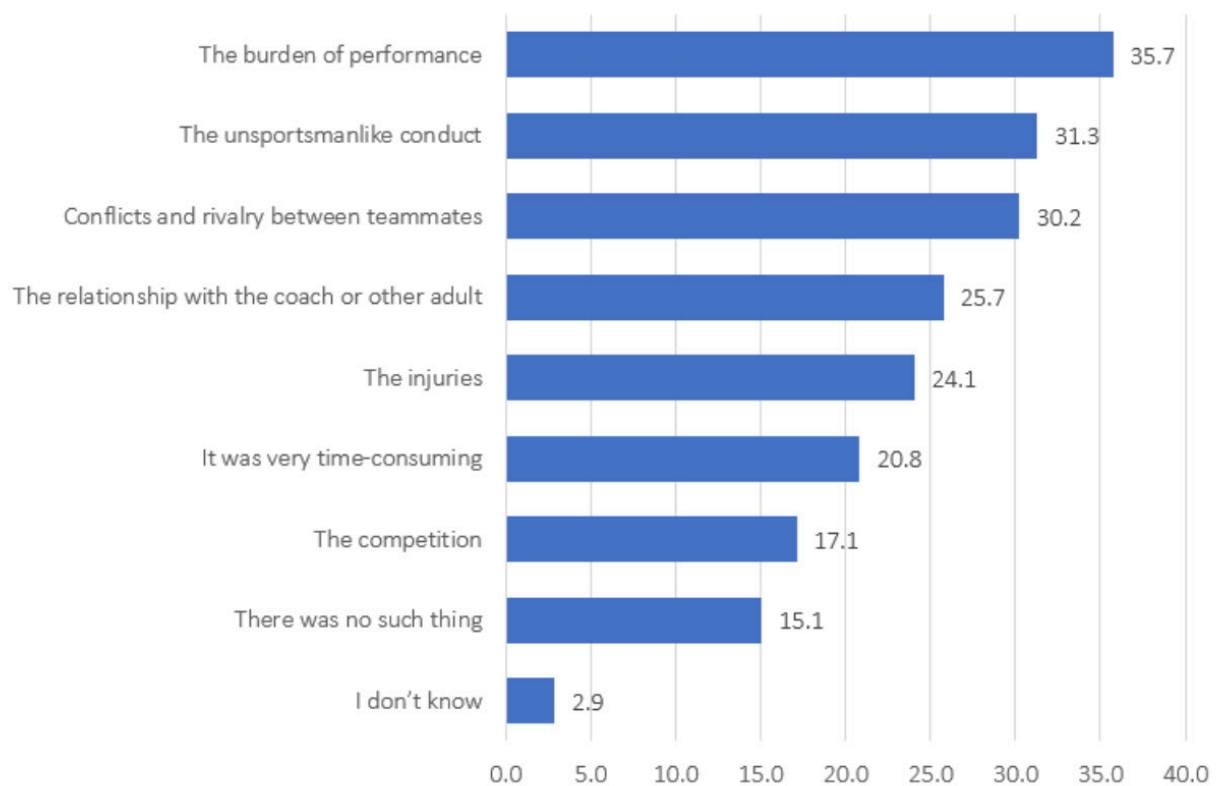
*“It made me strong mentally and physically. It had and still has a great significance in my future life.” (49-year-old man, competitive sport)*

**For respondents, the worst experience in organized sports was the pressure to perform;** 35.7% said that they liked it the least, 31.3% disliked unsportsmanlike conduct, while 20.2% disliked conflict and rivalry among teammates. Approximately one quarter of the respondents identified the relationship with the coach or other

adults (25.7%) and the injuries (24.1%) as their worst experience.

Of respondents, 20.8% disliked that sport took a lot from their free time, while 17.1% found competitions difficult, and 15.1% had no negative memories in connection with organized sports. (Figure 12)

**Figure 12 - What did you like the least in your participation in organized sport?  
%) N=5076**



Pressure to perform appeared often in written answers as well. It had a huge role in stories of those who disliked sport. Many gave up sport due to the oppressive atmosphere. There were also several stories about the fact that participation in competitive sport

was often ruthless and nothing mattered, just the result to be achieved. In connection with this, the fact that children thought to be less talented didn't receive enough attention also came up, which led to the loss of motivation and giving up sport.

*“Team sports are performance-oriented even in childhood, therefore children who are less skillful or talented can easily lose their motivation.” (man, elite sport, \*age was not given)*

*“We received little real, personal attention. In many places. Focus was only on sport performance. They didn’t spend much time with us as people, as children – technique and performance were important.” (49-year-old man, competitive sport)*

### Expert opinion

Sport professionals confirmed the result that the sport itself makes participants happy. Doing sports is determinative in the life of a child: it helps their physical and mental development, it teaches self-awareness and provides self-esteem. However, the experiences are affected by several other factors, that’s why it is really important that sport organizations work taking into consideration not only the aspects of sport, but also the interests and needs of children.

***“Fundamentally, sport is a good thing. We, the coach or the team, are the ones that can ruin the experience for others. These are exactly the bad experiences I have” (sport professional)***

Another topic – beyond the aspects of the questionnaire – which had appeared again and again was that there are no equal

opportunities in sport, it requires a lot of money, so children of wealthy parents can go further and they receive special treatment.

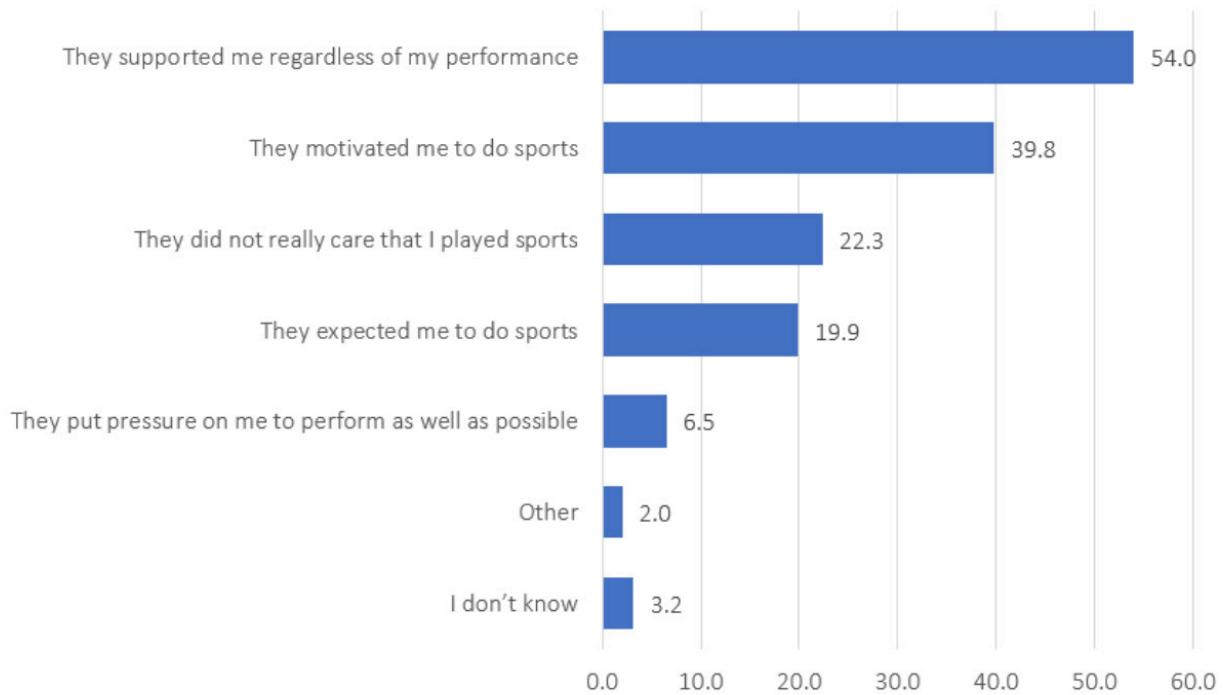
*“Our family background was quite modest, so it was difficult to raise money for competitive sport. In the end, I gave it up, because I couldn’t expect my parents to pay for it. I started to work alongside my studies, so I didn’t have so much time to train.” (30-year-old woman, competitive sport)*

**The role of parents is also decisive in connection with sport.** According to more than half the respondents (54.0%), their parents supported them regardless of their performance, 39.8% reported that they were motivated to do sport, 22.3% stated

that their parents didn’t care that they did sport, but 19.9% were expected to do sport, and 6.5% of respondents said that they were pressured by their parents to achieve better performance in sport. (Figure 13)



**Figure 13 - What describes your parents' approach towards your sporting activities the best? (%) N=5076**



There is a connection between the role of the parents and the level of the sporting activity. Those who participated in elite sport or were in the national team reported in a higher proportion that their sport career was supported and motivated by their parents.

However, a higher proportion of them also reported parental pressure. In the case of recreational and competitive sport, a higher proportion stated that their parents didn't care if they did sport. (Table 1).

**Table 1 – Perception of the parents' approach towards sporting activities by the level of participation in sports (%) N=5076**

	Recreational sport	Competitive sport	Elite sport	National team
They motivated me to do sports	30.8	39.4	51.1	60.6
They supported me regardless of my performance	43.2	56.0	62.7	62.0
They expected me to do sports*	20.7	18.8	21.2	25.2
They put pressure on me to perform as well as possible	3.3	5.7	13.1	15.0
They did not really care that I played sports	30.8	21.8	13.4	9.1

\* There is no significant correlation

The role of the parents was also emphasized in the written answers. Opinions of those who lacked parental support appeared in the reports in a higher proportion. This draws attention to the fact that **children**

**doing sports really need support outside of the organization**, because the lack of this can even cause a long-lasting negative effect.

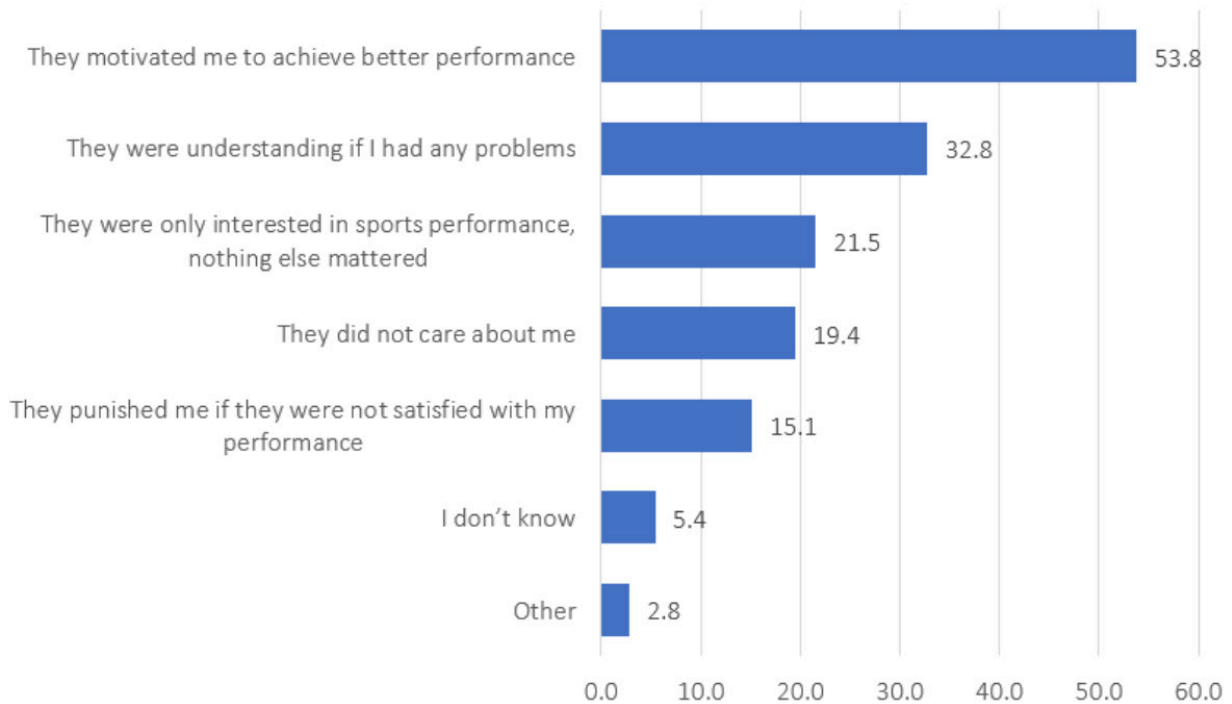
*“It meant a lot to me that my parents could also clearly see how toxic the atmosphere was and they always supported me regardless of my performance.” (28-year-old man, competitive sport)*

*“I think the majority of children don’t know that they should not be treated like this. They don’t have a vocabulary to express it even if their parents would help them. Parents should rather be informed about what they should pay attention to. I didn’t dare to tell them that I didn’t want to go swimming, even though they did not force it. Fortunately, they realized that it was not a pleasure for me to go, but it still became a lasting ‘experience’.” (44-year-old woman, recreational sport)*

The attitude of coaches is also very determinative for children doing sports. **The majority of the participants involved in the research had a positive memory of their childhood coach.** According to more than the half the respondents (53.8%), they were motivated by their coach to achieve better performance, almost one third (32.8%) also stated that their coach was understanding with them in connection with any problems they had, 21.5% said that their coach was only interested in their sport performance and didn’t care about other things, 19.1% felt that they didn’t receive

enough attention from their coach, and 15.1% reported that their coach applied punishment if he/she was not satisfied with their sports performance. (Figure 14) (On the basis of the written answers, punishment meant mainly doing extra exercises, running etc., but many mentioned shouting and humiliation as well.)

**Figure 14 - What describes your coach’s approach towards your sporting activities the best? (%) N=5076**



The assessment of the attitude of coaches shows a similar pattern as the attitude of parents regarding the level of participation in the organized sport. It is true here as well that those who participated in elite sport or were in the national team reported both the support and the application

of punishment in a higher proportion. Regarding the assessment of coaches, those who participated in competitive sport or recreational sport felt that they didn't receive enough attention from their coach in a higher proportion. (Table 2)

**Table 2 – Perception of the coach’s approach towards sporting activities by the level of participation in sports (%) N=5076**

	Recreational sport	Competitive sport	Elite sport	National team
They motivated me to achieve better performance	36.0	57.7	66.1	62
They were understanding if I had any problems	25.0	35.3	36.2	32.1
They were only interested in sports performance, nothing else mattered	18.4	21.6	26.3	26.3
They punished me if they were not satisfied with my performance	10.9	14.4	23.9	23.4
They did not care about me	34.5	16.8	8.1	7.7

The majority of the written answers were linked to coaches in a way, which evidently reveals how important the personality, preparedness and attention of the coaches

were for the children. On the basis of the answers, coaches can influence the attitude of the children towards sport either positively or negatively.

*“The role of the coach, teacher, and educator is the most important. Mine earned my admiration and loyalty. He loved us, that’s why we did everything he asked.” (Man, competitive sport \*age was not given)*

*“At the age of 14 I attended a high school specialized in sport that was situated 400 km from my parents just because of sport. My coach believed in me and encouraged me. He stood by me even if I made a mistake. This changed in high school. My new coach was condescending, he humiliated me and he treated some pupils differently. I gave up sport, my dream, because of him. He made me believe that I was not good. My previous coach always communicated the opposite. A bad coach can ruin everything.” (37-year-old woman, competitive sport)*

However, the role of the coach relates not only to the sport performance, he/she needs to perform a more complex task, because he/she becomes part of the child’s life who participates in organized sport. The written answers evidently reveal that **from the child’s perspective, a coach is**

**good if he/she pays attention to them, understands their problems and is present in a supportive way.** Contrary to this, an exclusively performance-oriented coach can negatively affect the child doing sport, which can even lead to long-term consequences in some cases.

