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# **Exploring children's agency, wellbeing and consent in competitive sport: a case study from a rugby club**

By Ruth Barnes

Moray House School of Education and Sport  
University of Edinburgh  
2024



## **Abstract**

The wellbeing benefits of children's sport are well documented, with children encouraged to participate in sporting activities for their physical and mental health and for the social opportunities they can provide. At the same time, there has been increasing awareness that children in organised sport face wellbeing risks. These concerns relate to excessive exertion or injury but are also connected to abuse and perpetrated harm. Yet, children continue to participate in sport, and, especially outside of school settings, this is most often facilitated by parental agreement and resources. Children playing – and enjoying – sports in contexts in which harm is known to be possible calls into consideration how wellbeing and harm are understood by those involved, how children practice agency in this participation and how parental consent interacts with and affects children's wellbeing, agency and consent.

Existing research has considered children's agency and wellbeing at length, resulting in detailed discussions over meanings across many aspects of children's lives, including where children act outside of societal expectations. However, this research is somewhat limited in its application to children's agency within sport, particularly as it relates to the potential for harm. Further, while scholars have considered experiences of harm, injury and exertion in sport, the field has yet to address perceptions and co-constructions of wellbeing – including with regards to expectations around harm. Finally, there is currently a gap in the consideration of how understandings of parental consent affect children's experiences in sport, including children's agentic practice, their perceptions of wellbeing and harm and their own consent.

This study aimed to examine the constructions of and interactions between children's wellbeing and harm, agency and consent and parental consent in competitive sport.

Three research questions were developed to address this aim:

1. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children's wellbeing and harm, including 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' harm, in competitive sport?
2. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children's agency and consent in competitive sport?

3. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand parental consent in competitive sport and how does this affect children's perceptions of their own wellbeing and harm, agency and consent?

The research used a single embedded case study to answer the research questions and address its aim. Fieldwork took place with a youth section of a rugby club in England. Rugby was chosen as a popular sport in England that involves high levels of physicality. Fieldwork included five observations of relevant teams' training sessions (with children aged 14-18), 29 semi-structured interviews with children, parents, coaches and officials and six group discussions with children aged 14-18. Research activities also included a review of over 40 governing body and club documents. The research design included eight child-parent-coach triads as embedded units of analysis within the broader case study. Ethical considerations were core to all stages throughout the research planning and implementation, particularly as the research involved child participants and a potentially sensitive subject matter. Actions to support ethical research included using voluntary, informed consent practices, attention to confidentiality and privacy, and consideration of risks and benefits to participants throughout the study. Ethical approval was obtained from Moray House School of Education and Sport and ethical practice was further supported by the development and implementation of a living ethical protocol, including a safeguarding referral process and information sharing protocol.

Data were analysed using reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This analysis drew on concepts relating to relational agency, including 'generagency' (Leonard, 2016), wellbeing, including subjective wellbeing (e.g., Axford et al., 2014; Ben-Arieh et al., 2014), the categorisation of harm in sport (e.g., Alexander et al., 2011) and the communication of consent in sport (e.g., Channon & Matthews, 2021). Based on this, the findings chapters explore: 1) children's, parents' and coaches' views and understandings of agency, particularly as connected to 'generagency' and the prominent 'rugby family' motif; 2) children's, parents' and coaches' views and understandings of wellbeing and harm, including co-constructions of acceptable and unacceptable harm; and 3) children's, parents' and coaches' views of children's and parental consent and the impact on children's agency, wellbeing and harm. The thesis forefronts children's relational practice of agency as crucial to their wellbeing in sport, particularly in the ongoing practice of agency to provide, withhold or withdraw consent.

Further, it highlights how relationships with and actions by adults – parents and coaches – can co-construct a sporting environment that supports children’s wellbeing, agency and consent.

This thesis contributes to the fields of research relating to childhood studies and to children’s sport in its application of concepts – particularly those relating to relational agency – to children’s experiences within sport. In this regard, it offers a nuanced approach to understanding children’s agency that may be applied in areas outside of sport. It also contributes to closing a gap in the understanding of children’s experiences of consent and the impact of this on children’s agency and wellbeing, particularly in the identification, establishment and enforcement of consent boundaries. In this regard, this thesis highlights the importance of trust and relationships to children’s wellbeing, and within consent discussions and decisions that affect children’s wellbeing and potential harm.

The thesis concludes by setting out implications for research, policy and practice, especially for children’s practice of agency and the protection of children from harm in sport. These emphasise the importance that rules and guidelines relating to physicality in sport support children’s wellbeing and protect children from harm, given their contribution to expectations relating to physical injury and in establishing boundaries to consent. Policy and practice implications also call for actions to raise awareness and support engagement among parents to ensure awareness of appropriate behaviours in sporting environments and to facilitate strong intergenerational relationships, in which shared understandings can support children’s wellbeing. Finally, the thesis calls for additional research about individual or non-contact sports, and research that addresses the intersectionality of children’s experiences within sport.

## **Lay summary**

Children's participation in sport is often encouraged as something that is beneficial to their physical and mental health and wellbeing. However, recent reports have drawn attention to wellbeing concerns in children's sport. These include concerns about physical, sexual and emotional harm but also in relation to injuries and exertion and the risk of future health concerns. Parents are almost always involved in children's participation in sport, especially sport that takes place outside of school. Whether by paying for lessons and equipment, driving children to and from sport sessions or being there to support their children, parents have a role to play in children's sport. This raises questions about how parental involvement and consent can help to protect children, given the known wellbeing challenges that sit alongside sport's benefits.

This research study was designed with the aim of exploring the ways that children, parents and coaches think about children's wellbeing and harm, children's agency (their choices, decisions and ability to make these) and their consent, and parental consent. In particular, it looked at how children, parents and coaches think about wellbeing and harm in sport, considering that studies have shown sport can involve injury and exertion, and deliberate maltreatment. It brought these ideas together to ask how different views of parental consent could affect children's wellbeing and harm, agency and consent. In particular, the research considered how the idea that parental consent had been given for a child to play a sport might affect children's wellbeing by influencing what children expect of other peoples' behaviour and their own experiences.

This research study took place at 'The Club', a rugby club in England that had a 'youth' section involving 'boys' and 'girls' teams. The research started with five observations of training sessions with different teams at the under 15s, under 16s and under 18s age groups. Following this, children were invited to take part in group discussions with other children from their teams. There were six group discussions involving 29 children. The research took a special focus on eight so-called 'triad' groupings of children, their parent(s) and their coaches to gain different perspectives from the three sides of the child-parent-coach 'triangle'. Interviews were conducted with eight children, nine parents, six coaches and six officials from The Club. Six of these children also participated in the group discussions. The research also involved collecting and reviewing documents from The Club and from the Rugby Football Union, which is the

organisation that oversees rugby union in England. Because the research involved potentially sensitive topics with children and families, it followed strict ethical procedures that were approved in advance. In all of the research activities, the focus was to learn about views and experiences of wellbeing and harm, agency and consent in sport. The information from this case study helps to provide insights about children's sport in general.

This thesis has three 'findings chapters' which give details (findings) based on the research data. Chapter 5 focuses on children's 'agency', which can be understood as their choices, decisions and the ability to make these. This chapter starts by introducing the idea of the 'rugby family' as something that children, parents and coaches shared and that can be a source of support to them. It then explains findings about how children practice agency in relation to their parents, their coaches and their teammates. It found that children pushed themselves to support team relationships and that children strongly resisted any idea of being 'forced' by parents to play sport. It also found that sporting relationships between parents, children and coaches changed as children got older and were viewed as having more expertise. Chapter 6 focuses on children's wellbeing. It found that children got wellbeing benefits from the sport's physicality, including the contact that rugby involves. Children enjoyed playing the sport and being with their teams and this was beneficial to their wellbeing as an outlet from challenges from outside of sport. Again, children strongly criticised the idea of being 'forced' to play sport. They also felt that when coaches compared children to each other this was harmful. Children, parents and coaches worked together with trust and expertise to build spaces and experiences in sport that felt safe for children's wellbeing. Chapter 7 focuses on parental and children's consent. It found that children, parents and coaches felt there were boundaries to parental consent based on rules and on parents' ideas about children's wellbeing. Parents referred to their own views of their children's wellbeing and trusted the expertise of coaches when consenting to children's participation in sport.

The thesis ends with a conclusion (Chapter 8) that discusses the ways that the study fits within research that has already taken place and the theories this previous research has led to. It proposes some new areas for future research, especially about children's experiences in individual and non-contact sports and about the experiences of children and families from diverse demographic backgrounds. The thesis proposes

some implications and reflections for better policy and practice. For example, it highlights the importance that the rules of sport actually do protect children from harm because these rules help to shape children's, parents' and coaches' behaviours, expectations and consent boundaries. It also recommends additional guidance and training about positive behaviours to help protect children from emotional harm, which often is not protected by the rules and guidance of a sport. Finally, it brings to the forefront the importance of parent-child relationships in sport. These have many different roles in protecting children's wellbeing but work best when parents and children share the same understandings about children's wellbeing in sport. Encouraging conversations about wellbeing can help put safe boundaries in place and make sure they are followed so that children can enjoy sport as much and as long as they wish.

## **Acknowledgements**

Above all, thank you to all the children and young people, parents, coaches and officials who participated in my field research. You were welcoming, enthusiastic, supportive and so giving of your time and views. I will forever be grateful and wish the best for everyone at 'The Club'. I hope this thesis does your contributions justice.

I owe a huge and eternal debt of gratitude to my supervisors, Prof Deborah Fry and Prof Kay Tisdall. Without your support, compassion and unfailingly excellent advice, I could not have done this. Thank you. You will continue to inspire me.