*“I had a positive experience. I solved my teenage problems with the help of my coach. She was my second mother, I am grateful for every minute of her attention.” (49-year-old man, competitive sport)*

*“I experienced that in competitive sport, coaches are never interested in the children, they are only interested in the results they can achieve using children. They subordinated everything to this: corporal development, school results.’ (42-year-old man, competitive sport)*





# ABUSE IN SPORT

We asked about the different types of abuse experienced in sport (emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse). For each type of abuse, we first asked about the occurrence of the incidents (never, sometimes or regularly). Then we asked questions about the perpetrator and witnesses, and about

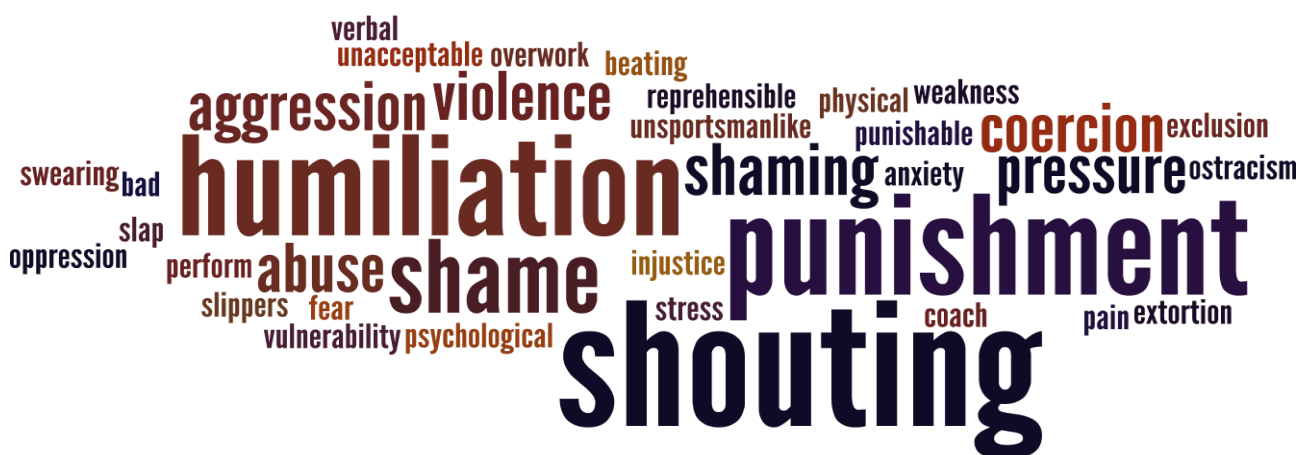
the handling and perception of the abuse. If the respondent chose the option “no abuse was committed against me” regarding the question on the perpetrator(s), no further questions were asked and the questionnaire moved on to the next question block.

*“It was a dog-eat-dog world; the vulnerable were abused by everyone.” (55-year-old male, competitive sport)*

As a prelude to the question blocks about bullying, respondents were asked to write down three words that come to mind when they think of bullying in relation to sport. Most respondents thought of the words

‘humiliation’, ‘punishment’, ‘shaming’, ‘shouting’ and ‘fear’, i.e. most thought of forms of abuse or of its consequences. (Figure 15)

**Figure 15 - What are the first 3 words that come to your mind about abuse in sport?**



# Emotional abuse

## **What is emotional abuse?**

*Emotional abuse is the regular mistreatment of children that may not leave visible signs, but can have a serious and long-lasting negative impact on a child's healthy development.*

## **What are some examples?**

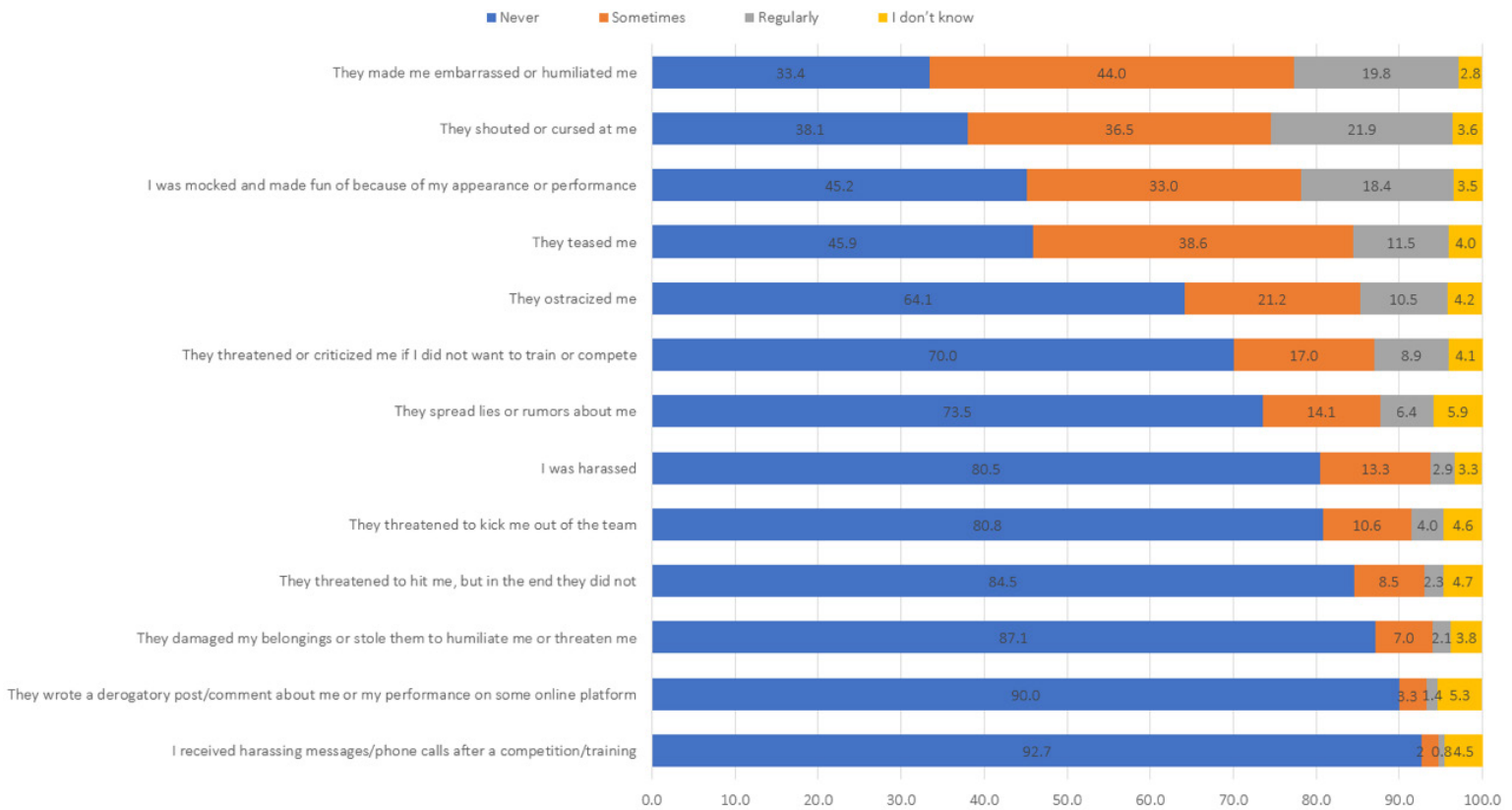
*Teasing, humiliating, threatening, mocking, ostracizing or any behavior that was difficult for you emotionally.*

Of respondents, 19.8% were regularly embarrassed or humiliated, while 44.0% were only occasionally embarrassed or humiliated. Yelling or swearing was something that 21.9% of respondents experienced regularly, while 36.5% experienced it occasionally. Mocking or teasing was experienced regularly by 18.4%, while 33.0% experienced it occasionally. 11.5% said they were teased regularly, while 38.6% reported that occasionally someone

teased them. 10.5% said they were bullied regularly, while 21.2% said it happened occasionally. Threats (e.g. firing or physical abuse) and harassment, spreading lies, affected about one fifth of the respondents. These forms of emotional abuse were less systematic, occurring occasionally and more sporadically. Emotional abuse in the online space was the least frequent, which is perhaps significantly influenced by the age distribution of respondents. (Figure 16).



**Figure 16 - Did you experience any of the below when practicing sports as a child? (%) N=5076**

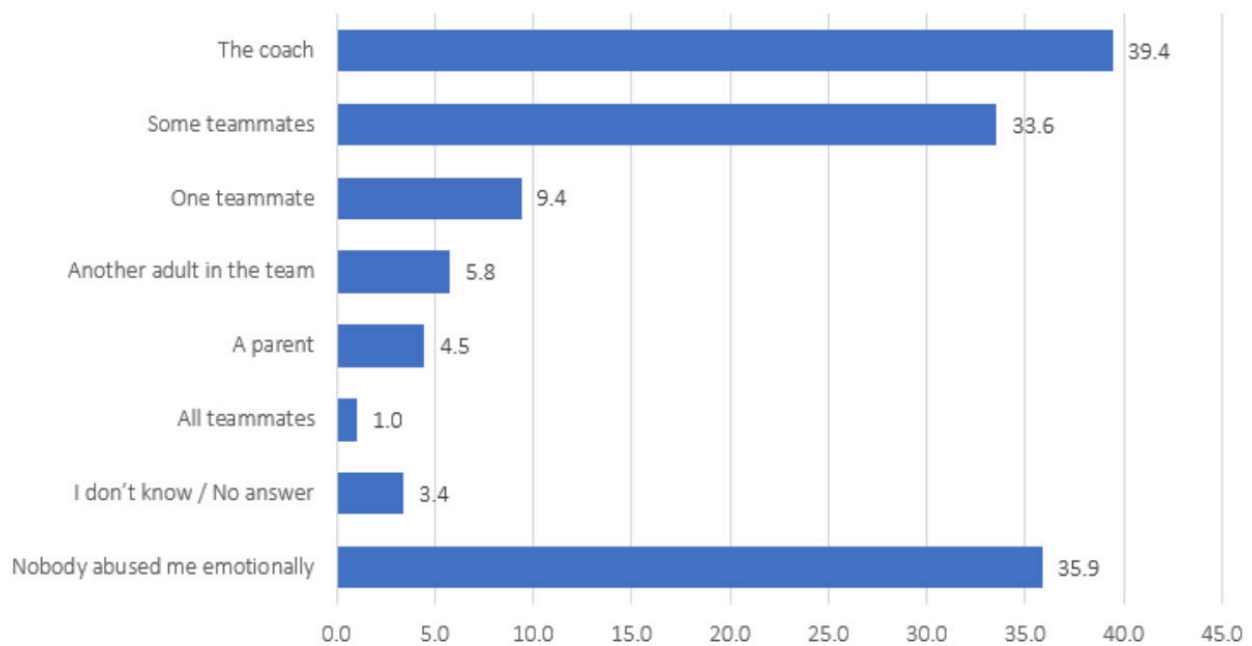


*“Locker room rowdiness and coaching taunts were so commonplace that you thought that dealing with it was part of playing sports. Some of it actually made me better/tougher and some of it unfortunately left a deeper mark.” (31-year-old male, competitive sport)”*

**The abuser for most respondents (39.4%) was the coach, but there was also a significant proportion of those against whom emotional abuse was perpetrated by a number of teammates (33.6%).**

Abuse by one teammate or other adults was much less common (4.5% to 9.4%), but there were also very few instances of the whole team engaging in abusive behavior (1.0%) towards someone. (Figure 17)

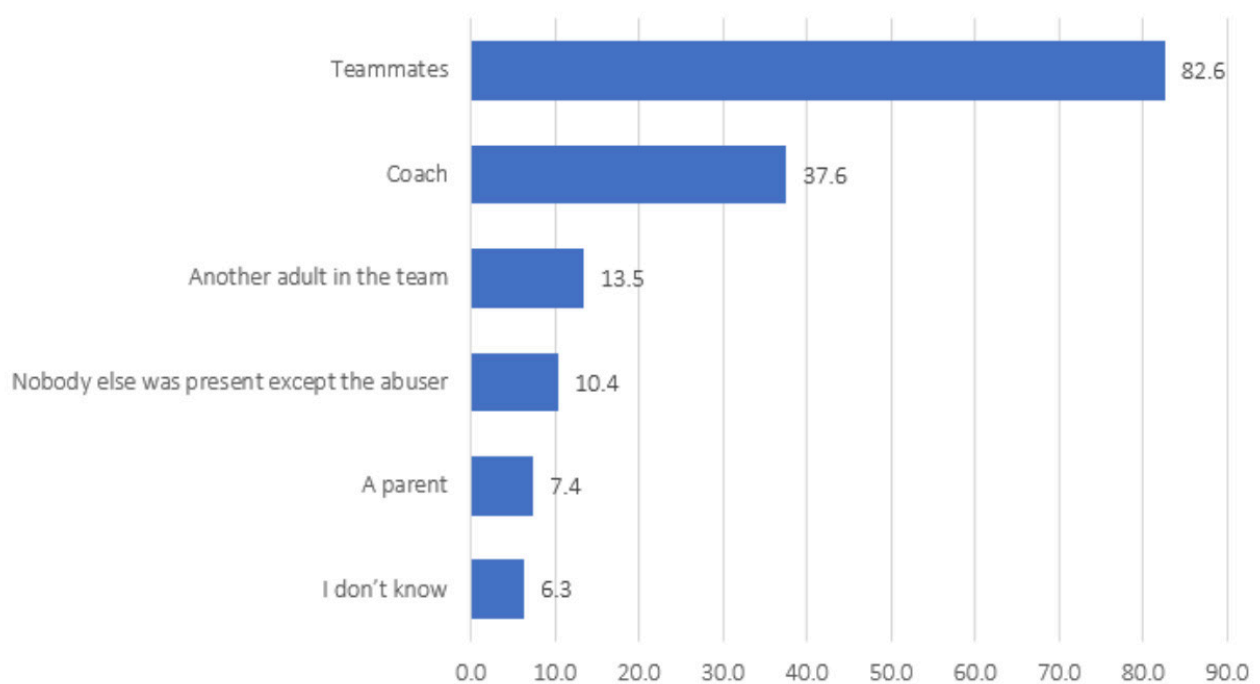
**Figure 17 - Who committed the emotional abuse? (%) N=5076**



**In more than four-fifths of cases (82.6%), teammates were present alongside the perpetrator.** 37.6% said that the coach witnessed the abuse, while 13.5% reported

that other adults were present. Only 10.4% of those who suffered emotional abuse said that no one else was present except the perpetrator. (Figure 18)

*“It was our coach who kept scolding all of us for everything. Usually the whole team was present. The publicity added to the humiliation. Sometimes our other coaches or the massage therapist heard it, but they either kept quiet or joined in.” (22-year-old female, professional sport)*

**Figure 18 - Who else was present when these abuses occurred? (%) N=3256**

### Expert opinion

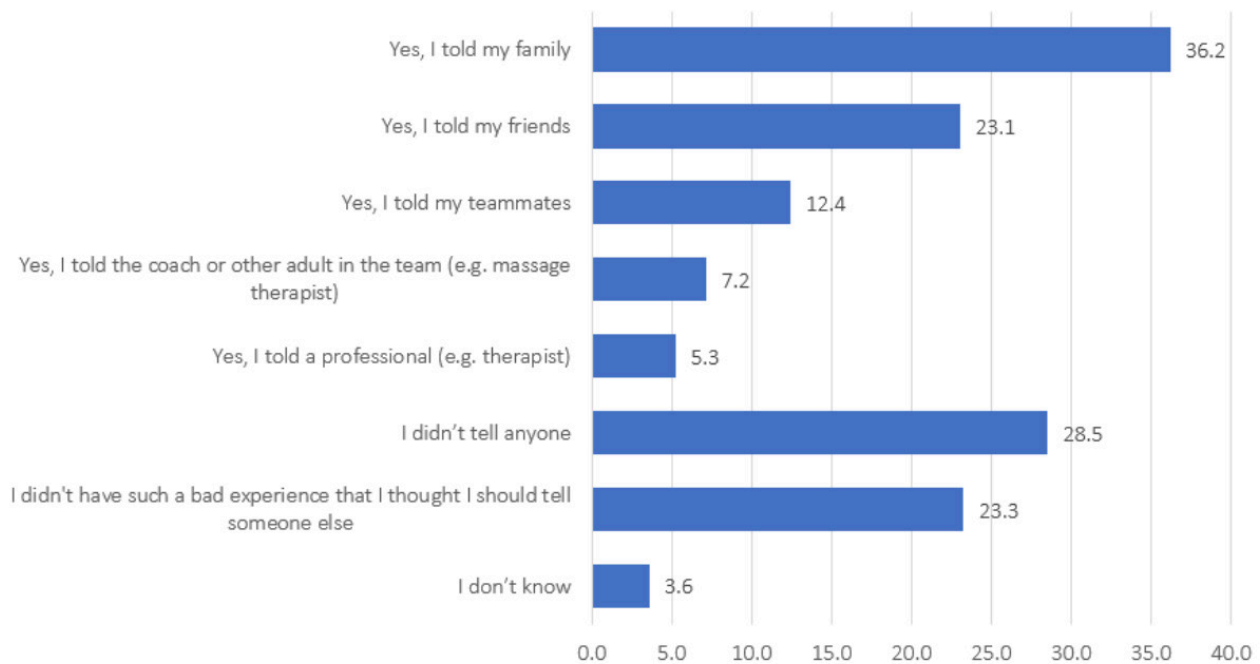
Experts highlighted that when it comes to emotional abuse, the most difficult issue is to identify and recognize boundary crossings, and in these situations it is very common to prefer to tolerate e.g. verbal abuse in order to avoid conflict. As a result, the presence of emotional abuse can easily become embedded in the organizational culture. To avoid this, professionals stressed the importance of clear boundaries and straightforward open communication in sports organizations.

With regard to the role of coaches, it was highlighted that there is a high level of uncertainty among coaches about emotional abuse, one of the reasons being that training for coaches does not provide sufficient pedagogical and psychological knowledge. "It has not kept up with the needs in this area".

**The majority (36.2%) shared with their family that they had suffered emotional abuse.** 23.1% told their friends about what had happened, 12.4% told teammates and 7.2% told an adult working for another team. Only 5.3% went to a professional.

**More than a quarter of those who had suffered emotional abuse (28.5%) did not tell anyone about what had happened.** 23.3% said they did not have such a bad experience that they felt they needed to tell someone about it. (Figure 19)

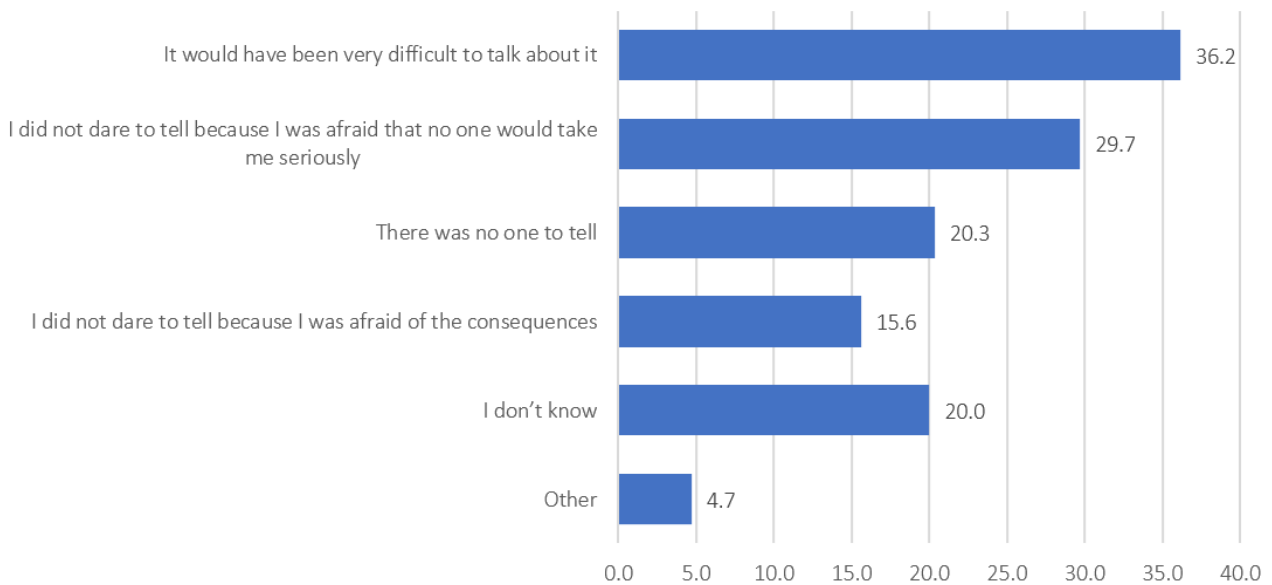
**Figure 19 - Did you tell anyone about the emotional abuse then or at a later time? (%)**  
**N=3256**



**The majority (36.2%) did not tell anyone that they had suffered emotional abuse because it would have been too difficult for them to talk about it, 29.7% were afraid**

that no one would take them seriously, one fifth (20.3%) felt they had no one to tell and 15.6% were afraid of the consequences. (Figure 20)

*"I felt a constant sense of shame and would not have dared to defend myself or others because it was not an equal relationship but a subordinate relationship." (40-year-old woman, competitive sport)*

**Figure 20 - Why didn't you tell anyone? (%) N=929**

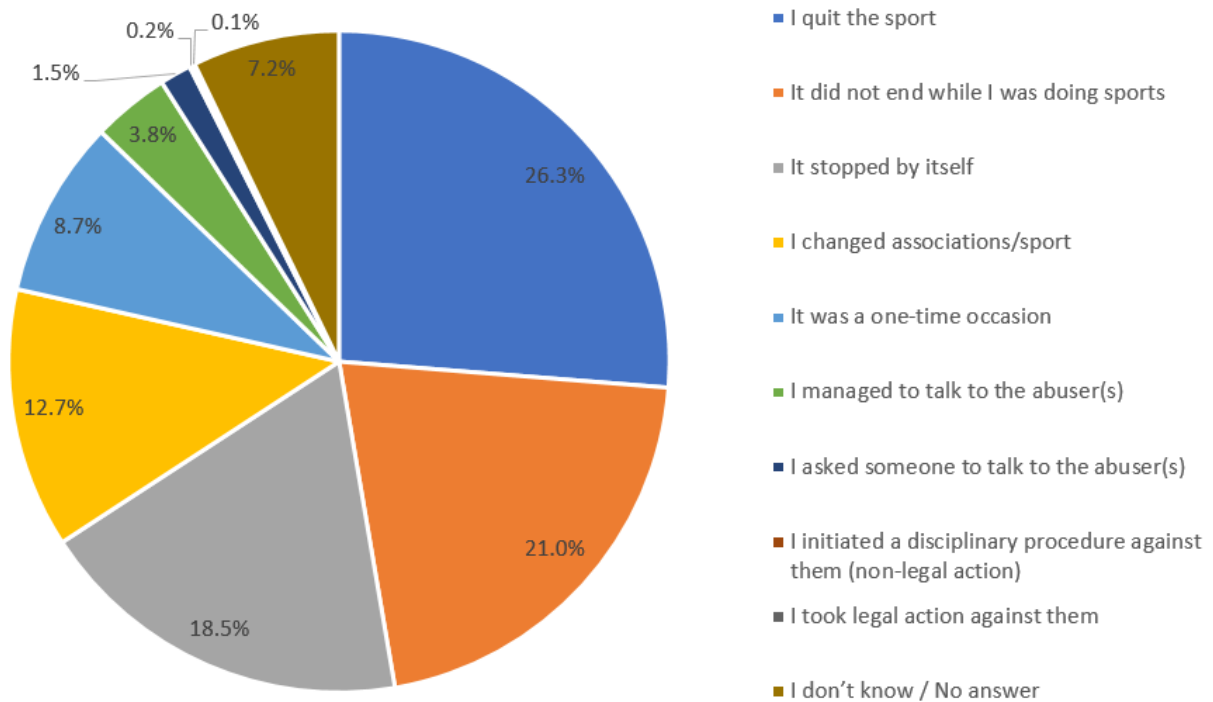
**Around a quarter (26.3%) of those who had suffered emotional abuse left the sport to stop the abuse,** 21.0% reported that the emotional abuse did not stop while they were playing sports, and 18.5% reported that it stopped on its own. 12.7% changed clubs or sports, 8.7% of those who suffered emotional abuse reported that

the abuse was a one time incident, 3.8% managed to resolve the problem with the abuser and 1.5% asked for help. Almost no respondents made use of the possibility of disciplinary or legal proceedings (0.2% and 0.1% respectively, for a total of nine respondents). (Figure 21).

*"It was so natural for us to be humiliated that we saw it as part of the sport, we accepted that it came with it. You get used to it or you run away. I changed sports; it was the same there, so I escaped." (42-year-old woman, recreational sport)*

*"'Kids are evil' and as long as we think this way they won't be any different. We need to make them more accepting, more understanding, and more receptive." (Male, professional sport \*Did not give age)*

Figure 21 - How did the emotional abuse end?



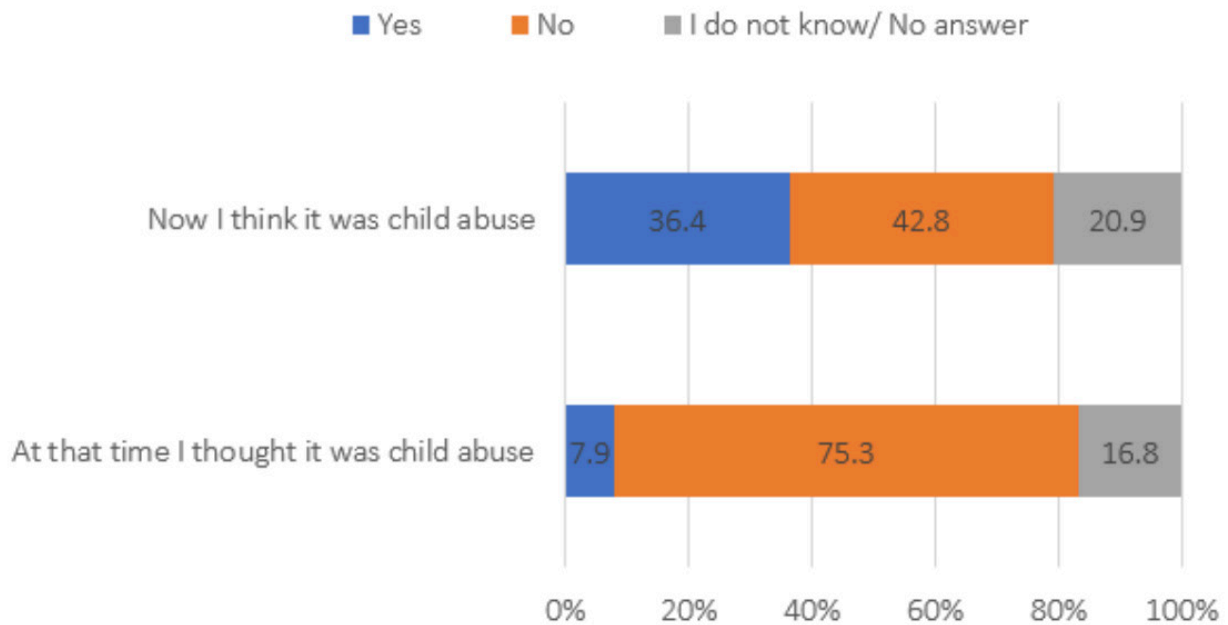
**7.9% of respondents said that even as children they thought that what was happening to them was abuse. In contrast, as adults, 36.4% think that what happened back then was child abuse, which is just over a third of victims.** This

shows that perceptions of incidents can vary greatly from person to person, whether child or adult. However, the data show that recognition rates increase somewhat with age. (Figure 22)

*“It is very difficult to draw a line between what is coach discipline and what is emotional abuse.” (21-year-old female, professional sport)*



**Figure 22 - Do you think that the abuse you suffered was so severe that it amounted to child abuse? (%) N=3256**



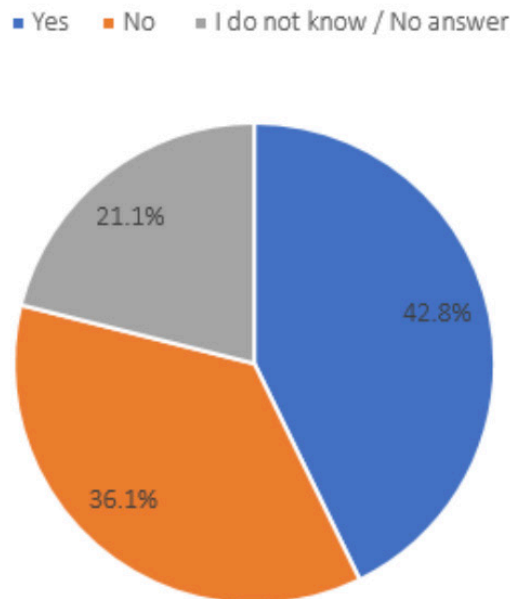
**Age differences can be observed in the perception of abuse.** The youngest age group (18-26 years) had the highest proportion of people who thought that they had been abused as children (9.6%). This proportion was lower in older age groups. At the same time, a lower proportion of the youngest people now think that what happened to them was abuse (29.7%), compared with 39.9% of those aged 27-40 and 44.6% of those aged 41-55. These figures reveal that the **younger generation was better able to recognize abuse as children than older people. At the same time, the data suggest that they are more likely to be able to identify abusive situations as they get older.**

*"I also felt abused when I had to watch a fellow teammate suffer." (41-year-old woman, recreational sport)*

We also wanted to know how many of those who participated in organized sport had witnessed emotional abuse of other children, regardless of whether they had been victims themselves. **Of respondents, 42.8% reported being present when a fellow sportsman was a victim of emotional abuse.** The proportion of those in the younger age group who witnessed emotional abuse by a peer was also higher. (Figure 23)



**Figure 23 - Was there ever a time when you witnessed that a teammate of yours was emotionally abused? (%)**



## Physical abuse

### *What do we mean by physical abuse?*

*An intentional act or negligence that results in or may lead to the physical injury of a child. Physical abuse means causing physical pain or injury. It does not include physical injuries that occur during training or accidentally, such as strains, bruising or ankle sprains that occur while playing.*

### *Examples of what we mean*

*Any occasions when you have been pushed, hit, beaten up, or forced to continue training or playing, despite your pain etc.*

**Physical abuse is not as common as emotional abuse.** The proportion of those who regularly experience physical abuse is less than 10% for each type of abuse. 21.5% of respondents reported that they had occasionally been forced to participate in training when they were injured or exhausted.

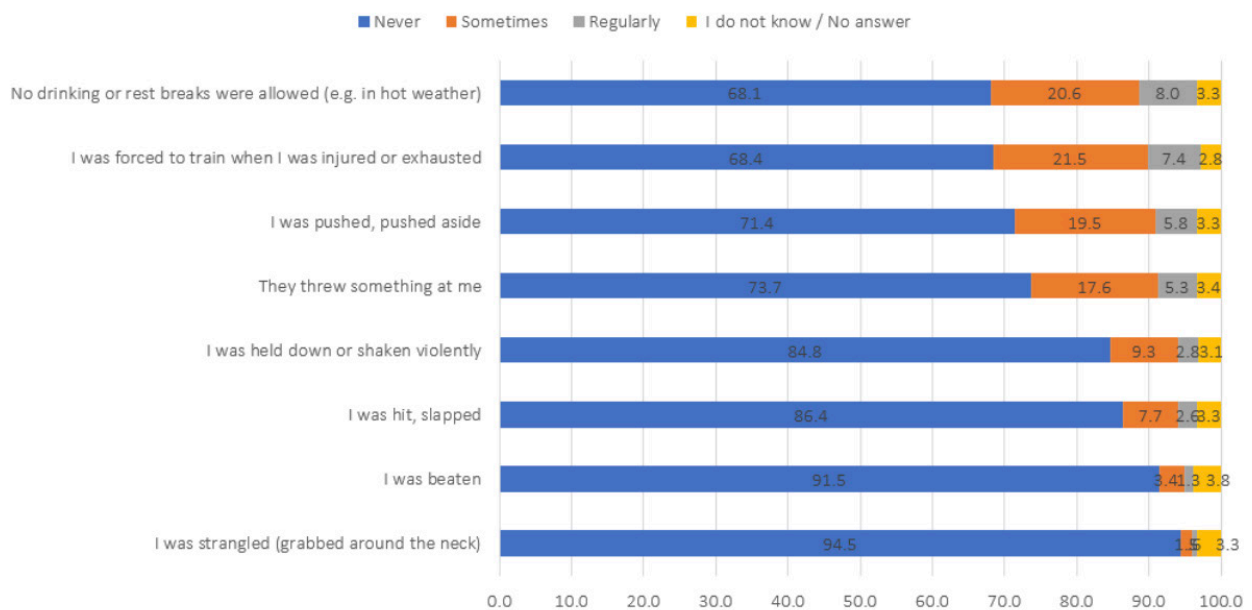
20.6% also reported that they were often not allowed to take a break to drink or rest. About the same number of respondents sometimes experienced being pushed aside (19.5%) or had something thrown at them (17.6%), 9.3% reported that they were occasionally forcefully held or shaken, and