Thank you, too, to my friends at Edinburgh and further afield. They say 'it takes a village', and I am grateful to all my friends from my 'village' for their moral support – and especially ad-hoc childcare – throughout this process. To my fellow students, April, Bernadette, Cathy, Chantelle, Emily and Kait, and to my friends Jorun and Jastine, you have been an invaluable support network.

To my parents and siblings, another thanks. To my dad, Richard, thank you for all our chats – academic and otherwise – and for your calming influence. To my mum, Patti, thank you for instilling in me the grit to keep going, and for making me laugh along the way. My siblings, Helen, Adrian and Alice, I've always been grateful to you for cheering me on and making sure I believe in myself. Thank you, all.

To my husband, Anthony, and our children A, V and A, I am grateful for you every day and am so thankful for your love and support. Anthony, you took it in your stride when I applied to do this PhD. You listened, gave me space and time, put up with my extroverted analytical needs, and, most of all, you understood how much this meant to me. Our children have grown up so much in these few years. All the notes left in my workspace and all the summers we 'moved up a year' together have made me smile and kept me grounded. There's nothing quite like writing about children and sport while sitting courtside, waiting in a parked car between sessions or sheltering from the rain watching my own children do the sports they enjoy so much. I love you 'Team B-E' and I am so excited to help you with your dreams as you have me with mine.

# Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Lay summary</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>Acronyms</b> .....	<b>xii</b>
<b>Chapter 1 – Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1. Reflections on my interest in the research .....	1
1.2. Research aims and questions .....	2
1.3. Methodology .....	3
1.4. Definitions and terminology .....	4
1.5. Summary and structure of the thesis .....	6
1.6. Conclusion .....	8
<b>Chapter 2 – Context and background</b> .....	<b>9</b>
2.1. Children in the English context .....	9
2.2. Children and sport in the English context .....	10
2.3. Children and competitive sport in England .....	12
2.4. Children’s participation in rugby union .....	14
2.5. Public consideration of children’s harm in sport in England .....	16
2.6. Conclusion .....	18
<b>Chapter 3 – Literature review</b> .....	<b>19</b>
3.1. Children’s agency .....	19
3.2. Children’s wellbeing and harm .....	28
3.3. Parental and children’s consent .....	43
3.4. Conclusion .....	52
<b>Chapter 4 – Methodology</b> .....	<b>55</b>
4.1. Introduction .....	55
4.2. Research aim and questions .....	55
4.3. Ontology and epistemology .....	56
4.4. Research design .....	58
4.5. Research methods .....	75
4.6. Data management .....	105
4.7. Data analysis .....	106
4.8. Ethics .....	113
4.9. Reflexivity and positionality .....	123
4.10. Conclusion .....	124
<b>Chapter 5 – (Gener)agency in ‘the rugby family’</b> .....	<b>126</b>

5.1. The meaning and importance of ‘family’ .....	127
5.2. The rugby family .....	129
5.3. Concepts and understandings of agency.....	142
5.4. Exploring generagency at The Club.....	143
5.5. Conclusions .....	161
<b>Chapter 6 – Children’s wellbeing and the co-construction of “safe spaces” .</b>	<b>164</b>
6.1. A conceptual foundation for exploring children’s wellbeing.....	165
6.2. Views and understandings of children’s wellbeing in rugby .....	166
6.3. Exploring constructions and understandings of harm .....	180
6.4. Co-construction of safe spaces in rugby.....	193
6.5. Conclusions .....	198
<b>Chapter 7 – Experiences of children’s and parental consent .....</b>	<b>200</b>
7.1. Frameworks and meanings of consent in children’s lives .....	201
7.2. Experiences of children’s consent .....	204
7.3. Experiences of parental consent.....	209
7.4. Connecting children’s and parental consent .....	218
7.5. Understandings of the impact and meaning of parental consent .....	221
7.6. Conclusions .....	232
<b>Chapter 8 – Conclusions .....</b>	<b>235</b>
8.1. Summary of findings .....	235
8.2. Implications and reflections.....	245
8.3. Concluding reflections .....	251
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>253</b>
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>278</b>
Appendix A: Ethical approval letter.....	278
Appendix B: Cover sheet for introductory package.....	279
Appendix C: Example of Participant Information Sheet and consent form for children .....	280
Appendix D: Example of Participant Information Sheet and consent form for adults (parents) .....	285
Appendix E: Example of semi-structured interview tool.....	290
Appendix F: Overview of group discussion activities .....	292
Appendix G: Initial findings sheet .....	293

## List of Figures

Figure 1 - Case Study with Embedded Units of Analysis.....	62
Figure 2 - Case Selection Mind Map .....	64
Figure 3 - Research 'Triads' .....	65
Figure 4 - How the Research Methods Address the Research Questions.....	75
Figure 5 - How Observations Contributed to the Research Study .....	77
Figure 6 - Observation Form .....	78
Figure 7 - Observation Form and Sweatbands.....	81
Figure 8 - Diagrams of the Observations.....	82
Figure 9 - How Group Discussions Contributed to the Research Study .....	84
Figure 10 - Vignettes, Story Purposes and Amendments Following Pilot.....	87
Figure 11 - Timeline Activity Guide .....	88
Figure 12 - Timeline Activity Pilot Sheet .....	89
Figure 13 - Vignettes and Research Issues/Questions .....	92
Figure 14 - How Interviews Contributed to the Research Study.....	95
Figure 15 - (Abridged) Interview Schedule.....	97
Figure 16 - How Document Analysis Contributed to the Research Study.....	102
Figure 17 - Whiteboard Following Phase Two of Thematic Analysis .....	108
Figure 18 - Whiteboard Following Phase Three of Thematic Analysis .....	109
Figure 19 - Whiteboard Following Phase Four of Thematic Analysis .....	110
Figure 20 - Whiteboard for Phase Five of Thematic Analysis.....	111
Figure 21 - Safeguarding Referral and Information Sharing Protocol.....	121
Figure 22 - Researcher's Mapping of 'Family' at The Club.....	140
Figure 23 - Vignette Story 2 Card for Group Participants.....	170
Figure 24 - Vignette Story Cards Presented to Participants in Group Discussions	182
Figure 25 - Triad Example: James .....	224
Figure 26 - Triad Example: Marnie .....	226
Figure 27 - Triad Example: Delilah .....	227
Figure 28 - Triad Example: Thor.....	229
Figure 29 - Triad Example: Mike .....	231

## List of Tables

Table 1 - Planned Purposeful Selection Criteria for Embedded Units .....	66
Table 2 - Actual Purposeful Selection Criteria for Embedded Units .....	67
Table 3 - Child and Coach Triad Participants .....	68
Table 4 - Number of Participants – Planned and Actual .....	71
Table 5 - Observation Participation Numbers and Duration.....	79
Table 6 - Group Discussion Details .....	91
Table 7 - Summary of Documents Collected .....	103

## **Acronyms**

A-Level – Advanced level qualification

CPSU – Child Protection in Sport Unit

CSO – Club Safeguarding Officer

DBS – Disclosure and Barring Service

DCMS – Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport of the United Kingdom

DfE – Department for Education of the United Kingdom

ECB – England and Wales Cricket Board

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

GD – Group Discussions

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

GMC – General Medical Council

GMS – Games Management System

ICEC – Independent Commission for Equity in Cricket

ISCSWG – International Safeguarding Children in Sport Working Group

MHSES – Moray House School of Education and Sport

NGB – National Governing Body

NHS – National Health Service

NSPCC – National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

ONS – Office for National Statistics

PE – Physical Education

RFU – Rugby Football Union

RFUIPF – Rugby Football Union Injured Players Foundation

TREDS – Teamwork, Respect, Enjoyment, Discipline and Sportsmanship

U6s – U18s – Under 6 years old to U18 years old (for example)

UK – United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

UNCRC – United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

WHO – World Health Organization

## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

This thesis explores children’s agency, wellbeing and consent in competitive sport and is based on research conducted using a qualitative single embedded case study approach with participants from a youth rugby club in England. This chapter serves as an introduction to the thesis, providing insight into the purpose and background of the research, including my motivations for taking this forward as a doctoral study. It presents the research aim and questions and a brief summary of the methodology used to address these. It also sets out key terminology before providing a summary of the structure and contents of the thesis and a brief chapter conclusion.

### **1.1. Reflections on my interest in the research**

I arrived at this PhD after 13 years of child-rights-connected research and policy development and as a former high-level junior and collegiate tennis player. My interest in the research therefore derives from two separate but connected elements of my background. First, in chronological terms, I spent a great many hours of my childhood playing tennis. From the age of around eight years old, I played almost every day. As I grew older, I began playing nationally and internationally, with nearly every weekend occupied with a tennis tournament for me and for those of my siblings who also played the sport. I then played throughout college, putting my rackets away when I was around 22 years old. While I have viewed with concern emerging reports of child maltreatment across a range of sports in recent years (e.g. Ingle, 2021; Sheldon, 2021), it has been particularly striking to recognise aspects of these accounts in my own observations as a child. I am now a parent to three young children who play and enjoy sports. As I once ‘dropped off’ one of my children to a dance class that due to COVID-19 was held without parental presence, I wondered how my child would know what to expect. I had, of course, asked for and read the child protection policies, and I had chosen the class based on a recommendation from a trusted friend. However, it was our first foray into dance. The experience of ‘dropping off’ felt as if it communicated some form of confidence, trust and reassurance to my child. I wondered how it might feel for them. This was on my mind as I was considering my PhD studies. As I moved forward with this nascent idea, I found myself wondering how children, including mine, experience their own agency and consent, and parental consent, when participating

in sport and other activities, recognising parental involvement in sport as necessary but complex (Knight et al., 2020).