7.7% were hit or slapped. The proportion of those who occasionally suffered severe beatings was 3.4%, and 1.3% experienced regular beatings. (Figure 24) Physical abuse is not as common as emotional abuse. The proportion of those who regularly experience physical abuse is less than 10% for each type of abuse. 21.5% of respondents reported that they had occasionally been forced to participate in training when they were injured or exhausted. 20.6% also

reported that they were often not allowed to take a break to drink or rest. About the same number of respondents sometimes experienced being pushed aside (19.5%) or had something thrown at them (17.6%), 9.3% reported that they were occasionally forcefully held or shaken, and 7.7% were hit or slapped. The proportion of those who occasionally suffered severe beatings was 3.4%, and 1.3% experienced regular beatings. (Figure 24)

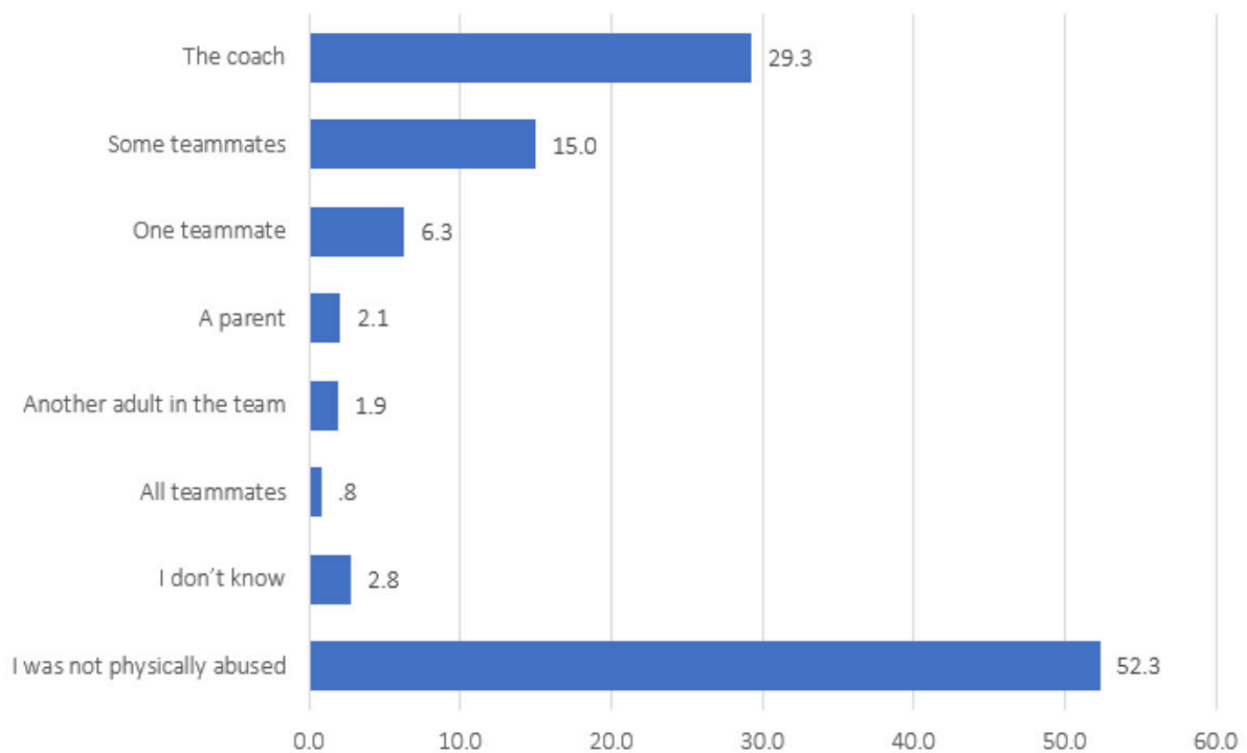
*“They didn’t physically beat us, but making us jump or play while injured, and not allowing us to drink/eat were part of the repertoire. They said it was to increase our endurance. I felt like crap knowing that this was making me feel bad.” (39-year-old woman, competitive sports)*

**Figure 24 - Did you experience any of the following when playing sports as a child? N=5076**



**Physical abuse was most commonly reported from coaches (29.3%), which follows from the most frequently experienced forms of abuse (denial of rest breaks, forced training).**

About half as many people mentioned that a number of their teammates were the abusers (15.0%), as opposed to emotional abuse, where they were named as abusers at a similar rate to coaches. (Figure 25)

**Figure 25 - Who committed the physical abuse? (%) N=5076**

### Expert opinion

Sports professionals highlighted the lack of education regarding physical abuse committed by coaches. According to them, it is still common for a coach to focus only on results, only emphasizing the „here and now,“ and thus not taking the injuries and problems reported by children seriously. However, they pointed out that this mindset is much less prevalent in the younger generation of coaches. Additionally, in recent times, there has been an increasing importance placed on approaches that consider the needs of children in sports organizations, such as drinking breaks becoming a basic requirement, which was not common practice before.

They also drew attention to the fact that greater emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of education on peer abuse.

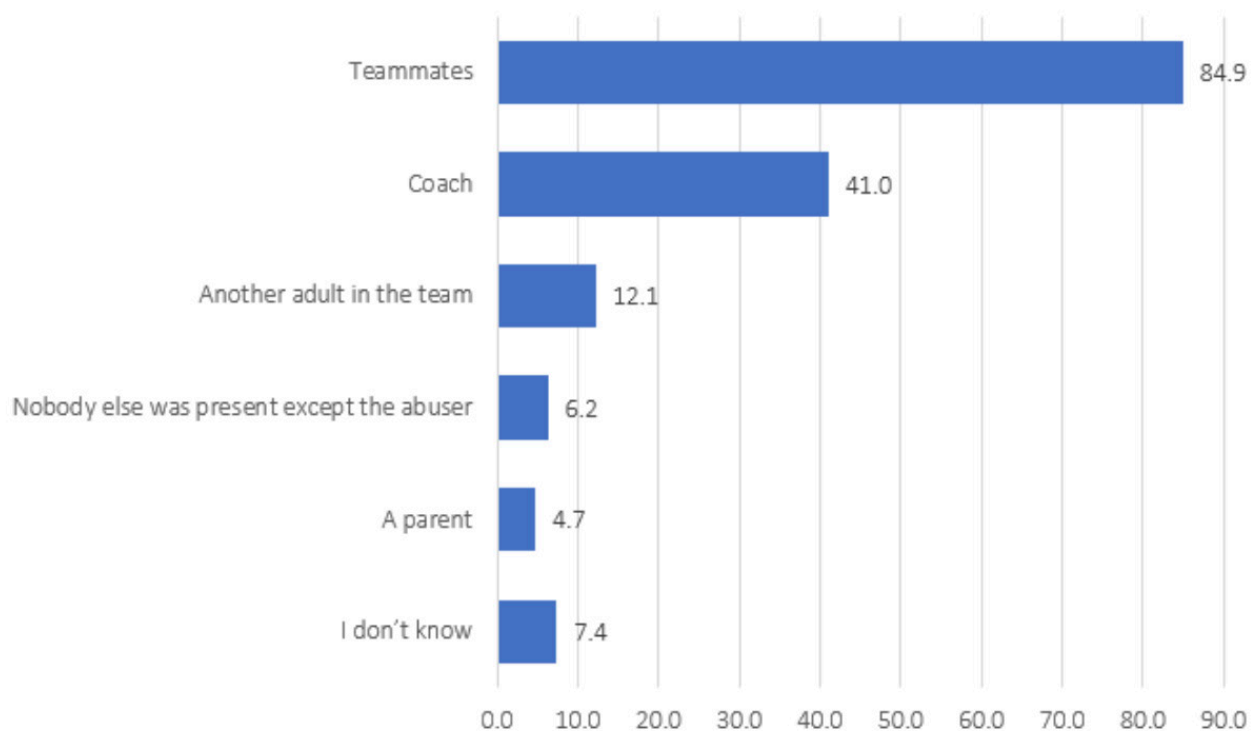
“Normally, playing a sport should pass on the love of the sport itself and also teach players how to behave as a team, and peer abuse just doesn’t fit into that.” (Sports professional)

**In the case of physical abuse, 84.9% of the victims reported that teammates were present when the abuse occurred.**

However, coaches were also often witnesses to abuse committed by teammates or other adults. (Figure 26)

*“The questionnaire mainly focuses on one’s own teammates and coach. My team was regularly abused when we played away. We went to certain places and games in fear, preparing for a beating. These things happened in the locker room, where adults were rarely present.” (39-year-old woman, competitive sports)*

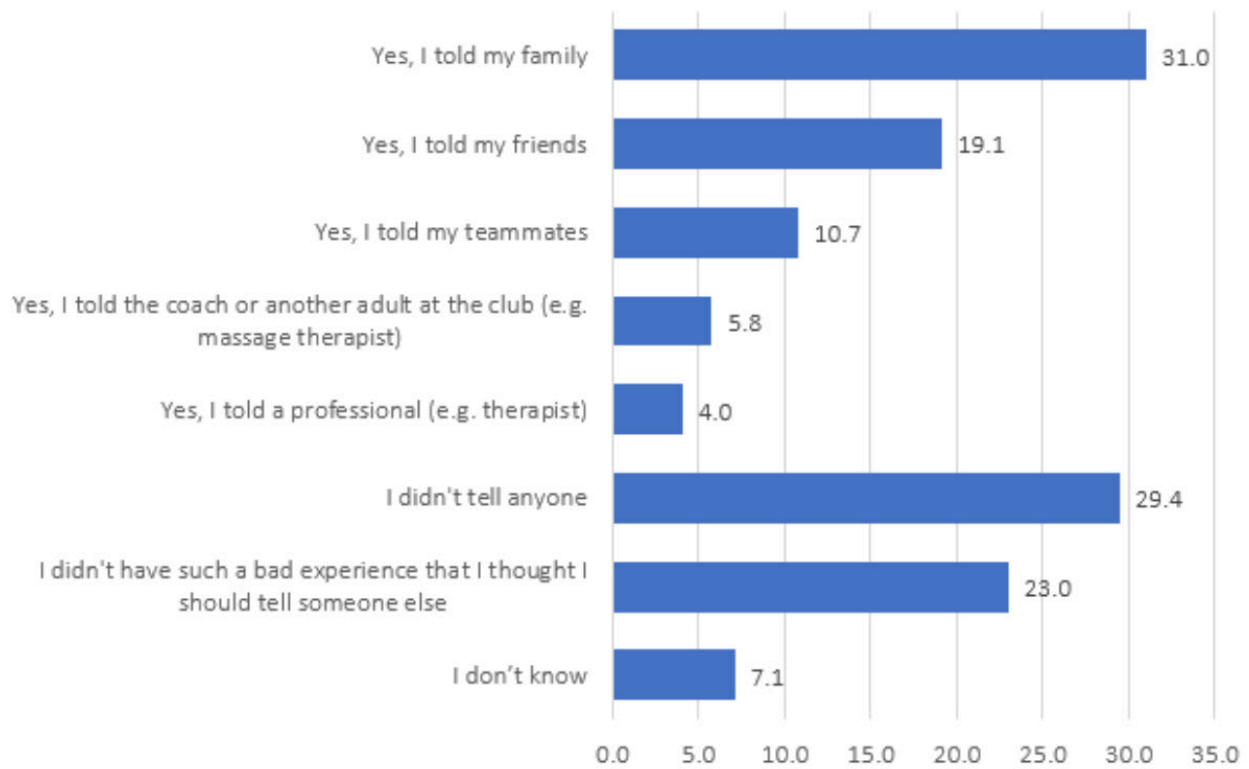
**Figure 26 - Who else was present during these abuses? (%) N=2308**



In the case of physical abuse, the proportion of those who did not talk to anyone about the abuse (29.4%) was approximately the same as those who thought that their experience was not so bad that they needed to talk about it, similar to emotional abuse. **The**

**majority (31.0%) talked to their family about physical abuse, 19.1% shared with friends, and 10.7% shared with teammates. Only 5.8% talked to another adult, while 4.0% sought help from a professional. (Figure 27)**

Figure 27 - Did you tell anyone about the physical abuse then or later? (%) N=2308



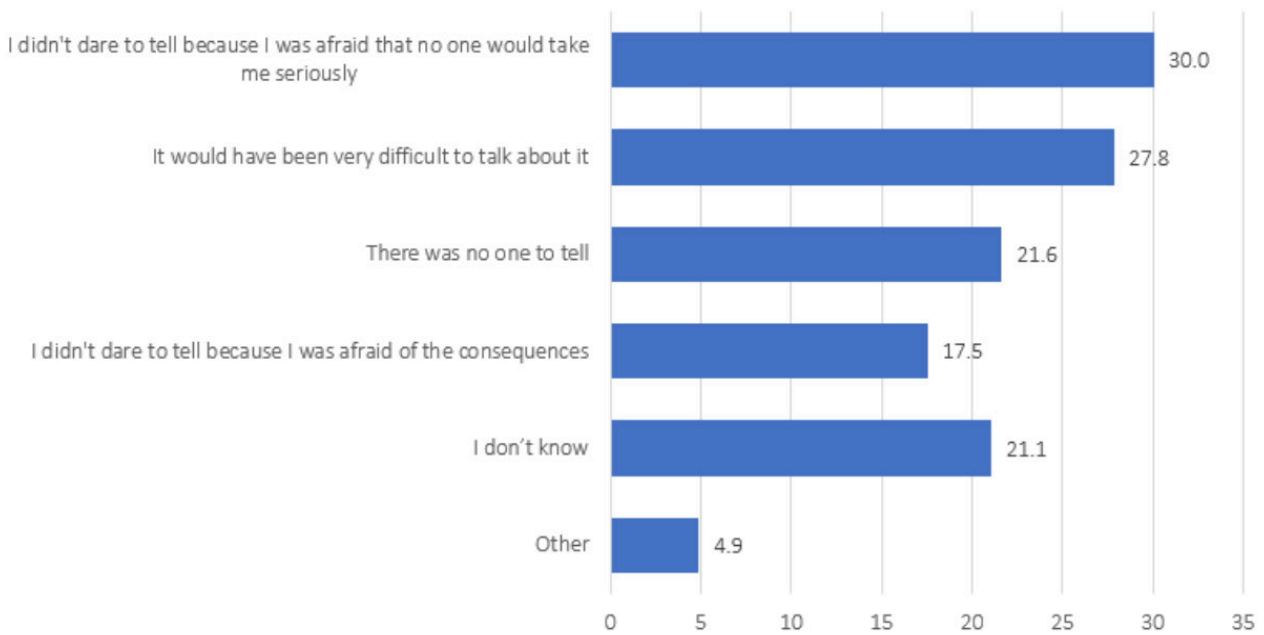
**The majority (30.0%) did not speak about physical abuse because they were afraid that no one would take them seriously** and 27.8% did not tell anyone because it would have been too difficult to talk about

it. In this case, approximately one-fifth of the victims of abuse (21.6%) also reported that there was no one with whom they could share what happened to them. (Figure 28)

*“It wasn’t fair, a 13-year-old boy vs. a 38-year-old adult... I was scared, but I didn’t dare to tell anyone because I also liked our coach and I didn’t want anything bad for him.” (43-year-old man, competitive sports)*