My interest in and consideration of children's experiences, childhood and children's rights is also closely connected to my professional work in international law and policy relating to children's rights. In a previous role, I spent many years working at a large children's charity in London. I conducted action-oriented research, helped to develop and support policies and legislative reforms and had devised and delivered training relating to children's rights. In particular, I had extensive experience of work relating to child protection and safeguarding in different settings, globally. This included, for example, carrying out research and analysis relating to the situation for children in varying country contexts, focusing on the realisation of children's rights and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. I also developed safeguarding mechanisms – policies and procedures – for implementation in educational and charity-based settings.

Within this work and in my other voluntary roles I have been exposed to a range of considerations relating to parental responsibilities and parenting approaches, children's rights to protection and participation, and mechanisms to support positive parenting and to protect children's rights. This commitment to the protection and promotion of children's rights influenced my interest in conducting this doctoral research and my approach towards its completion. Together, my childhood and parental experiences and my professional background combine in the development, implementation and presentation of this research study and thesis.

## **1.2. Research aims and questions**

This research aims to examine the constructions of and interactions between children's wellbeing and harm, agency and consent and parental consent in competitive sport. Three research questions were developed to address this aim:

1. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children's wellbeing and harm, including 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' harm, in competitive sport?

2. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children's agency and consent in competitive sport?
3. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand parental consent in competitive sport and how does this affect children's perceptions of their own wellbeing and harm, agency and consent?

### **1.3. Methodology**

To address the research aim and questions, this study adopted a qualitative approach with a single embedded case study design. The research was conducted from the standpoint of a social constructionist research paradigm, with a constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. In taking this approach, the study was focused on the views, understandings and co-constructions experienced and shared by research participants, and in the analysis of these to address the research goals.

The case study club, 'The Club', was a rugby club in England that was selected based on criteria developed following a literature review (see Chapter 3) and using a recruitment approach detailed in Chapter 4 – Methodology. The Club had a large 'youth section' to its membership, which included youth boys' and youth girls' teams with players aged from five to 18 years old. Research methods included five observations of relevant training sessions, six group discussions with small groups of players from selected age groups, 29 semi-structured interviews with triad members and additional officials and collection and review of over 40 documents. These methods are described in detail in Chapter 4. In total, field research participants included 111 observation participants, 61 of whom provided consent to detailed observation. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with eight children, nine parents, six coaches and six officials from The Club. Group discussions were conducted with 29 children, six of whom also participated in the individual interviews. I conducted a document review of over 40 governing body and club documents. Child participants ranged in age from 14 to 18 years old, with one having turned 18 years old shortly before their group discussion.

Data were managed in line with a data management plan developed based on literature, experience and best practice recommendations from the University of Edinburgh. The data management plan included careful labelling and storage of data.

This involved using a locked filing system for hard copy materials with attention to best practices – for example, returning hard copy materials immediately to the filing system upon receipt. It also involved secure storage of soft copy materials through the University of Edinburgh’s storage system and using an encrypted laptop and password-protected folders. Data were analysed in line with Braun and Clarke’s (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach, including its six ‘phases’ of: 1) data familiarisation, 2) data coding, 3) initial theme generation, 4) theme development and review, 5) theme refining, defining and naming, and 6) writing up (p. 6). Ethical practice within the research study was supported by a robust ethical protocol which included careful consideration and implementation of voluntary informed consent, potential harms and benefits to participants and especially participants’ privacy and confidentiality. Mindful of the potentially sensitive nature of the research topics, I developed and followed a safeguarding and child protection referral protocol. No safeguarding or information sharing referrals were made.

#### **1.4. Definitions and terminology**

This section provides a brief discussion of definitions and terminology used within this thesis. Discussion and definition of several key terms – especially, agency, wellbeing and harm and consent – are reserved for the main body of the thesis.

**Age-grade** – a term to describe rugby played by those between the ages of six and 18 years old. This includes ‘mini’ and ‘youth’ rugby. There are numerous age groups within age grade rugby. It is also important to note that some children younger than the age of six years old participate in ‘Under 6’ rugby teams or informal rugby sessions.

**Children** – for the purposes of this thesis, ‘children’ means all individuals below the age of 18. This is consistent with Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**Competitive sport** – this is organised sport that is more than recreational and can include a range of levels of excellence, from local, community level (see the definition of ‘grassroots’ in this section) to elite level participation. Participation in external competition – through matches, races, fixtures and games – is at the core of this definition.

**Contact** – the term ‘contact’ is used frequently throughout this thesis in relation to the physical touching of and by rugby players during the sport. This occurs in several ways within training and in matches. Different forms of contact involve physical touching in different ways, for different purposes and on different body parts. For example, in a ‘line-out’, players on the same side will lift a teammate into the air to catch or tap a ball into play. They do this by grabbing them around their shorts. Specific forms of contact are explained within this thesis when appropriate.

**England Rugby** – a trademark of the Rugby Football Union (RFU), and a name frequently used by those involved in rugby union to refer to the RFU and in relation to English national rugby teams.

**Grassroots** – grassroots sports are community-level, non-professional sports. The term ‘grassroots’ is used in relation to several sporting activities within England to describe local community clubs led by volunteers.

**Parents** – in this thesis, ‘parents’ means those with parental responsibility for a child. This includes those with legal guardianship and carers.

**Rugby** – the sport of rugby union is referred to throughout this thesis by the shorthand ‘rugby’. This is not to disregard or dismiss the sport of ‘rugby league’ but, rather, reflects the shorthand used by those within The Club.

**Rugby Football Union** – the governing body for the sport of rugby union within England, sometimes abbreviated to the RFU. England Rugby is a name and trademark associated with the Rugby Football Union and the English national rugby team.

**Safeguarding** – in relation to children, the term ‘safeguarding’ can be understood to describe actions and approaches that seek to protect children from harm, and to promote their welfare, including their health and wellbeing.

**Scrum** – a way to restart a game of rugby after it has been stopped due to a minor infraction. This involves eight players on each side for 15-a-side rugby and three players on each side for rugby sevens. Players from each side crouch into each other, in three rows and attempt to push the other side forward and/or the ball backwards to release it to their teammates.

**Tackling** – this is one of the main forms of contact between players in rugby. It occurs when one player has the ball and a player or players from the other team seek to bring the player to the ground to stop that player’s team from progressing forward and to seek to gain possession of the ball.

**Youth section** – in the context of this thesis, the term ‘youth’ refers to the age categorisation of players who play grassroots rugby in the age groups from Under 12s or 13s (depending on the area) to Under 18s. Children who play grassroots club rugby and are younger than the respective ‘youth’ age groups are called ‘minis’.

### **1.5. Summary and structure of the thesis**

This thesis comprises eight main chapters, including this introduction. The following is a summary of these.

Following Chapter 1, the introductory chapter to this thesis, in Chapter 2, I present the context and background of the research study. I begin by providing a brief introduction to the situation for children in England, including concerning their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and potential effects on wellbeing and physical activities. The chapter then provides context-setting information in relation to children’s participation in sport in school settings and within grassroots sports clubs, to support the discussion of their participation in activities and sports. I then introduce background and some data relating to children’s participation in competitive sport and rugby union in England. Finally, Chapter 2 includes a summary of public-facing considerations relating to children’s experiences of wellbeing and harm within competitive sport and a short conclusion.

In Chapter 3, I review the literature relating to children’s agency, wellbeing and harm and consent, connecting this to and drawing from literature relating to children’s experiences in competitive sport. I take each of these central concepts of this thesis – agency, wellbeing and harm and consent – in turn, exploring relevant literature in connection with children and childhood generally, and in relation to children’s experiences in sport. The chapter identifies the areas of contribution of and the rationale for this research, leading into the research aim, questions and methodology. It ends with a brief conclusion.

Chapter 4 sets out the methodology for this research study. It begins by discussing the study's constructionist/interpretivist ontology and epistemology. It then presents the qualitative embedded case study research approach taken within the research, setting out the rationale behind this. This chapter then outlines the research design and methods selected to address the research aim and questions. In Chapter 4, I share my approach to reflexive thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and data management. At each stage, I provide detailed rationales behind these decisions. Within this chapter, I provide a detailed discussion of ethical considerations and decisions taken during the study design and implementation. In particular, I note ethical concerns and the approaches used to address and mitigate these. Such considerations were particularly pertinent due to the sensitive nature of the research and the involvement of children. The chapter closes with a reflexivity and positionality statement and conclusion.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 present detailed explorations and presentations of the research findings. Each of these 'findings chapters' begins with a brief reintroduction to relevant literature and ends with a conclusion. Chapter 5, the first of these chapters, focuses on views and experiences of children's agency, addressing the first part of research question 2. It begins with a discussion of constructions and meanings of family. This then supports the exploration of the concept of the 'rugby family', a motif that was identified during reflexive thematic analysis and that was co-constructed by participants as connecting all those participating in rugby, at the case study club and beyond, extending to all those who have ever played rugby. This concept of 'rugby family' leads into the discussion of children's agency. This draws on Leonard's (2016) generagency to explore children's practices of agency in relation to adults and peers and other conceptualisations of agency, including 'ambiguous agency' (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012) in relation to children's participation in a physically demanding sport.

Chapter 6 presents findings relating to children's wellbeing, focusing on the analysis to address research question 1. It sets out a conceptual foundation for exploring wellbeing and harm before delving into participants' views and understandings of children's wellbeing in rugby as connected to 'what it is' and 'what it is not'. This chapter presents analysis relating to how children, parents and coaches understand and view 'harm' within their experience of rugby, highlighting child participants' enjoyment of

physicality and prioritisation of emotional wellbeing. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the co-construction of safe spaces in rugby by children, parents and coaches, considering this in connection with experiences of wellbeing and harm.

In Chapter 7, I explore answers to the second part of research question 2, relating to children's consent, and research question 3, relating to parental consent and children's experiences of this. This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the consent frameworks that function within children's lives. Next, it explores participants' experiences of children's and parental consent. It then provides a detailed analysis of the key considerations as to the understandings of parental consent and the potential impact on children. Within this, the chapter presents individual and cross-triad analysis to explore perceptions of boundaries to parental consent in sport. The chapter, as with all 'findings chapters', ends with a brief conclusion.

Finally, in Chapter 8, I present a conclusion, bringing together analysis from each of Chapters 5-7, drawing application of the analysis beyond the case study and setting out key findings and the central contributions of this research. In this chapter, I reiterate how this thesis answers each of the research questions and addresses the overall research aim. This chapter concludes by discussing potential research, policy and practice implications of the research findings.

## **1.6. Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the research study and the thesis. I have shared my interest in designing and implementing the research study, including in relation to my background as a child rights law and policy professional with a keen interest in children's rights and wellbeing, a former junior and collegiate tennis player and a parent. The chapter also introduced the research aim, namely, to examine the constructions of and interactions between children's wellbeing and harm, agency and consent and parental consent in competitive sport, the three research questions and the methodology utilised to address these. The next two chapters provide additional context and background to the study (Chapter 2) and present a literature review (Chapter 3).

## **Chapter 2 – Context and background**

This chapter provides context and background relating to children in England, to children's competitive sport in England and in relation to children's participation in rugby – the sport played at the case study club. This sets the scene for the subsequent exploration of the youth rugby case study later in the thesis. Further, this chapter details some recent high-profile and public considerations of children's experiences of harm in sports in England. Additional literature relating to wellbeing and harm in sport is included in the literature review in Chapter 3.

### **2.1. Children in the English context**

This research study focuses on children's experiences of competitive sport. The field research took place in England, a country within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. According to official estimates, the overall population of children in England is approximately 11.9 million (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2023). This research focuses on children aged 14 to 17 years old, a group that accounts for around 2.7 million children in England, approximately 22.5 per cent of the total child population (ONS, 2023).

In England, all children must continue in some form of education or training until they reach the age of 18 years old (Department for Education [DfE], 2016). Children who are aged between 14 and 16 years olds are most likely to be in school years 9 (ages 13-14 years old) to 13 (ages 17-18 years old).<sup>1</sup> Within this, those in school year 10, but especially in year 11, are most likely to be taking national exams known as GCSEs in the summertime. These are considered to be important examinations and children's results in them can affect their next steps in education and/or training. Some children will continue their education by taking A-levels in years 12 to 13, while others will take alternative educational courses, including vocational training. While children may reach the age of 18 during their 'final' year of education or training, they are encouraged to complete that 'academic year', which runs from September to August each year.

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<sup>1</sup> There is some, limited, variation of ages in school years but the ages provided will correspond to the vast majority of children in school year groups.

The definition of a child in England is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in that a child is defined as “a person under the age of 18” (Children Act 1989, s. 105). Administratively, children aged 16-17 receive different treatment from those below the age of 16 in several areas. In housing and living arrangements, children are generally able to leave home at the age of 16, and to enter into a contract for their housing, though they remain the responsibility of their parents until the age of 18 (Coram Children's Legal Centre, n.d.). Recognising this transitional age, support for 16-17 year olds who have been under the care of their local authority falls under additional guidance. This different understanding of the status of children aged 16-17 is also evidenced by changes in rights to consent to a range of activities including sexual activity, name changes and medical treatment (Coram Children's Legal Centre, n.d.).

## **2.2. Children and sport in the English context**

Sports in England fall within the remit of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) at the government level. Elite sport falls under the remit of the UK government-funded entity UK Sport, while Sport England focuses on community-level sport engagement (Girginov, 2017). National Governing Bodies (NGBs) for each sport are responsible for administering and governing those sports and sports clubs playing them. Most NGBs receive funding from government, lottery and corporate/private sources (Girginov, 2017). Requirements for the receipt of government funding include safeguarding requirements in compliance with the Department for Education's “Working together to safeguarding children and young people” (DfE, 2023c).

Sport England is the ‘arms-length’ entity within the UK government that is responsible for increasing sports and activity participation, and particularly the development of sports at the grassroots level in England (Sport England, n.d.). The organisation regularly reports on the participation of children and young people in sports and physical activity. For the 2022-23 academic year, which was the year in which field research for this study was conducted, Sport England reported that 47 per cent of children aged 5-16 years old (3.5 million) participated in daily sport or physical activity that lasted 60 minutes or more on average (Sport England, 2023a, p. 6). This is the recommended daily amount of exercise prescribed by the Chief Medical Officer (Department for Culture, Media and Sport [DCMS], 2023, p. 28) and the World Health

Organization (WHO, 2018, p. 15). The report does not include data relating to children aged 17, as, recalling differences in consideration of children aged 16-17 above, such data is included in adult data tables and reports (Sport England, 2023a).

Sports participation is heavily encouraged by Sport England as positively associated with improved mental wellbeing and development (Sport England, 2023a). The organisation is currently working towards the realisation of a 10-year strategy known as “Uniting the Movement” that seeks to increase movement through sport and physical activity across England (Sport England, 2021). The strategy notes: “The evidence is overwhelming that moving our bodies – through community sport, fitness and physical activity – improves our lives, individually and collectively” (Sport England, 2021, p. 7). Within its five priority areas, “positive experiences for children and young people” are highlighted as essential to the facilitation of “foundations for a long and healthy life” (Sport England, 2021, p. 18). Regarding this priority issue, the strategy notes increasing obesity rates and mental health challenges among 5-16 year olds and urges change:

Sport and physical activity can do so much good for our mental and physical wellbeing, and for children this is even more profound: there’s evidence obesity levels are increasing and mental health deteriorating – rates of 5-16-year-olds who may have had problems with aspects of their mental health to such an extent that it impacted their daily lives, has increased from one in nine in 2017, to one in six in 2020. (Sport England, 2021, p. 25)

The UK Government, too, encourages sport as positive for health and wellbeing and its DCMS has a strategy designed to support increased participation in sport and physical activity, noting similar health benefits to being active (DCMS, 2023). In this strategy, as with Sport England’s, children’s and young people’s activity levels are a priority issue. This builds on the UK Chief Medical Officer’s recommendation, noted earlier, that all children should be physically active for at least one hour each day, averaged across the week (Department of Health and Social Care, 2019). The strategy also notes that the COVID-19 pandemic led to restricted opportunities for physical activity and socialisation among children, highlighting the need to address challenges and obstacles to participation to increase children’s activity (DCMS, 2023).

Addressing disparities in sports participation and particularly inequalities in participation opportunities are key goals of both of the strategies mentioned above. As Sport England (2021) sets out, there are “deep-rooted inequalities in sport and physical activity, which mean there are people who feel excluded from being active because the right options and opportunities aren’t there” (p. 9). The strategy notes that this affects those with disabilities and health conditions, people from within lower socio-economic groups, women and girls and “people from Asian and Black backgrounds” most prominently, and pledges to tackle these disparities (Sport England, 2021, p. 9). DCMS’s (2023) strategy reiterates this call, noting that despite overall activity levels returning to pre-COVID levels, “it is concerning that the disparities in participation between certain groups have continued to widen”, identifying similar disadvantages as those noted above (p. 21).

This research study began as COVID-19 restrictions were easing across England, the UK and globally. In the first year of my PhD course, the 2021-2022 academic year, many classes continued to be taught in a ‘hybrid’ format; COVID-19 testing and self-isolation continued to be required in some circumstances; and, in December 2021, face masks were required in many indoor spaces due to the emergence of a new ‘Omicron’ variant (Institute for Government, 2022). For children in England, COVID-19-related restrictions and conditions from 2020 to 2022 included school closures, remote or online learning, limitations on social gatherings, travel restrictions, exam cancellations and associated grading controversy and sports-related restrictions (Holt & Murray, 2022). The impact of these measures has been viewed as acutely and disparately felt by children within England, the focus population for this research study (Holt & Murray, 2022). Specific restrictions for rugby – from which a case study sports club was ultimately selected for this research – are discussed below in Section 2.4 and inform later analysis.

### **2.3. Children and competitive sport in England**

As noted within the introduction to this thesis, this research focuses on children’s experiences within competitive sport. Here, the term ‘competitive’ describes participation in sport that involves matches, games or playing against other teams, in a manner that is scored per the sport’s rules. This categorisation incorporates a wide range of sporting levels. Those researching or discussing participation in sports use

many terms to discuss different ‘levels’ or ‘calibres’ of sport, including ‘recreational’, ‘community’, ‘grassroots’, ‘development’, ‘national’ and ‘elite’ (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2017; McKay et al., 2021; Persson, 2022). In a recent paper, responding to a perceived lack of a firm definition of ‘elite’ sports participation, McKay and colleagues (2021) set out a ‘Participant Classification Framework’ that seeks to describe and delineate these differing levels. This framework covers: “Tier 0: Sedentary; Tier 1: Recreationally Active; Tier 2: Trained/Developmental; Tier 3: Highly Trained/National Level; Tier 4: Elite/International Level; or Tier 5: World Class” (McKay et al., 2021, p. 317). This classification framework is particularly useful to those seeking to focus on performance levels. However, the present research seeks to focus on the experience of participating in a sport at any level that involves competition. This could include McKay and colleagues’ (2021) Tiers 1 and ‘above’.

Accordingly, there are a range of different contexts in which children in England participate in competitive sports, including within and outside of school contexts, and at a range of classifications, from recreational to world class. In the school context, the national curriculum for children in England mandates physical education (PE) for all students up to and including year 11, at which stage children are generally aged 15-16 years old (Hemingway et al., 2023). PE activities can include indoor and outdoor sports, competitive team sports, dance and performance-based activities, with a view to developing a range of physical and social skills (DfE, 2023a). The national curriculum also encourages sports participation outside of school “through community links or sports clubs” (DfE, 2023a). Sport that takes place outside of schools is the focus of this research study.