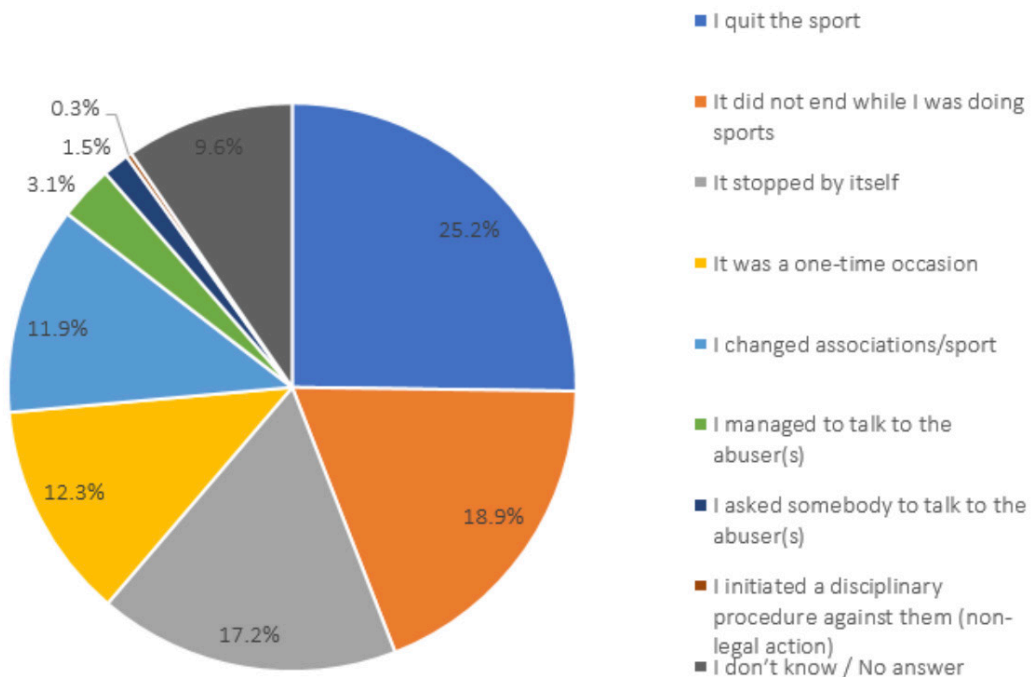
**Figure 28 - Why didn't you tell anyone? (%) N=679**



**In the case of physical abuse, a quarter of the abused children (25.2%) quit the sport to end the abuse, while 11.9% left the club or switched sports, 18.9% reported that the abuse did not stop while they were involved in sports, but a very similar proportion**

(17.2%) said that the physical violence stopped on its own. Less than 5% managed to resolve the situation on their own (3.1%), or with help (1.5%), and disciplinary or legal proceedings were not common. (Figure 29)

**Figure 29 - How did the physical abuse end? (%) N=2308**

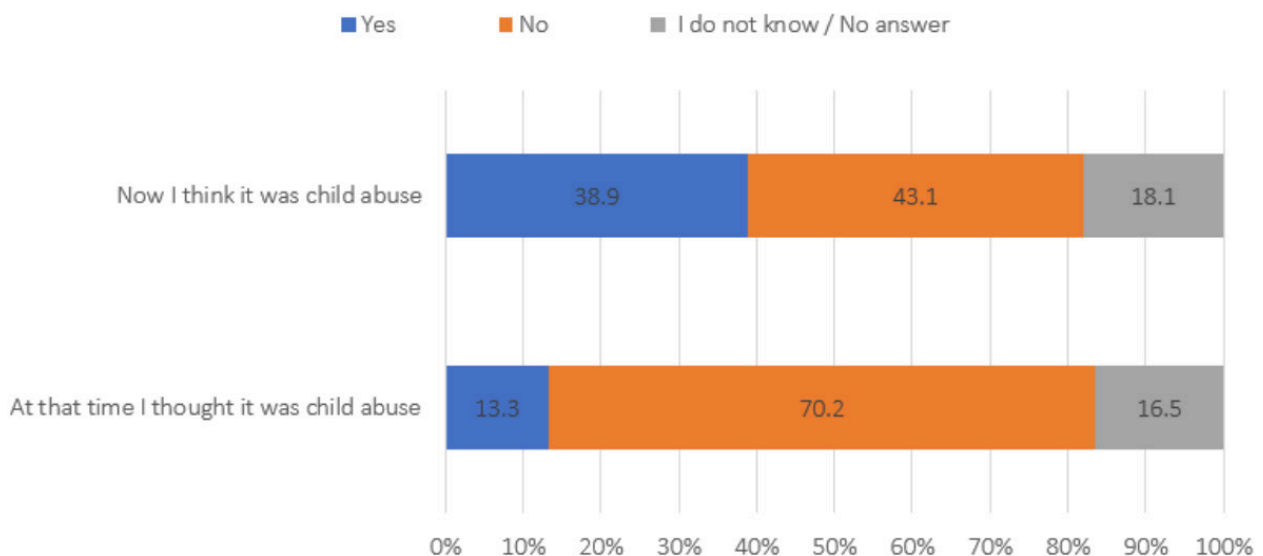


The notion of physical abuse is clearer for children compared to emotional abuse. However, even in this case, **the proportion of those who recognized that they were victims of child abuse is very low.** Only 13.3% said that as children, they thought that the experienced physical abuse was child abuse. As adults, more than one-third of the abused individuals now believe that their experiences meet the definition of child abuse. The easier recognition of physical abuse is indicated by the fact that

there is no significant difference in the childhood perception of abuse based on age groups, meaning that physical violence represents a much clearer boundary crossing than emotional abuse. With increasing age, the recognition of abuse becomes more pronounced. Less than one-third of those aged 18-26 (29.3%) consider their experiences to be child abuse, while more than half of those aged 41-55 (52.7%) now see it as child abuse. (Figure 30)

*“It’s as if this were part of the culture in some organizations. I played sports for 13 years; I practically grew into this. I saw them do it to the older ones, so when they did it to me, I didn’t feel bad because I always saw this happening.” (22-year-old woman, elite sports)*

**Figure 30 - Do you think that the abuse you suffered was so severe that it classifies as child abuse? (%) N=2308**



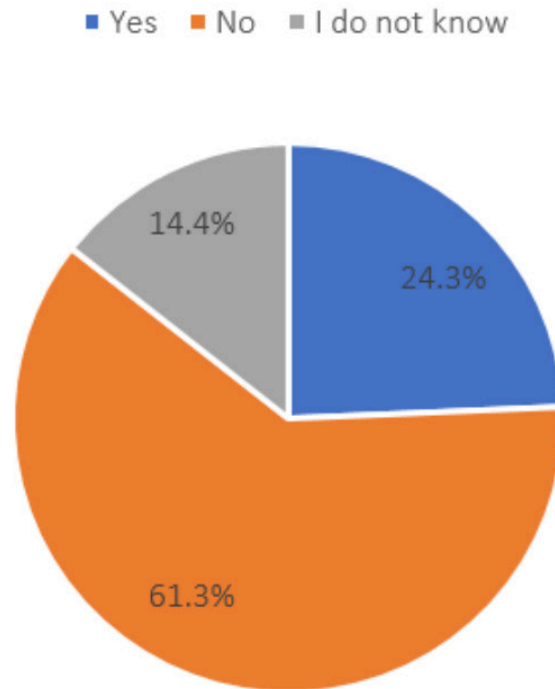
Of respondents, 24.3% reported witnessing physical abuse of their teammates. This proportion is much lower than in the case of

emotional abuse, likely because emotional abuse occurs much more frequently than physical abuse. (Figure 31)

*“I defended my teammate when the coach wanted to punish them.” (20-year-old woman, recreational sports)*



**Figure 31 - Did it ever happen that a fellow athlete was physically abused in your presence? (%) N=5076**



## Sexual abuse

### *What do we mean by sexual abuse?*

*Sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity to which the child has not given his/her genuine consent. It also includes cases where the child is unable to give meaningful consent because of his/her age, maturity or power imbalances between the actors. Abuse can occur between an adult and a child, or a child and a child.*

### *Examples of what we mean*

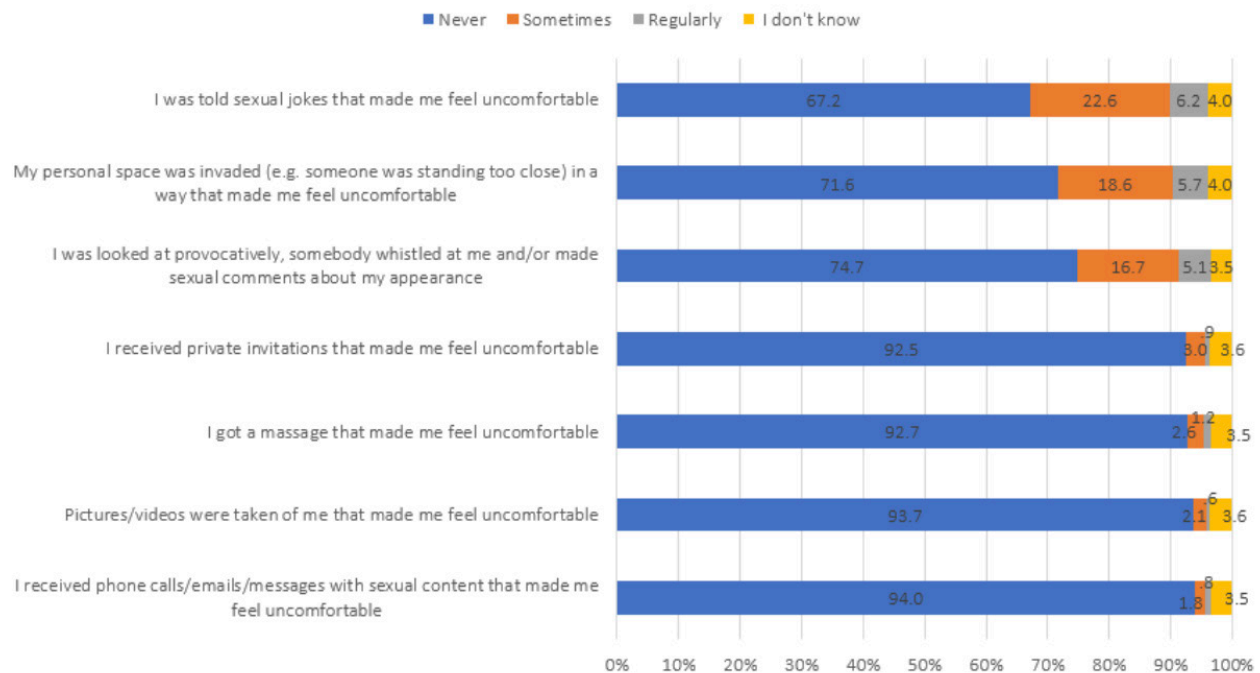
*Making jokes with sexual content, touching intimate parts of the body, touching that is unpleasant, as well as comments with sexual content and messages, and coercion into sexual intercourse.*

**The most common types of sexual harassment include unsolicited sex jokes, invasion of personal space, and comments and provocation of a sexual nature.** These forms of sexual harassment regularly affected 5-6% of respondents,

and it occasionally occurred for 17-23% of respondents. Uncomfortable or private invitations, massage that crossed

boundaries, or sexual harassment in the online space, affected 3.5% of respondents. (Figure 32)

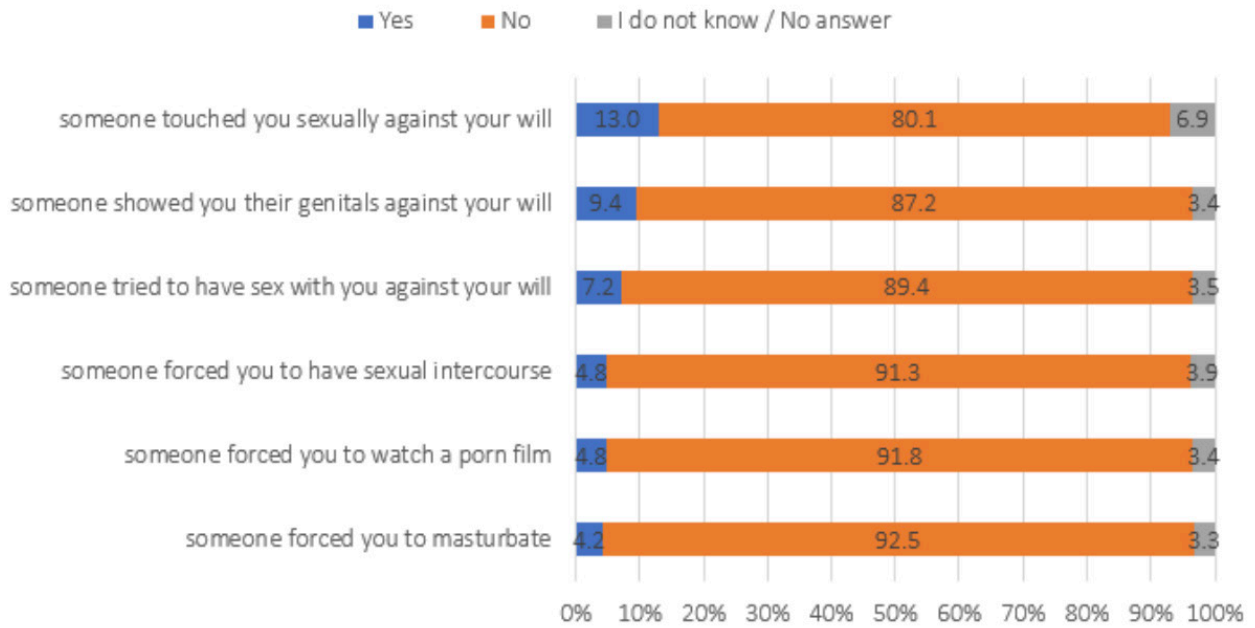
**Figure 32 - Did you experience any of the following when playing sports as a child? (%) N=5076**



Of respondents, 13.0% reported that they had been touched for sexual purposes against their will, 9.4% reported that they had been shown genitals against their will and 7.2% reported that someone tried to have sex with them against their will. 4.8%

of respondents were forced to have sexual intercourse, but the proportion was the same of those that were forced to watch pornographic films and and those that were forced to masturbate. (Figure 33)

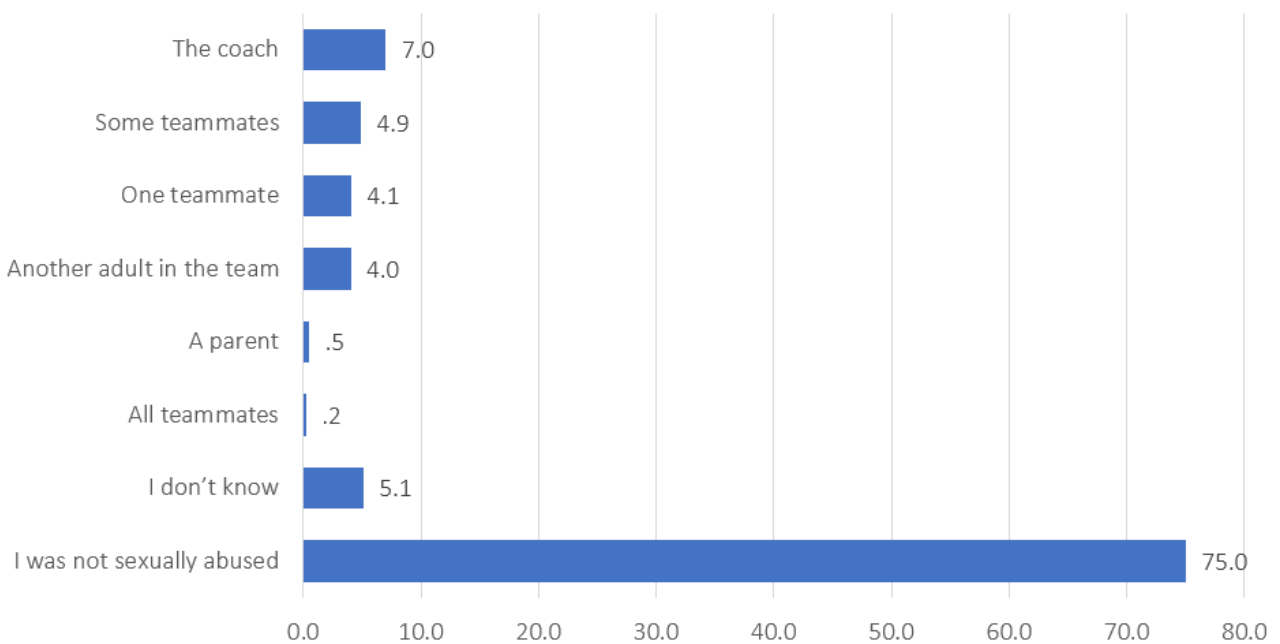
**Figure 33 - Did it ever happen to you that... (%) N=5076**



Of respondents, 7.0% who were victimized as a child named the coach as the abuser, while 4.9% named some of their teammates. Almost as many respondents said a

teammate sexually abused them as those who said that it was an adult working for a team. (Figure 34)