Children who participated in Sport England’s (2023a) study into childhood sporting and physical activity reported playing a wide variety of sport, including team sports, such as football, netball, basketball and hockey, and the largely individual sports of tennis, badminton and athletics. Based on survey responses relating to playing time in the previous week, the most popular sports activities among children aged 5-16 years old were: football, with an estimate of 2.95 million child participants; running, jogging, cross-country or completing ‘The Daily Mile’<sup>2</sup> at just over 2 million participants; and

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<sup>2</sup> A school activity undertaken in many primary schools within the UK, England and indeed worldwide in which children run, walk or wheel for 15 minutes every day, often around a playground or playing field.

swimming or diving at 1.93 million child participants (Sport England, 2023b, Table 5). These data are disaggregated according to gender but further disaggregation by demographics including family affluence, ethnicity and disability is only available in relation to swimming ability. Gender disaggregated data suggest that, of this same age group, girls and boys were approximately equally active in terms of 'all activities', at 92.2 per cent and 91.3 per cent respectively. However, boys were slightly more active in 'sporting activities' than girls, at 82.9 per cent compared to 78.7 per cent (Sport England, 2023b, Tables 9-10).

#### **2.4. Children's participation in rugby union**

As noted earlier, this research study focuses on one team sport – rugby union. In 2022-23, Sport England estimated that a total of nearly 610,000 children aged 5-16 had played rugby in England in the week prior to the survey (Sport England, 2023b, Table 5). This comprised an estimated 152,100 girls in school years 1-11 and 451,100 boys in the same year groups (Sport England, 2023b, Tables 9-10). This puts boys' participation at 75 per cent and girls' at only 25 per cent of overall participation. Disaggregated data by year group are not available.

While child rugby players may be introduced to the sport at school, many then join grassroots clubs to play the game outside of school. According to data from the Rugby Football Union (also known as the RFU and sometimes by its trademark 'England Rugby'), in November 2023, 152,391 child players aged from the Under 6 to Under 18 age groups were registered with 907 affiliated clubs across England (Rugby Football Union [RFU], 2023d). Competition at such clubs takes place in the form of matches, or fixtures, against other grassroots age group teams.

While it is difficult to summarise a sport in a few short sentences, World Rugby, the international federation for rugby union, describes rugby as: "a game in which the object is to carry the ball over the opponents' goal-line and force it to the ground to score" (World Rugby, n.d.). As the federation then notes, one challenge to this is that the ball may only be passed backwards, and only kicked forwards if team-mates are 'behind' the ball. The sport involves varying types of contact, from 'tag' to 'touch' to 'full contact'. Such full contact includes physical contact with opponents, teammates and the ground across 'tackles', 'scrums', 'rucks', 'mauls', 'lineouts' and general play. Rugby union teams most commonly comprise 15 players on the pitch per side, but can

also have seven players, known as Rugby 7s. Alternative options include 'XRugby', with 10, 7 or 5 players, touch and walking rugby (RFU, n.d.-e).

Children's participation in rugby may begin as early as they can walk, through toddler rugby activities. Children can register at grassroots rugby clubs from the age of five years old, where they would join the Under 6 age group of the 'minis' section. From this point, they are considered to participate in what is known as 'age grade rugby', which is regulated by RFU Regulation 15 (RFU, 2023a). Depending on the club and area, children transition from the 'mini' to 'youth' sections once in either Under 12s or Under 13s teams. From the age groups of Under 6s to Under 11s or Under 12s, teams are mixed gender, while, from the Under 12s or Under 13s teams onwards, there are 'youth girls' and 'youth boys' sections, though some clubs continue to refer to 'girls' and 'youth' teams. The recognition of gender as a social construct (Brickell, 2006) and gender-related experiences within sport (Erikainen et al., 2022; Fasting et al., 2004) are discussed at various moments throughout this thesis. This reflects ongoing discussions within academic literature and in sporting communities around disparities in participation that are related to gender identities (see above), but also in relation to discrimination and other maltreatment directed at athletes on the basis of gender identities and/or sexual orientation (Hartmann-Tews, 2022; Schailleé et al., 2021). For clarity and to avoid the 'othering' of those on 'girls' teams (e.g., Messner et al., 1993) I will refer to 'boys' and 'girls' teams throughout this thesis.

Within grassroots rugby, if children show particular talent or promise, they may be selected onto the relevant player development pathway, within which they may continue to play at their clubs but will also play with teams as determined by their 'position' on the pathway (RFU, n.d.-c). Clubs may also complete a club safeguarding audit by way of application to the RFU for children who have reached the age of 17 years old to play on adult club teams (RFU, 2024)

Safeguarding in rugby union in England is governed by the RFU, which sets out a Safeguarding Children Policy and which includes Regulation 21 – Safeguarding within the RFU Regulations. Regulation 21 requires clubs that have age grade rugby, or children aged 17 playing adult rugby, to have a Club Safeguarding Officer. These officers must take the 2.5 hour "In Touch" safeguarding course that is delivered by the RFU Safeguarding Team. Regulation 21 also requires clubs to ensure volunteers, including coaches and officials who work with children, are checked by the Disclosure

and Barring Service (DBS)<sup>3</sup> and that they complete the 30-minute online safeguarding awareness training (RFU, n.d.-d). Further safeguarding training – the “Play it Safe” course – is also available, as is a suite of training relating to contact, injury and other player-welfare related matters.

As noted earlier in Section 2.2, COVID-19-related restrictions affected children’s participation in sports, including rugby. Initial restrictions included limiting training to one-on-one situations, or ‘individual’ coaching and training sessions (RFU, 2020). Over time, training in larger groups and involving increasing levels of contact was reintroduced (RFU, 2020). By the nature of the ages of those involved in this study, any research participants who began playing rugby before the pandemic will have had their rugby experiences affected by these restrictions. Further details about rugby and how the game is played are provided at relevant stages in relation to The Club in Chapter 4 and in the presentation of the findings through Chapters 5-7.

## **2.5. Public consideration of children’s harm in sport in England**

As touched upon in relation to my interest in this research, there have been several high-profile reports relating to the protection of children from harm in sport. The past few decades have seen considerable research into child wellbeing and harm in sport. I discuss this in greater detail below at Section 3.2 but provide a brief introduction here. Brackenridge and Rhind (2014) suggest that the research and activism relating to safeguarding in sport began with reports of abuse in the 1980s before research in the 1990s. The authors describe this as questioning sport’s prior “Cinderella status” through which it had been viewed as “a cultural and political island, defined as separate and free from the rest of society”, which, they suggest, led to lack of awareness of and attention to potential harms in sport (p. 328). More recently, athlete wellbeing has received widespread attention, with athletes speaking out (Ingle, 2021), coaches prosecuted (BBC, 2018) and independent reviews commissioned (Sheldon, 2021; Whyte, 2022) across a range of sports.

In the UK and English context, wellbeing concerns relating to children in sport have included sexual offences by a tennis coach (Sport Resolutions, 2019), concerns over

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<sup>3</sup> The Disclosure and Barring Service is a public body that conducts background checks of employees and volunteers in England, Wales, the Channel Islands and Isle of Man to support safer recruitment.

bullying and poorly functioning complaints mechanisms in swimming clubs (Sport Resolutions, 2023), physical and emotional abuse in gymnastics (Whyte, 2022) and sexual abuse and heading the ball in football (England Football, n.d.; Sheldon, 2021). This is in addition to enquiries into experiences in sport at both child and adult levels, including in cricket (ICEC, 2023) and cycling (Sport Resolutions, 2017). In these cases, the national governing bodies in question have announced strategies or other response efforts to address concerns, often by strengthening reporting and response mechanisms.

Public attention has also been drawn to potential harm in the form of concussion and brain injury within sports, including rugby. News articles have highlighted legal action that is being taken against rugby institutions by groups totalling over three hundred professional and amateur players levelling accusations of negligence and failure to protect from the harmful effects of brain injury (e.g., Bull, 2023; Davies, 2023). Further, Anderson and colleagues' (2023) academic publication, in which they argue that rugby and boxing are sites of "child brain abuse" (p. 12) to the extent that they "intentionally structure" brain trauma (p. 1), attracted considerable attention and public debate (e.g., Patrick, 2024). Though the latter article was published after fieldwork for this study had been completed, the overarching concern relating to and awareness of concussion was present, and evident, during data collection.

Several of the reports noted above are discussed in greater detail later in this thesis as they articulate to the issues with which the research is concerned. For example, the Whyte Review (2022) highlighted the challenges parents and children face in assessing boundaries of necessary and appropriate behaviour, noting that following reports of abuse in gymnastics in the United States: "some gymnasts and parents began to realise that what they had assumed was normal and what they had been conditioned to believe was necessary, was neither appropriate nor necessary" (p. 295). Similarly, the Sheldon Review into non-recent sexual abuse in English football recognised the role of parents, calling for safeguarding training for parents to support disclosure by children and strengthen safeguarding in grassroots football (Sheldon, 2021). In both examples, the authors highlighted perpetrators' influence over parents to 'accept' environments in which their children faced maltreatment, noting the challenges this presented to children (and parents) in recognising and disclosing harm.

## **2.6. Conclusion**

This chapter has provided some insight into the context and background of the research study relating to children's experiences of sport in England. This has included the presentation of concerns about physical activity levels among children within England, about their wellbeing and the potential for experiences of harm within sport. It has also highlighted that potential impacts of COVID-19 on children's wellbeing during and since the pandemic. The next chapter reviews the literature concerning the main theoretical issues with which the research is concerned: wellbeing and harm, agency and consent.