**Figure 34 - Who committed the sexual abuse? (%) N=5076**



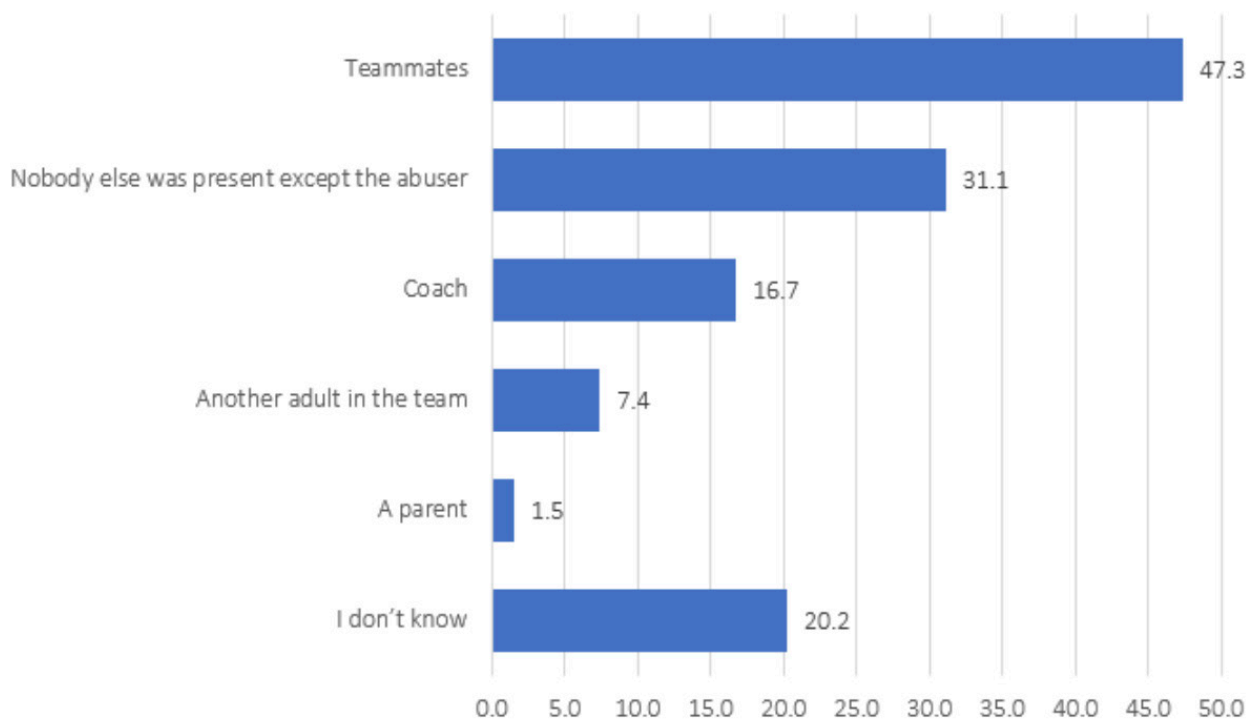
Of those who had been sexually assaulted, 47.3% reported that their teammates had witnessed the assault. However, **the proportion of those who reported that no one else was present (31.1%) was particularly high.** This result clearly

indicates why the rate of concealment in cases of sexual assault is so high. In sexual assault, e.g. sexual jokes etc., there may be more witnesses, but in more serious cases of abuse, the latency rate is very high (Figure 35).

*"[Sexual abuse] is less frequent than other forms of abuse, but there was one girl who turned out to have been abused by an older sports teammate and he did other illegal things to her, but it was only later discovered and nobody around me noticed any signs of it at the time (23-year-old male, elite sports)*

*"It was a particularly unpleasant experience regarding adults who were not directly involved in the sport, but who saw us train and compete." (37-year-old female, competitive sport)*

**Figure 35 - Who else was present during these abuses? (%) N=1084**

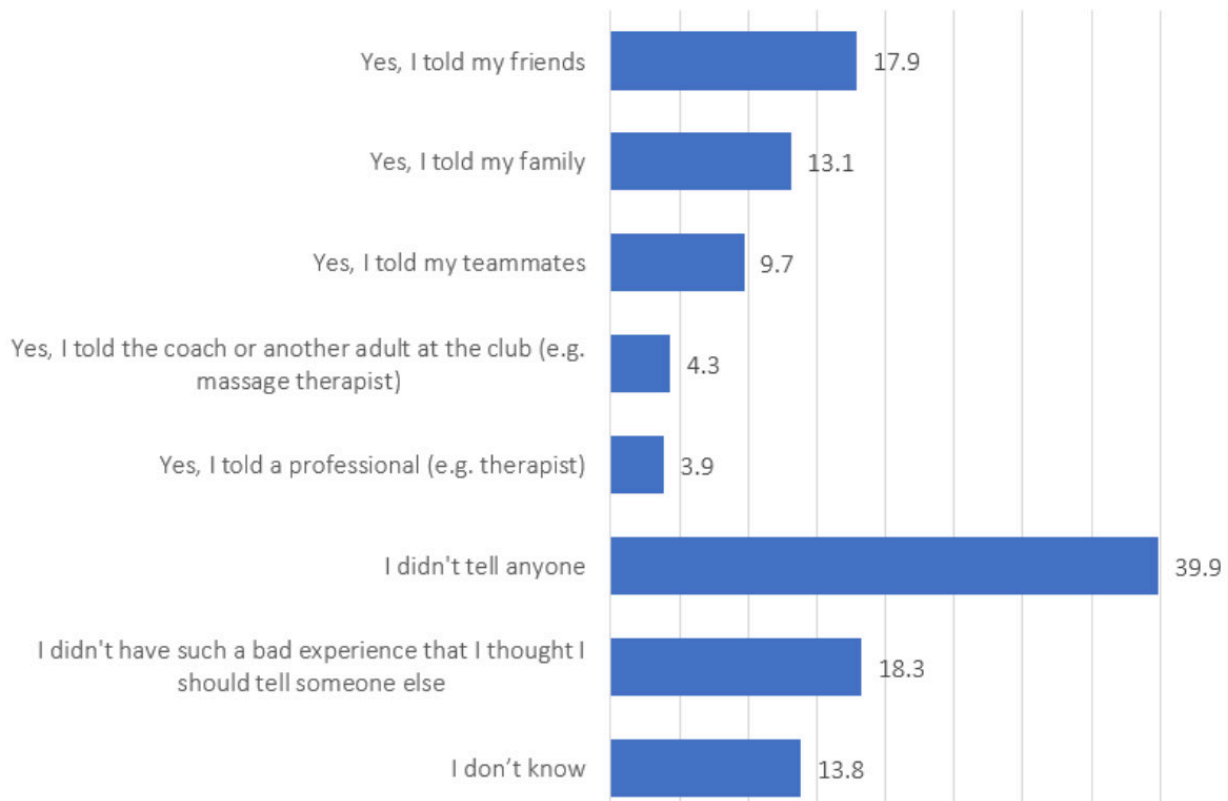


**Of sexual abuse victims, 39.9% did not tell anyone about what happened to them. This is a significantly higher rate than that seen among victims of emotional or physical abuse. It is also noteworthy**

**that those who did share their story with someone were more likely to tell their friends than their family,** compared to those who shared emotional and physical abuse primarily with their family. (Figure 36)

*"Maybe they believe children more now than back in my day." (62-year-old female, competitive sport)*

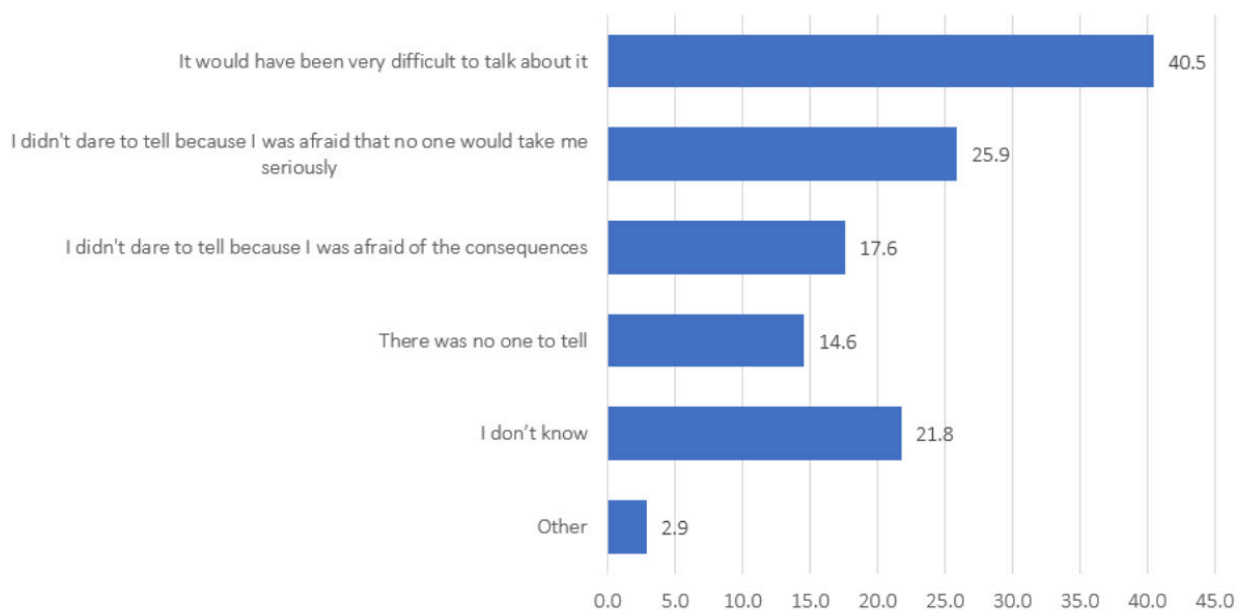
**Figure 36 - Did you tell anyone about the sexual abuse then or later? (%) N=1084**



**For those who did not talk about it, the main reason why they did not share it with anyone was because it would have been very difficult for them to talk about it (40.5%).** 25.9% were afraid that no one

would take it seriously and 17.6% were afraid of the consequences. Sexual abuse had the lowest proportion of people who did not tell anyone because of a lack of someone they could trust. (Figure 37)

*"My parents didn't believe me that my Mr XY unbuttoned my blouse and groped my tits when I was 13. It was horrible that they let me down." (43-year-old woman, competitive sports)*

**Figure 37 - Why didn't you tell anyone? (%) N=432**

### Expert opinion

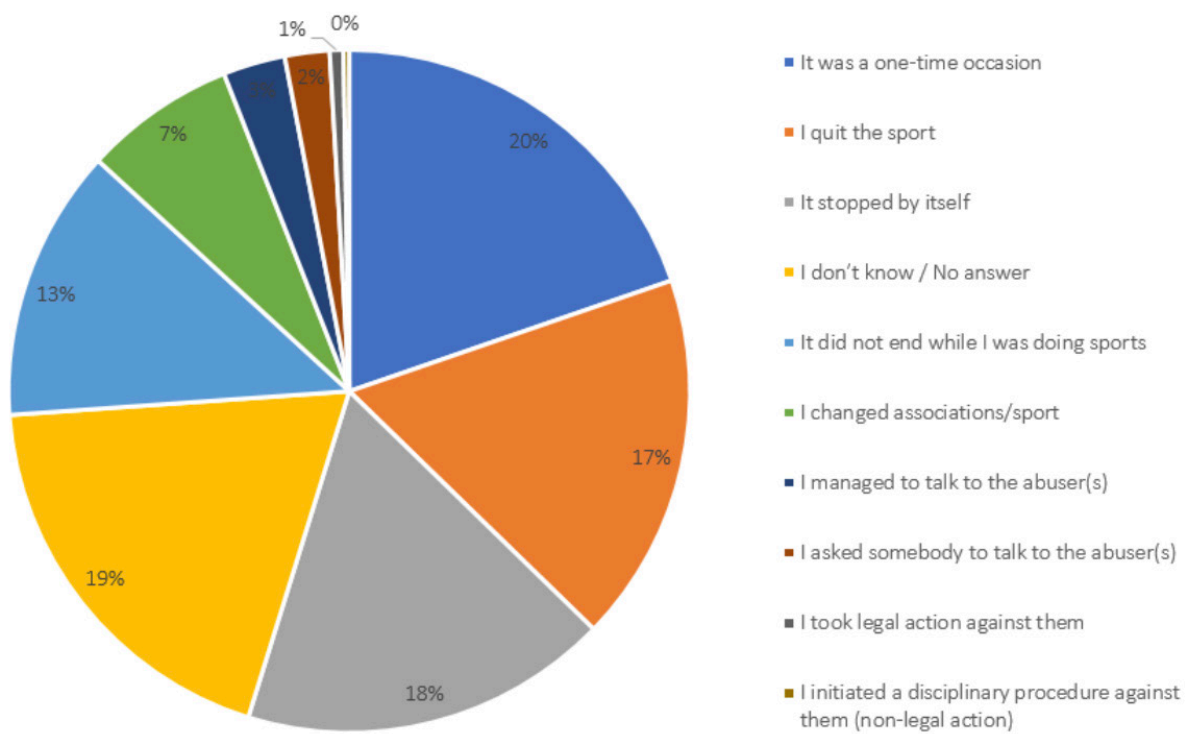
Sports professionals have also drawn attention to the risk of sexual abuse being hidden. In particular, they highlighted the danger when such abuse is presented as a **romantic relationship between an adult (e.g. coach, sponsor, massage therapist) and a child athlete**.

It was confirmed that children are most likely to talk about sexual abuse or assault they have experienced to their teammates if they want to share the experience with someone. They also pointed out that it is particularly risky if the report is not taken seriously.

**The highest proportion of those who experienced sexual abuse reported that it was a one-off incident (19.7%), but almost as many (19.1%) could not say how the sexual abuse ended.** 17.5% left the sport, and 7.2% changed clubs or sports to end the abuse. 17.5% said that it stopped by itself, but 12.9% said that it

did not stop while they were playing sport. 5.1% managed to resolve the situation with the abuser, either alone or with the help of a support person. The rate of initiation of legal or disciplinary proceedings in cases of sexual abuse was also low (0.6% initiated legal proceedings, while 0.3% initiated disciplinary proceedings). (Figure 38)

**Figure 38 - How did the sexual abuse end? (%) N=1084**



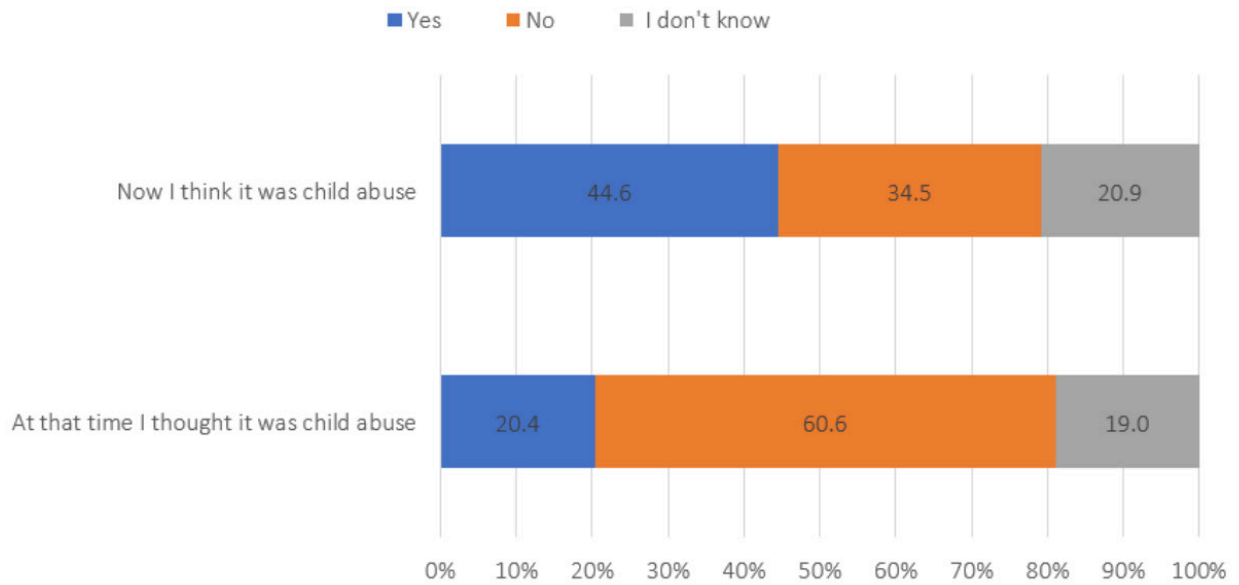
**Of those who suffered sexual abuse as a child, 20.4% recognized that what happened to them was child abuse, and 44.6% of adults think that what happened to them was child abuse. Among those**

**who experienced sexual abuse, there were fewer people who believed that what happened to them was child abuse than among those who had been a victim of sexual coercion. (Figure 39)**

*“The coach made a pass at me when I was 14 and I became his ‘girlfriend’. Today I think it was serious abuse. Nobody knew about it, it was a secret affair for about a year and a half.” (48-year-old woman, competitive sports)*

*“I immediately sensed that I was being abused, so I put a stop to it in good time.” (55-year-old woman, competitive sport)*

**Figure 39 - Do you think that the abuse you suffered was so severe that it classifies as child abuse? (%) N=1084**



There is no significant difference between age groups in the proportion of people who thought that what happened to them as a child was child abuse. Meanwhile, the same

trend in current perceptions of abuse can be observed as for emotional and physical abuse.