## **Chapter 3 – Literature review**

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the literature relating to each of the research's central concepts: children's agency, wellbeing and harm and consent. The purpose of this chapter is to set out and explore the existing literature concerning these issues, and to highlight areas in which this research study can contribute to knowledge in the field. Each of the key concepts is first introduced and then discussed in connection with children's lives and childhood, before being explored in relation to children's experiences in sport.

### **3.1. Children's agency**

The term 'agency' can be defined quite simply, for example as "action, capacity to act" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2000) or "the capacity of individuals to act independently" (James & James, 2012, p. 9). However, its meaning and application remain subject to considerable discussion. The application of human 'agency' to children and childhood emerged within the 'new sociology of childhood' movement in the 1980s and 1990s (Raithelhuber, 2016). Proponents of the new sociology of childhood asserted that children were more than just passive participants within lives that were largely defined and controlled by others, especially adults (James & Prout, 1997). Indeed, this presentation of children as social actors with agency was part of the 'new paradigm' of childhood (James & Prout, 1997), which was itself asserted as a clear departure and statement of opposition to conceptualisations of children and childhood as pre-adults or pre-adulthood:

In such developmental perspectives, children are viewed only inasmuch as they are moving toward a normatively defined notion of what is an adult and, in that sense, sociologists of childhood have been critical on the grounds that children are only ever known, assessed, measured and normalised according to the criterion of adulthood. (Oswell, 2013, p. 40)

Recognising children as active social agents not only sits firmly at the heart of the new paradigm of the sociology of childhood, it also fits with the concomitant development and passage of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was drafted throughout the 1980s and came into force in 1990 (Sirrko et al., 2019; Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019). The Convention articulates a wide range of civil, political,

economic, social and cultural rights that are inherently owned by and owed to children, thus affirming the role of children as actors within their own lives, and the duty of adults to protect and promote these rights (Esser et al., 2016; Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019).

The meaning of 'agency' in relation to children's lives is extensively discussed, debated and elaborated in literature (e.g., Esser et al., 2016; Oswell, 2013; Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019). The following sections outline conceptualisations of agency in children's lives and, where possible, in relation to children's experiences in sport.

### **3.1.1. Conceptualising agency in children's lives**

Childhood studies scholars offer many definitions relating to children as agents and children's agency. A selection of these is summarised below:

- **Agent:** "One, minimal, way of defining children as agents is to say that they act purposively" (Valentine, 2011, p. 349); "At a basic level, the agentic child should act with intention or purpose" (Leonard, 2016, p. 126); "A social *actor* does something, perhaps something arising from a subjective wish. The term *agent* suggests a further dimension: negotiation with others, with the effect that the interaction makes a difference – to a relationship or to a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints" (Mayall, 2002, p. 21, emphasis in original).
- **Agency:** "[A]n individual's own capacities, competencies, and activities through which they navigate the contexts and positions of their lifeworlds" (Robson et al., 2007, p. 135); "The capacity of individuals to act independently" (James & James, 2012, p. 9); "Agency implies intentionality which is generally achieved through goal-orientated action" (Leonard, 2016, p. 126); "[H]umans' capacity to choose, act and influence matters in their everyday lives" (Sirkko et al., 2019, p. 286).

Key themes within these definitions include purpose, choice, autonomy and independence, but there are nuanced differences that reflect ongoing discussions over the meaning and use of 'agency' in relation to children's lives. Based on a synthesis of these definitions, this research study understands agency to be practised where a child acts intentionally and with purpose. As will be discussed below, such practice of agency is understood to be located relationally to others.

Despite the ready availability of definitions of agency in childhood studies, and while the concept was introduced as a powerful, affirmative statement, it is increasingly acknowledged that this is complicated by the absence of clear “theoretical content” (Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019, p. 183), which leads to challenges in the application of ‘agency’ to children’s lives. A review of the literature suggests that what was a statement of intent in the 1980s and 1990s is now subject to scrutiny (e.g., Haring et al., 2019; Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019). Thus, while there may be general agreement that children are social actors (e.g., Alderson & Yoshida, 2016; James & Prout, 1997; Tisdall & Punch, 2012), there is increasing consideration that the concept of ‘agency’, and particularly its uncritical usage, is unsatisfactory, failing to capture a complete picture of different childhoods and relationships between children and others (e.g., Klocker, 2007; Oswell, 2013; Tisdall, 2016).

Esser and colleagues (2016) describe the interest in childhood agency as a tenet of understanding childhoods as an “almost dogmatic insistence” that is “the result of a critical reaction to nearly all the previous discussions of children and childhood in academic research, which had been criticised as adult-centred” (p. 2). This is not to say that the authors’ work is dismissive of childhood agency, but, rather, that they seek to ‘reconceptualise’ childhood agency to allow what they suggest to be greater utility and application in research and theory (Esser et al., 2016). Further critiques and questions about agency hold that simply stating children have agency can incur negative consequences as a result of the “normative value given to agency” (Tisdall, 2016, p. 365) and the actions attributed to and experiences of children in disadvantaged groups, or who act against social expectations (e.g., Bordonaro & Payne, 2012).

Some of the reconsiderations of childhood agency address the broader agency-structure dichotomy, with many in the field seeking to disrupt this dualism to account for the interactions and relationships between agency and structure in children’s lives (e.g., Larkins, 2019; Leonard, 2016). Giddens (1984) is often cited by those exploring children’s agency and structure, particularly because his work on structuration holds structure and agency out as inextricably linked and as “both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organize” (p. 25). Efforts to reframe agency also take into account other important discourses relating to ‘autonomy’, positioning children as

determinative in their lives, and framing the discussion around agency and autonomy to encourage the view that children “should be allowed to determine” their fates (Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019, p. 184). Perhaps reflecting the ambiguous use of ‘agency’ in childhood studies, some commentators have argued for a shift to ‘autonomy’ as a more functional approach to understand the way children and childhoods interact with social structures, and to drive a ‘normative agenda’ that “children are active shapers of their lifeworlds” (Mühlbacher & Sutterlüty, 2019, p. 249).

The pursuit of conceptualising ‘something more’ than simply childhood agency has resulted in a number of new terms that incorporate agency. Some scholars have extended understandings as a response to the complexity of theorising childhood agency when there are apparent disparities in children’s practice of agency under social circumstances. These efforts help to better reflect “children’s agency that goes against social norms” (Sutterlüty & Tisdall, 2019, p. 184). Bordonaro and Payne (2012), for example, describe several contexts that defy “normative conceptions about childhood” including children in conflict with the law, children engaged in conflict, children living and working on the street and those in child-headed households in their piece on “ambiguous agency” (p. 365). To Bordonaro and Payne, the term ‘ambiguous agency’ describes:

[E]xamples of agency amongst children and youth which is in stark contrast to established and normative conceptions about childhood and moral and social ideals about the kind of behaviour young people should demonstrate, the activities they should be engaged in, and the spaces and places deemed appropriate for them to inhabit. (p. 366)

This characterisation acknowledges and challenges the normative values applied to children’s expressions of agency. One other approach that has been applied to situations in which children’s activity results in or exists within a circumstance of harm, and is thus of potential relevance to this thesis, is the framework of ‘thickness’ and ‘thinness’ of children’s agency:

...‘thin’ agency refers to decisions and everyday actions that are carried out within highly restrictive contexts, characterized by few viable alternatives. ‘Thick’ agency is having the latitude to act within a broad range of options. It is

possible for a person's agency to be 'thickened' or 'thinned' over time and space, and across their various relationships. (Klocker, 2007, p. 85)

Klocker (2007) developed this conceptualisation of thick and thin agency in relation to research with young rural child domestic workers in Tanzania, explaining the development of this theory as follows:

The distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' agency has been adopted because of my reluctance to be dismissive of the pressures placed on rural Tanzanian girls, by poverty and various socio-cultural factors, to enter (and to stay in) potentially appalling employment situations. At the same time, their agency in this process cannot be completely denied, as they understand and actively negotiate the expectations and power relations that surround them while making decisions aimed at improving their own lives and those of their families. (p. 85)

Klocker (2007) identifies factors that 'thin' and 'thicken' the agency of child domestic workers in Tanzania, ensuring that even where children have limited control or influence over their actions, this is understood as a thinning rather than removal of their agency. Esser (2016) suggests the 'thick/thin' dualism risks improperly 'substantialising' agency and can fail to capture a complete picture of the particularities of the child's context and relationships. Instead, Esser (2016) prefers to suggest relationality, arguing that children gain their agency through relationships and interactions with other individuals and entities of all forms, including "material objects, institutions and legal regulations, subjects or documents" (p. 52). Indeed, many scholars' efforts to reconsider childhood agency focus on relationality. In part, this touches upon the agency-structure dichotomy that exists more broadly within sociology, as introduced above. For such scholars, childhood agency is reframed as relational agency because it is intertwined with the actions of others and social structures more generally (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012). Rather than agency being something 'owned' by children, it is something expressed relationally and in the context of power dynamics (Moran-Ellis, 2013). Larkins (2019), for example, writing from a critical realist approach, suggests the benefits of "a generation-sensitive CR [critical realist] account of agency" which takes into account "lifeworlds and relationist understandings of contexts," thus drawing together considerations of relational and ambiguous agency (p. 427).

Leonard (2016) introduces 'generagency' as a "potentially useful model" for understanding such relational agency, and for "bridging structure and agency", using the following definitions:

The 'gener' aspect of the concept involves acknowledging the ongoing relevance of generation for understanding the location of childhood and adulthood and the implications of this positioning for both parties. Both children and adults are part of a wider social order based on generation that permeates and demarcates everyday life. The 'agency' aspect of the concept recognises children as agents who actively construct their own everyday lives and the everyday lives of those around them, while emphasising the importance of locating children's agency within the positioning of childhood relative to adulthood. (p. 132)

Leonard (2016) distinguishes between inter- and intrageneragency, connecting to the practice of agency by children in relation to adults and children respectively, while also recognising the complexity and non-homogeneity of individual, collective and relational experiences of childhood and adulthood. The interactions between inter- and intrageneragency are depicted in the image of the "generagentree" (Leonard 2016, p.135), which shows the "branches" of adulthood and childhood emanating from the same "trunk", or world, with further branches and leaves reflecting the influence of factors including age, class, gender and ethnicity. Using this, Leonard (2016) highlights that childhood and adulthood are "experienced within overlapping, additional, structural categories of class, gender and ethnicity, and agency is practised within and across these varying categories" (p. 136) and notes that "[t]he variables outlined here are social constructions and emerge historically, culturally, socially and economically within specific societies" (p. 137). The concept of 'generagency', in acting as a potential 'bridge' between structure and agency, thus supports exploration of structural and contextual factors, including those relating to generation, that may enable or constrain practices of agency.

Children's relational agency, including using the approach of 'generagency', has been explored by several scholars (e.g., Horgan et al., 2020; Leonard, 2020; Seymour, 2020). Punch (2020) argues that examining generational order is crucial to the future of childhood studies, equating this to the importance of studying gender order in

gender studies. This thesis takes account of this, understanding children's experiences in sport to be closely connected to their relationships with adults and children in their sport, and considering relational conceptualisations of agency as potentially instructive.

### **3.1.2. Explorations of agency in children's sport**

This section reviews literature relating to children's practice of agency in sport. Writing in 2014, Messner and Musto encouraged the application of concepts from childhood studies to the context of children's participation in sport, arguing for the importance of fore-fronting the childhood and childhood studies aspects of children's experiences in sport (Messner & Musto, 2014). More recently, Lang (2022), who has written extensively about child safeguarding within sport, has argued for the importance of the "agentic child construction" (p. 52) as crucial to the realisation of children's participation rights and their protection from harm in sports. Lang (2022) draws on and encourages the application of concepts from childhood studies, positioning children as actively engaged in the negotiation of actions and decisions, including consent decisions in sport.

Though there are gaps in the scholarly consideration of children's agency within sport – which this study seeks to fill – literature has considered agency and children's sport in some ways that are relevant to and informative for this study. Persson and colleagues (2020), for example, studied the reasons why children choose to leave youth sport. In so doing, they framed this as 'opting out' rather than 'dropout', explaining this framing decision as ensuring recognition of agency:

To avoid the normative concern that accompanies the dropout concept, we have chosen to discuss 'opting-out' of sports, which accentuates that youth have reasons for leaving and a form of agency that will always be part of the process of opting out. (Persson et al., 2020, p. 842)

The authors found that a primary reason for children leaving sports settings was related to the 'feeling of not belonging', emphasising their social and relational experiences within sports (Persson et al., 2020). This has particular relevance to this study in its examination of reasons to continue within, or to leave, a sporting

environment, to the extent that these negotiations and decisions touch upon agency, wellbeing and consent.

In her work, Cooky (2010) explores ‘girls’ experiences in connection with agency and structure, particularly in the resistance to or reproduction of structures in the practice of agency. The author found that:

[G]irls are able to exercise agency within the context of GIG [Girls in the Game] to make their own choices, and while this freedom is empowering for girls within the informal structure of the program, this agency may ultimately be reproductive of wider social institutions. (Cooky, 2010, p. 167)

Wamucii (2012) also explored children’s agency through sport, in the context of the co-creation of opportunities for voice and action through a non-governmental sports-related organisation in Kenya. Within this, Wamucii found that the organisation exemplified “how sports can be used as a public device that allows ordinary people to participate in social change through talk and agency” (p. 40), emphasising the potential impact of supporting children’s practices of agency through sport.

In other related contexts, including play and physical education, scholars have considered children’s practices of agency. First, in the context of play, Brus (2018) has presented research on children’s video gaming, focusing on children’s practices of generagency in inter- and intragenerational relationships, stigmatisation and regulation. Brus (2018) found that, though their participation in this activity is heavily regulated, children practice generagency within this over how and when they play. Also taking a relational approach to agency, Waboso and colleagues (2022) conducted qualitative research with children in Canada to explore their experiences of play – among other factors – during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that: “[e]ven during a time when social distancing and quarantine restrictions were in place, their engagements were always contextually, relationally and interdependently co-produced,” that they were not passively shaped by the pandemic, but actively interacted within human and non-human relationships, including by enhancing practice and enjoyment of outdoor play (Waboso et al., 2022, p. 12). Finally, in the context of physical education, Wilkinson and Penney (2021) used case study work to

explore children's practice of agency within physical education in England, highlighting children's active engagement in policy enactment through agentic practices.

Other research signals to the importance of exploring children's agency in sport, including in relation to how sporting norms may restrict or constrain children's agency. Hughes and Coakley's (1991) 'sport ethic' is a concept that will be discussed extensively in this thesis. It relates to athletes' experiences of seeking to be "an athlete" and the sacrifices the pursuit of excellence can involve, including risks of pain, injury and over-exertion (p. 310). This has been adopted by several researchers conducting research into wellbeing and harm in sport and has implications for the consideration of agency. Malcom (2006), for example, has explored how the 'sport ethic' may encourage children playing recreational softball to push beyond boundaries to train excessively and while injured. Concerns over the sport ethic were extended within an article by Stafford and colleagues (2013a), in a piece based on Alexander and colleagues' (2011) study, which is introduced in detail in Section 3.2. Here, the authors note that "studies describe the normative culture prevalent in sport where experiencing pain and injury gradually come to be accepted by athletes as a normal part of sport participation" (Stafford et al., 2013a, p. 288). Their findings aligned with this, with the authors emphasising the importance that all child participants "feel empowered and able to speak up for their right to participate in sport in ways that are safe, fun and carefree", where speaking up may include challenging norms and expected or accepted behaviour (Stafford et al., 2013a, p. 298). Channon and Matthews (2021) have connected the practice of agency and normativity to consent in their work on the communication of consent in adult combat sports. They note, for example, that a boxer might prefer to withdraw from a fight and blame it on a medic: "fighters may lack agency to withdraw consent once (implicitly) given. Thus, they may require the intervention of a third party, particularly someone whose primary concern is the athlete's welfare, to restore this freedom to them" (p. 911). This work is discussed extensively in this thesis.

Conducting research, including the present study, into children's experiences and practices of agency in sport may further illuminate how children experience and negotiate limits and boundaries within competitive sport. In particular, the practice of

agency by children, including relationally, is under-explored in relation to children's sport. This research seeks to contribute knowledge to fill this gap.

### **3.2. Children's wellbeing and harm**

The word 'wellbeing' appears with increasing prominence in everyday discussions around children's lives. Though scholarly conversations about wellbeing can be traced far back in philosophy (Fattore et al., 2017), events recent to this research, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis and international conflicts, have, perhaps, brought considerations and conversations to the fore. In 2022, the UK Government published an evidence review relating to children's wellbeing in the UK, noting that:

The wellbeing of children and young people has been a focus of Government policy for a number of years. The impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has further emphasised the importance of supporting our children and young people's wellbeing, which is why it remains a central part of the Department for Education's plans for recovery... As the focus has shifted beyond the immediate impacts of COVID-19 towards recovery and the future, a range of national and global issues have emerged or come into focus. These include war in Ukraine, the increasing cost of living, concerns over the environment and climate change, and wider social issues. (DfE, 2023b, p. 10)

The UK Government's positioning of children's experiences of wellbeing in relation to national and international events provides useful context to the consideration of such experiences within the research study. As discussed in the previous chapter, children in England, and therefore children within the research study, experienced a range of restrictions on their movement and activities during the pandemic (Holt & Murray, 2022). In the abovementioned report, the UK Government noted that evidence relating to children's so-called 'personal wellbeing' is "mixed" (p. 18), with some suggestion that overall wellbeing is returning to pre-pandemic levels, but with caution that "anxiousness" is increasing (DfE, 2023b, p. 29). The report further notes that the age groups of 14-16 and 16-18 years old had lower average happiness, life satisfaction and feelings of life being "worthwhile" and that they reported more anxiousness than those in lower age groups (DfE, 2023b, p. 43). This suggests that children's wellbeing within England remains a topic of concern.

### **3.2.1. Approaches to understanding children's wellbeing**

Though the concept of 'wellbeing' continues to receive increasing consideration in relation to children's lives, its definition and measurement remain much discussed, and there are several different approaches to understanding what it may mean (Garvis & Pendergast, 2020; Tisdall, 2015). The following section explores both definitions of wellbeing and the ways in which it has been measured, particularly in relation to children.

As noted above, human interest in wellbeing as distinct from 'happiness' can be traced far back in Western and Eastern philosophy (Fattore et al., 2017). Its prominent contemporary usage is suggested by some to have emerged with efforts to recognise an individual's health status as more than medical and with improvements to the measurement of wellbeing through more than indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Statham & Chase, 2010; Voukelatou et al., 2020). Though wellbeing, as applied to children, is not consistently defined or measured (Fattore et al., 2017), much of the language used to understand child wellbeing centres on the key motivation to understand children's health, happiness and satisfaction and the quality of their lives (Fattore et al., 2021; Statham & Chase, 2010; UNICEF, 2011). Ben-Arieh and colleagues (2014) offer a definition of wellbeing as "a desirable state of being happy, healthy or prosperous", elaborating that it "refers to both subjective feelings and experiences as well as to living conditions. Well-being is also related to the fulfillment of desires, to the balance of pleasure and pain, and to opportunities for development and self-fulfillment" (p. 1). In the main, the thesis follows this definition as a starting point for discussion, with the further understanding that wellbeing can be understood and approached through a number of conceptualisations, as set out below.