# SELF-IMAGE DEVELOPMENT

## *What is self-image?*

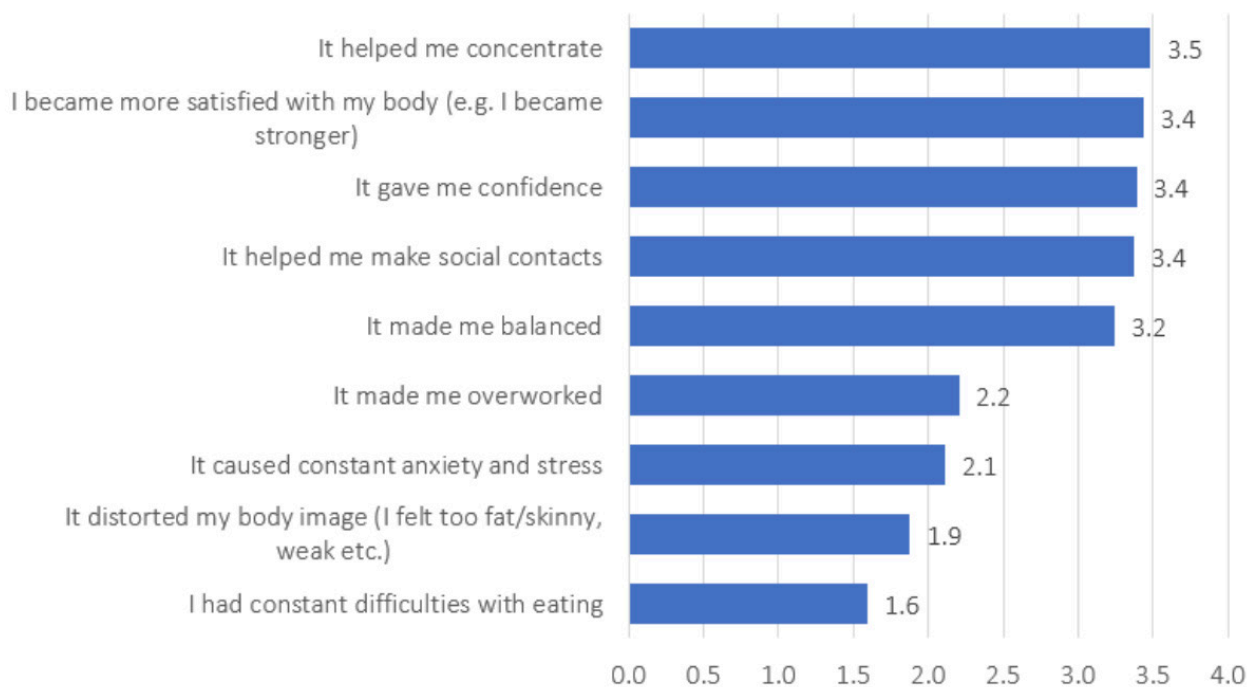
*By self-image we mean the mental image we have of ourselves, which can be influenced by external expectations. Self-image is closely linked to confidence and self-awareness, and affects the image we show to others about ourselves.*

We also asked respondents how they rate the impact of sport on their self-image. They were asked to rate statements on a 5-point scale, where 1 means “not at all true” and 5 means “completely true”. Respondents primarily identified the positive effects of sports. **The majority thought that playing sports helped them concentrate, gave**

**them self-confidence and increased their sense of balance. It also helped to make social contacts.** Fewer people on average thought that sport made them overworked and caused ongoing stress, and even fewer reported that participation in sport caused body image disturbance or eating disorders. (Figure 40)

*“It was more than 10 years after quitting competitive sports that I recovered from my eating disorder after continuous weight loss supervised by coaches.” (28-year-old female, national team)*

*“It has given me a healthy body awareness, and a love of exercise and sport is part of my everyday life” (37-year-old woman, elite sports)*

**Figure 40 - How did sport affect you? (average) N=5076**

The variables measuring the impact of sport on self-image were reduced to two variables<sup>3</sup>. One variable represents the positive impact of sport on self-image, while the other represents the negative impact of sport on self-image. Multivariate analysis<sup>4</sup> demonstrates that experiencing different types of abuse significantly worsens the

impact of sport on self-image. Experiencing every type of abuse increased the likelihood of developing a negative self-image, while **those who did not experience abuse were more likely to experience the positive self-esteem and self-confidence-enhancing effect of sport.**

<sup>3</sup> We carried out the data reduction with principal component analysis.

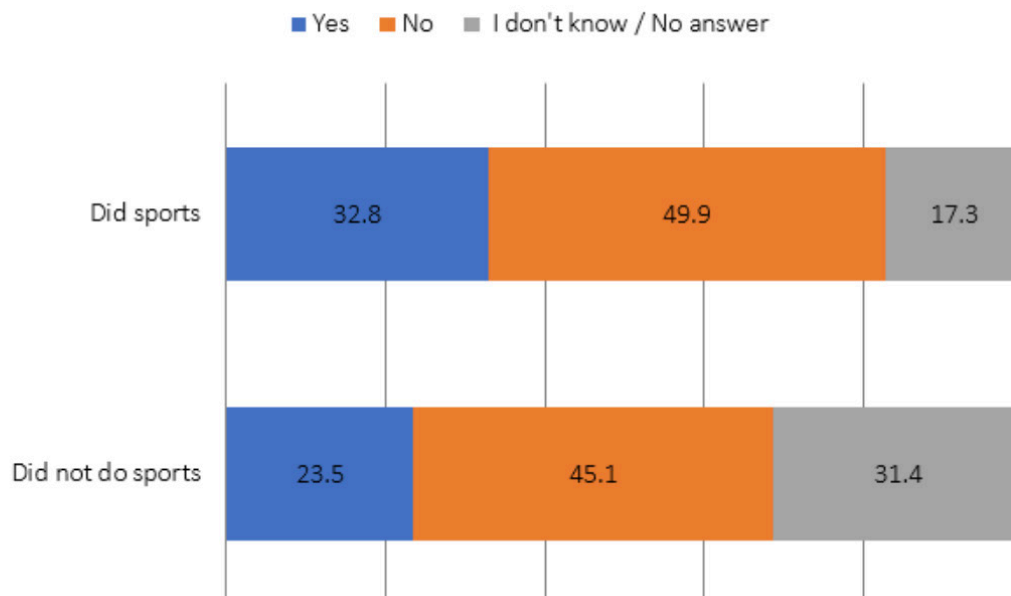
<sup>4</sup> In linear regression models, the two principal components as the dependent variable and the abuse types as the explanatory variable were included as the two-valued aggregated variable. Gender, age, settlement type and sport level were included as the control variables. The explanatory power of the models: Positive self-image  $R^2=0.208$ ; Negative self-image  $R^2=0.186$

# THE PREVALENCE OF ABUSE IN ORGANIZED SPORTS

The questionnaire also asked how widespread bullying is in organized sports. To do this, we also asked if they knew an individual or any individuals who had been abused as children in organized sports. This

question was also open to respondents who did not play sports as children. Around a third (32.8%) of athletes and a fifth of non-athletes know someone who suffered some form of abuse as a child. (Figure 41)

**Figure 41 - Do you know anyone who was abused as a child in organized sports? (%)**  
N=6450



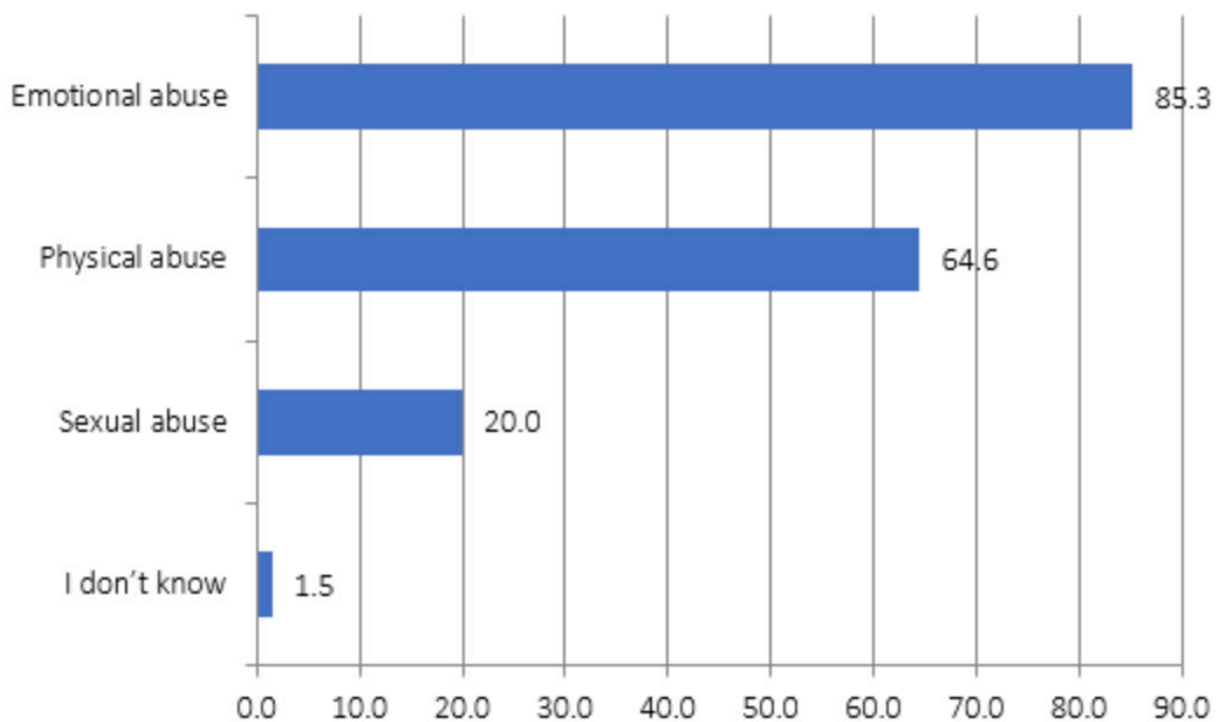
Those who knew someone who had been abused were also asked what kind of abuse they had been a victim of. The trend of the types of abuse in relation to each other was similar to that of their own experiences.

Emotional abuse (85.3%) was the most frequently reported, followed by physical abuse (64.6%), then sexual abuse (20.0%). (Figure 42)

*“He was ostracized, always the last to be selected for the team, even though he loved the sport. He was constantly mocked, scolded and laughed at.” (19-year-old male, not involved in organized sports)*

*“Regular criticism and humiliation if he did not perform well.” (33-year-old female, not involved in organized sport)*

**Figure 42 - What kind of abuse did they suffer from? (%) N=1986**



# AS A PARENT IN SPORTS

In the final part of the questionnaire we measured respondents' experiences of organized sports as parents. This section of the questionnaire was completed by those who indicated that they had children under the age of 18, regardless of whether they played sports<sup>5</sup> as children. 31.6% of

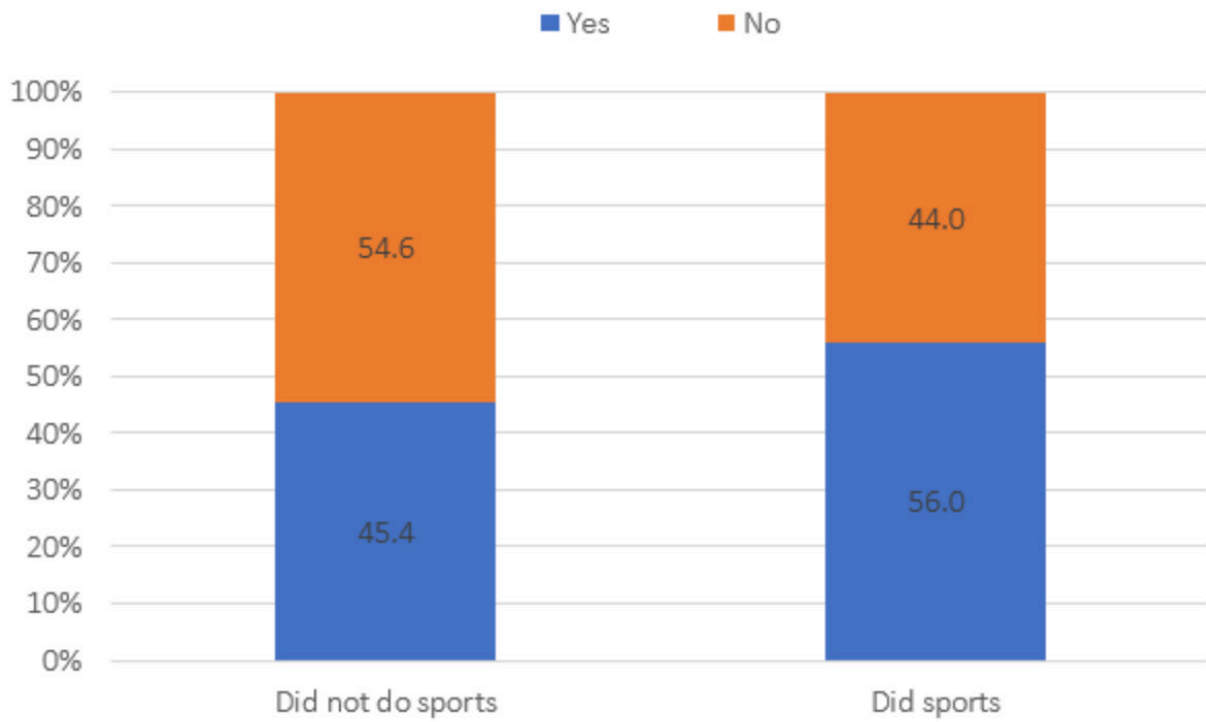
respondents have a minor child. Just over half of them (53.8%) said that their child participated in organized sports. Among those who participated in sports as a child, a slightly higher proportion said that their child also participated in organized sports. (Figure 43)

*"I will never get my child to go to this kind of thing because it completely crushes their love of movement and the love of sport for its own sake. My child can play sports WHEN he wants and how he wants. The point of organized sports is to train new professional athletes and not to educate them in healthy movement culture." (30-year-old woman, competitive sport)*

*"It played an important role in my physical, mental and spiritual development as a child. I look back at it fondly. I also motivate my children to play sports and exercise." (51-year-old woman, competitive sport)*

<sup>5</sup> We asked respondents to respond with 'yes' if they have more than one child and at least one of them participates in organized sports.

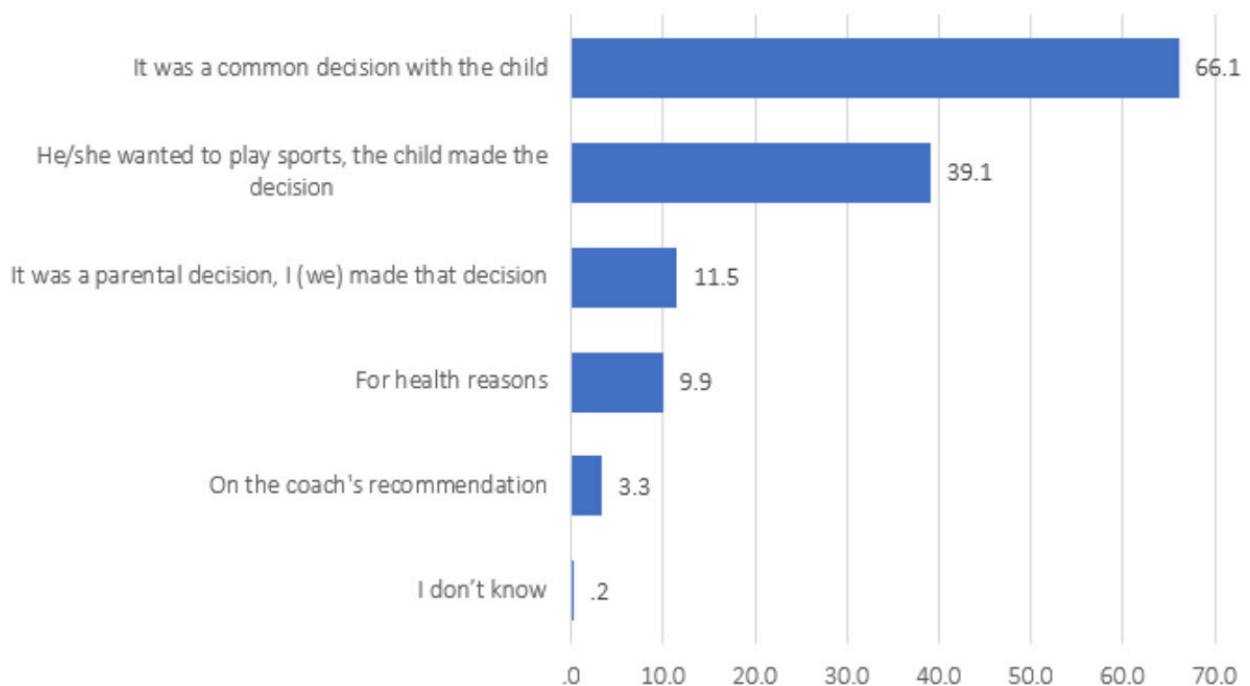
**Figure 43 - Do your children participate in organized sport activities? (%) N=2036**



Most respondents said that they and their child decided to start playing sports together (66.1%), 39.1% reported that it was

the child’s decision, while 11.5% said it was the parent’s decision. One in ten children took up sports for health reasons. (Figure 44)

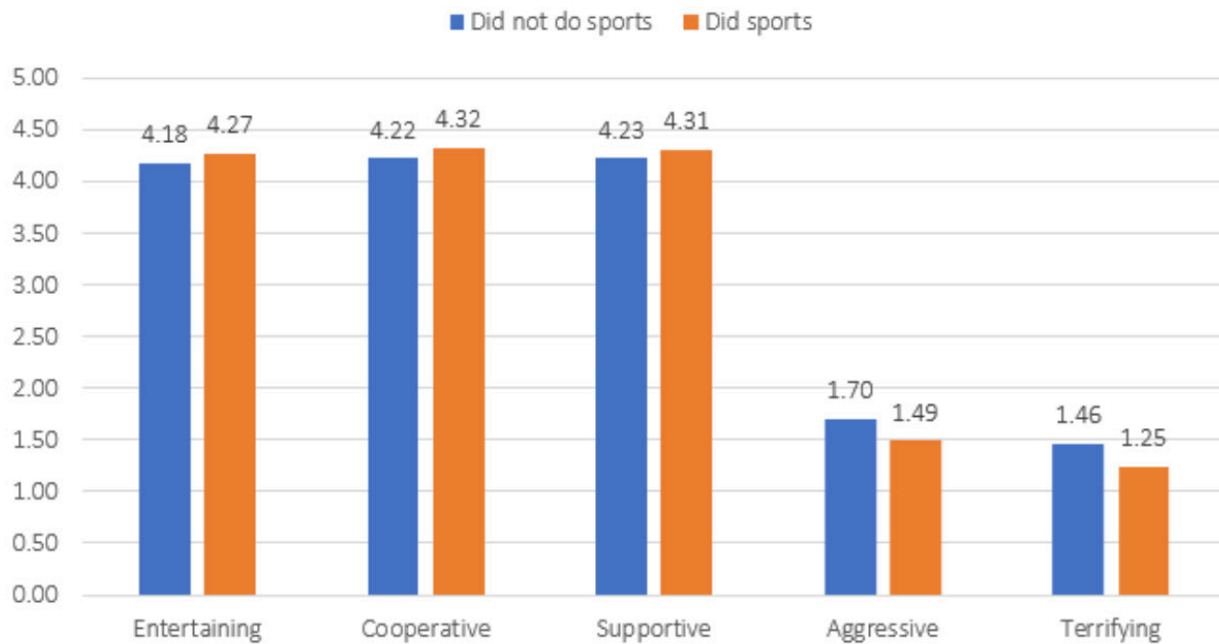
**Figure 44 - Why did they start playing sports? (%) N=1096**



Respondents typically consider the atmosphere where their child plays sports to be good. On average, respondents who participated in organized sports as children

think it is slightly better than those who did not. They also rated the atmosphere as better compared to their own childhood experiences. (Figure 45)

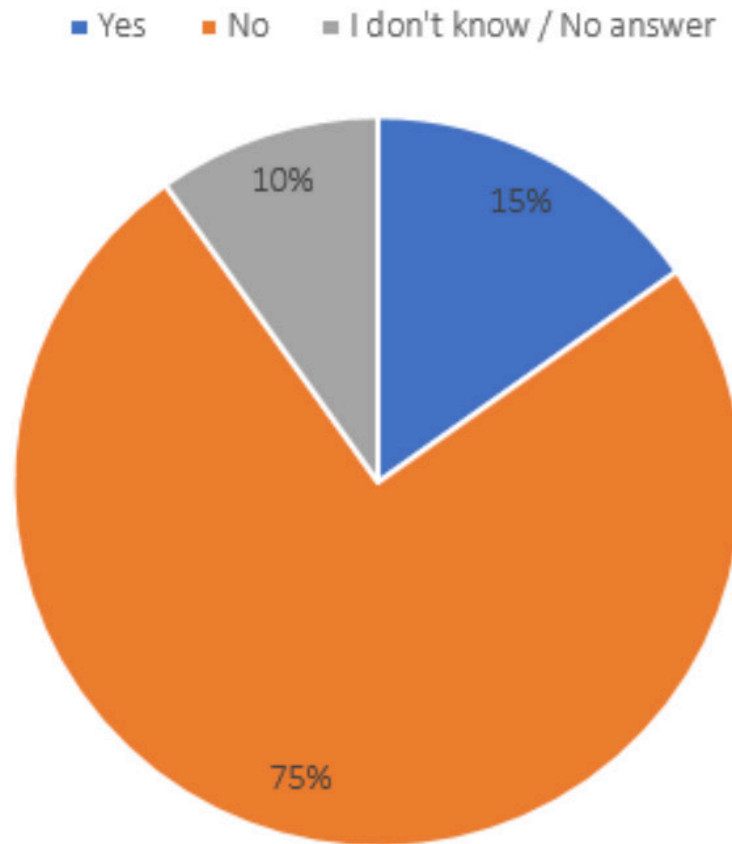
**Figure 45 - What is the atmosphere like where your child plays sports? (average) N=1096**



Of parents, 15% reported that their child experienced some form of abuse – emotional, physical or sexual – related to sport. Parents of abused children were also asked if any steps were taken to address the abuse. Although this is a very low number of cases (N=167), it is probably indicative

of the trend that **more than half (55.1%) of parents said that nothing was done to address the situation. Of respondents, 38.3% reported that the case was dealt with within the organization, while 1.8% reported that proceedings were initiated** (Figure 46).

**Figure 46 - Has your child experienced any kind of abuse (emotional, physical, sexual abuse) during organized sport activities? (%) N=1096**



Finally, we asked parents if they knew of any abuse of other children in the sports

organization that their child attends; 11.6% of parents knew of such an incident.



# FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH RESULTS

The parental focus group took place in November 2022. Participation in the focus group was conditional to the applicant having a minor child who is currently playing organized sports. Of the 10 parents who participated in the interview, nine were female and one was male. Some of their children played sports recreationally and some played sports competitively.

We first looked at what their child expects and what they expect from playing sports. We then talked about the role of parents and asked about their views on sports organizations and coaches.

Participants also felt that **their children like sport mainly because they can experience a sense of achievement**, and they also highlighted that their children like **to belong to these communities** and make many friends through sports. As parents, they consider it important that their children lead an active life, which is good for their health. Many of them stressed that this is good as long as their child is having fun and it is not too physically or mentally demanding. They also highlighted the impact of sport on personal development.

*“He learns how to behave in a community and how to cooperate. It’s healthy to move and it makes a positive difference in other areas.” (Parent 1)*

*“He learns how to win and lose, and to tolerate failure and victory. It’s good for his personality development.” (Parent 2)*

Based on the results of the questionnaire survey, we were curious to know how much parents’ childhood sports-related experiences are relevant to their children’s sporting activities (e.g. choice of sport, sports club), as most of the participating parents also played sports as children. They said that **their childhood experiences were also very decisive for them**. Parents

who had a negative experience were keen to ensure that their child did not have to experience this. There were parents who did not want their child to play the sports they played as children because they found it too demanding. There were also those who were picky about the choice of coach because of their own bad experiences.

*"I spent a lot of time on the sidelines making sure my children were in good hands."  
(Parent 3)*

It was thought that a parent could play a guiding role in a child's participation in sport. They stressed that when choosing a sport, they should show their child alternatives so that they can choose the best one for them. They also felt that they had a role to play in guiding their children towards a change if they saw that the sport they had chosen was not suitable for them, preventing them from experiencing failure.

When choosing a sports club, many people took into account the experiences of people they knew, as well as the need to look at community building (e.g. summer camps). However, there was almost unanimous agreement that it was not the club but the character of the coach that was most decisive. Parents agreed that both negative and positive experiences were most strongly linked to the coach. There was a mixture of good and bad experiences with coaches.

*"It's like in first grade when we choose a teacher. Here we choose a coach." (Parent 4)*

**The role of the coach was also highlighted in relation to the physical and emotional safety** of children. It was considered important for coaches to be empathetic and to have the necessary pedagogical knowledge to be able to focus on the children individually as well as on peer relationships. Many were pleased that their children's coach met the criteria described, but there was a consensus that this was rather incidental, and that these aspects were not taken into account **when coaches were selected and only professional aspects prevail**. Parents confirmed that the training of coaches does not include adequate pedagogical and psychological preparation, although many

of them thought that this would be one of the ways towards positive development.

In relation to the pressure to perform, a distinction was made between the pressure to achieve competitive results and the pressure to participate in training in terms of the amount of work put into sport. It was also pointed out that there are differences between team sports and individual sports: while in individual sports the pressure to achieve competitive results is much more pronounced, in team sports children are given opportunities in accordance with performance.

*"In our team, it's a rule that the coach puts his energy into the person who is always there: at training, in competition." (Parent 3)*

*"There is a big difference between team and individual sports. They really push them to always show up to training. This is why those who miss out get fewer opportunities. It's not a 'push' to attain results, it is a push to attend training." (Parent 5)*

# CONCLUSIONS

Playing sports voluntarily and with pleasure contributes greatly to children's physical and mental development. However, sometimes unpleasant or bad experiences are associated with playing sports, ranging from teasing from teammates to sexual abuse or even serious abuse committed by adults.

The main aim of this research is to understand children's positive and negative experiences in sports in order to develop prevention-oriented programs that will enable children to participate in organized sports in the safest way possible.

## Sport is joy

The results of the research clearly show that for most children, **playing sports is a source of happiness** and many feel that their years of playing sports have had a major impact on their personal development. Therefore, most of them associate the words "joy", "friends" and "success" with playing sports as a child. Seven out of 10 respondents said

that they liked the sport itself the most. It is clear from the responses **that sport can be a way of developing self-confidence and self-awareness**, from which many people can draw strength later on. The majority recall a fun and supportive atmosphere when they think back to their childhood years playing sport.

## The pressure to perform undermines motivation

The pressure to perform is an experience that most children have experienced and that many have not been able to cope with. From the textual responses it is clear that the constant need to perform is a key element of organized sports, and that the extent of this pressure often takes the joy out of playing

sports. In addition, this success-oriented approach often results in discrimination against children and puts children who are considered less talented at a disadvantage, often discouraging them from playing sports for life.

# The role of the coach is key

UNICEF's research in 2014 also highlighted the prominent role of the coach, and the current findings confirm this as well. The responses clearly show that the coach's expertise is only one part of his or her job, and that he or she has a much more complex role to fulfill. His attitude, his behavior, his personality, and his attention to the children not only determines the atmosphere in training sessions, but can also decide a child's attitude to sports. There have been many textual accounts of children who have stopped playing sports because of a bad coach, but many have also written about the opposite. A supportive, good coach can help children through the ups and downs, encouraging them to persevere. The coach's position of power makes him or her a prominent player in abuse. On the one hand, in all types of abuse, the coach is most often identified as the abuser: it is

a common experience that he/she crosses boundaries to improve performance. On the other hand, because of their status and prestige, it is the coach who can do the most to prevent and handle abuse. **It is therefore of paramount importance that he or she also recognizes and deals with abuse among teammates.** The role of coaches was also emphasized in the focus group research section: both parents and sports professionals confirmed that a coach needs to have the right pedagogical and psychological knowledge to help him/her to be able to address children appropriately. It is a common experience, however, that in practice this is even less true. Parents and professionals alike felt that there should be much greater emphasis in coaching education on the transfer of this knowledge and skills.

# Changing perceptions of abuse

Public opinion, and in many places organizational culture, suggests that abuse must be tolerated in order to succeed. In many textual accounts, the idea arose that these are "necessary" either for sporting success or for character development. In addition, particularly in the case of emotional abuse, it was **also emphasized**

**that it is very difficult to judge where the boundary lies between strictness, motivation and abuse.** Recognizing this as a child is particularly difficult. Similar to the results of the 2014 UNICEF survey, looking back as adults, respondents were much more likely to think that what happened to them was child abuse.

## Missing tools

The results also highlight that there are almost no tools available to tackle abuse in sports organizations. The most common response to stop abuse is to stop playing sports or, to change clubs or the type of sport. Another common response was that the abuse experienced was not stopped in any way while the person was playing sports. The amount of responses regarding formal or informal treatment of abuse was low. A further indication of the lack of means was the high proportion of respondents who did not tell anyone what happened to them for each type of abuse. The main reason for this given by respondents was that it would have been difficult to talk about it, that they

were afraid that they would not be believed or they were afraid of the consequences. In relation to the abuse they experienced, most respondents reported that witnesses were present and most respondents were also present when a teammate was abused. **The behavior of bystanders in all abuse situations is decisive.** In the majority of cases, no one intervenes because they are afraid of the abuser and of becoming a victim, or fear of other consequences. In many cases, they do not know what to do. However, this can empower the abuser and increase the victim's sense of helplessness and inhibit them from seeking help.

## Parental support is essential

The findings also underline **the importance of the role of parents.** It is very important for children to have the support of their parents regardless of their achievements and level of participation in sports. Many respondents, regarding playing sports, highlighted the lack of parental attention and interest as a negative experience. The importance of

parental support is also indicated by the fact that most respondents also talked to their families about the emotional and physical abuse that they had experienced. Sexual abuse, on the other hand, is a heavy burden, with a higher proportion of those who did not talk about it, than those who shared it with their family.

## Experiences last for a lifetime

The results show that years spent in sport leave a lasting mark on a person. In lucky – and most – cases, they build character, help self-acceptance and boost self-confidence.

In contrast, bad experiences can cause lasting damage. There were several accounts of experiences regarding failure in sport that resulted in long-term lack of self-

confidence. In worse cases, they also caused serious damage to body image and mental disturbance.

More than half of the children of parents who played sports as children participate in organized sports, which is a higher proportion than parents who did not play sports as children. However, the textual responses show that there are also many parents who, because of their own bad experiences, do not think it is a good idea for

their children to participate in sports. On the other hand, parents who themselves played sports as children are often more aware and careful in their choice of sports and sports organizations for their children. This is confirmed by the results of the parental focus group; parents who played sports as children and had negative experiences were very careful to ensure that their child did not get into a situation that caused them difficulties.

## Summary

Childhood experiences in sports are still important in later life. At best, they can be a positive physical and mental support, and at worst, they can have a negative impact on life as a whole. The results suggest that children need a supportive, safe environment, which is currently haphazard and sometimes absent in organized sport. It is important to recognize the need to develop protocols to help prevent and

handle abuse. It is very important to stress that coaches have a crucial role to play and therefore need to be properly prepared. It is important for all children involved in sports to acquire the necessary knowledge of how to recognize abuse, where to seek help and who to contact if they become a victim of or witness to abuse. Last but not least, we also need parents to support our children throughout participation in sports.





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