Ben-Arieh and colleagues (2014) also discuss the concepts of 'subjective' and 'objective' wellbeing, a distinction that is common within wellbeing literature, and a conceptualisation that this study also considers, with a particular focus on subjective wellbeing:

Children's well-being should take into account: (1) children's conditions of living and "objective" measures of their well-being; (2) children's perceptions, evaluations, and aspirations regarding their own lives – including children's subjective well-being; and (3) perceptions, evaluations, and aspirations of other

relevant social agents (stakeholders) about children's lives and conditions of living, i.e., the opinions of their parents, teachers, pediatricians, educators, social professionals, and so on. (p. 16)

In considering this, the authors note that there are tensions between subjective and objective wellbeing, particularly in relation to how children's "well-being encompasses both children's lives in the present and how the present influences their future and their development" (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014, p. 3). Axford and colleagues (2014) – writing in the same handbook – have explored the discussion and measurement of children's wellbeing in relation both to subjective and objective wellbeing. They define subjective wellbeing as "how children and young people assess their lives" (p. 2700). Further, they explore the measurement of child wellbeing as follows:

Objective well-being covers different dimensions of children's health and development – behavior, emotions, attainment, and so on – and, to some extent, the factors that impinge on these, such as housing, parenting, environment, and socioeconomic situation. Subjective well-being concerns how children and young people assess their lives, in particular how satisfied or happy they are with aspects of their lives or their lives overall. (Axford et al., 2014, p. 2700)

They go on to identify six main dimensions of wellbeing, with the first four largely 'objective' and the final two 'subjective': physical wellbeing, material wellbeing, social relations, environment, psychological health and spirituality, noting that "self-determination" is crucial to subjective wellbeing (Axford et al., 2014, p. 2703).

Operationalising wellbeing requires moving beyond definitions to how it will be measured and analysed. This is reflected in the literature, and researchers and institutions have taken a range of approaches to develop indicators and domains for use to assess and explore wellbeing. Between 2014 and 2020, the Office for National Statistics measured child wellbeing using 31 indicators that fell within seven domains (Jordan & Rees, 2020, p. 2). These indicators were updated in 2020 following a literature review and consultation with children and young people that resulted in 71 measures and eight domains: personal wellbeing; our relationships; health; what we do; where we live; household finances; schools and skills; future and voice (Jordan & Rees, 2020, pp. 6-12). The Children's Society, a non-governmental organisation

based in the UK, administers an annual “Good Childhood Report” based on a survey of 10 domains that it uses to assess wellbeing, in addition to a question about overall life satisfaction (The Children’s Society, 2023). These domains are family, time use, home, friends, health, future, choice, things, appearance and school (The Children’s Society, 2023). Internationally, the OECD Child Well-being Data Portal takes in five domains and 59 indicators, while ‘Children’s Worlds’, the International Survey of Children’s Wellbeing, includes eight wellbeing related domains in a questionnaire of 10 main parts (Children’s Worlds, 2019).

The discussion above demonstrates that there are a multitude of indicators that have been used to measure children’s wellbeing. Further, researchers have made concerted efforts to include children in their development of understanding of and indicators to measure wellbeing (e.g., Fattore et al., 2021; Fattore et al., 2017; Jordan & Rees, 2020). A 2012 literature review of research representing children’s voices in relation to wellbeing indicates the range of approaches to measuring wellbeing, but also the commonality across this range (Dex & Hollingworth, 2012). It identified research covering 74 domains of wellbeing and organised these into three categories: quality of relationships; quality of environment; and self and freedoms. Fattore and colleagues’ (2017) study involving 126 children in New South Wales, Australia, arrived at a child standpoint on wellbeing that has similar broad findings. They identified three overlapping and interconnected key domains of safety and security, agency and autonomy, and self and identity, existing within what the authors refer to as the ‘dimensions’ of health, economic wellbeing, leisure and emotional/relational wellbeing (Fattore et al., 2017, p. 49). Thematically, it is possible to identify common threads across these dimensions and domains, including feelings of safety, sense of self and relationship satisfaction. This thesis draws on these for analysis and discussion.

The existing research set out above offers valuable insights to this research study by presenting findings relating to children’s understandings and constructions of wellbeing. Seeking children’s views on their experiences of wellbeing positions children as key informants about their lives (Camfield et al., 2009, citing Ben-Arieh, 2004). It also supports the exploration of ‘experienced’ wellbeing as described by Martela and Sheldon (2019). In taking conceptualisations and measurement of wellbeing forward, this research study takes these domains and dimensions into

account, especially in relation to safety, sense of self and relationships, while providing the opportunity for participants to add their own views and perspectives (as discussed in Chapter 4 – Methodology).

### ***3.2.2. Approaches to understanding children's wellbeing and harm***

In addition to considering wellbeing, this research seeks to explore perceptions and views relating to harm to children in competitive sport. There are close connections between harm and children's wellbeing. When a child experiences harm, this will often be detrimental to the child's wellbeing in some way, with research suggesting that adverse childhood experiences can lead to adverse outcomes in both childhood and adulthood (Berger & Slack, 2014). However, 'harm' does not necessarily act to the detriment of all forms of wellbeing. Axford and colleagues (2014), for example, highlight that although choices can lead to negative impacts on wellbeing – they give the example of a medical patient refusing treatment – the freedom to choose can contribute to "happiness and desire satisfaction", and therefore support subjective wellbeing (pp. 2703-2704). There is thus a complexity to the understanding and experience of harm in relation to wellbeing, something explored in this research study and thesis. To support this, this section seeks to draw out definitions of harm and measures taken to protect children from harm – often known as 'safeguarding' measures.

In England, where this research took place, the legal definition of 'harm' to a child in the context of childcare and child protection is "ill-treatment or the impairment of health or development including, for example, impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill-treatment of another" (Children Act 1989, s. 31(9)). In legal child protection structures – those that seek to protect children from harm – the definition of 'harm' is central, because where there are concerns a child has or will experience 'significant harm', this triggers a range of legal interventions to protect the child. The Children Act 1989 supplements the definition of harm by defining "development" as "physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural development", "health" as "physical or mental health" and "ill-treatment" as inclusive of "sexual abuse and forms of ill-treatment which are not physical" (Children Act 1989, s. 31(9)).

The UK ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991 and is required to implement its provisions. Children have a right to be protected

from harm under Articles 19 and 32-36 of the Convention, and legislation in England and Wales, as noted above. The Department for Education's "Working together to safeguard children" acts as statutory guidance on safeguarding for those working with children in a range of settings, including education, social work, health, public services, voluntary organisations and sports (DfE, 2023c). According to this guidance, 'safeguarding' involves help and support, protection from maltreatment, prevention of impairment, securing a safe environment of care, supporting families and acting to support the best outcomes for children (DfE, 2023c, pp. 7-8). In England, a wide range of organisations and individuals have safeguarding responsibilities in relation to children, including schools, public service bodies and their officers, children's organisations and workers and sports clubs and their officials, coaches and volunteers.

Sports' safeguarding standards were introduced following concerns over child wellbeing (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014). The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has issued several consensus statements, including on non-accidental violence and training for elite child athletes (Mountjoy et al., 2008; Mountjoy et al., 2016). International guidance also comes from the International Safeguards for Children in Sport (International Safeguarding Children in Sport Working Group, 2016). In the UK, the National Action Plan for Child Protection in Sport was ratified in 2000, and, in England and Wales, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) hosts the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU), which oversees safeguarding and offers guidance (Everley, 2020). Sports' national governing bodies must aim to meet safeguarding standards to receive government funding, as set out in "Working together to safeguard children": "All National Governing Bodies of Sport that receive funding from either Sport England or UK Sport should aim to meet the Standards for Safeguarding and Protecting Children in Sport" (DfE, 2023c, p. 130). Further, efforts to protect children in England and Wales from harm within sport include the recent extension of existing legislation to make sexual relationships between all children and adults who are in a position of trust as sport coaches illegal (Sexual Offences Act 2003, s. 21-22A(2)).

### **3.2.3. Concepts and considerations of harm in sport**

Stirling (2009), writing about harm in sport, defines maltreatment as “volitional acts that result in or have the potential to result in physical injuries and/or psychological harm” (p. 1091, citing Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005), thus positioning harm as a potential consequence of maltreatment. Fortier and colleagues (2020) adopt a similar approach in their exploration of abuse and neglect in sport, describing child abuse as resulting in actual or potential harm. Tuakli-Wosornu and colleagues (2020) focus on non-accidental harms in their review relating to ‘para-athletics’ and note that language around abuse and maltreatment in sport can be somewhat confused, with several terms used interchangeably. They note: “we use the general umbrella term ‘non-accidental harm(s)’ in this manuscript, meaning ‘volitional acts that result in or have the potential to result in physical injury and/or psychological harm’,” reasoning “we feel this term captures harms that are conscious and readily apparent to others (e.g., physical abuse), as well as those that may be unconscious and less readily apparent to others (e.g., financial abuse)” (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2020, p. 2). These definitions reflect a key conceptualisation that maltreatment and abuse are causes or potential causes of ‘harm’ to children in sport.

In their examination of research relating to child protection in sport over 30 years, Brackenridge and Rhind (2014) use the phrase “abuse and non-accidental harm”, suggesting, perhaps, that there may be a distinction between the two (p. 327). Within this article, the authors note that related literature uses a range of definitions and conceptualisations of abuse, including differing in using either ‘harm’ or ‘abuse’ (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014). Brackenridge and Rhind’s (2014) use of the term ‘non-accidental harm’ comports with Brackenridge’s involvement in the development of the International Olympic Committee’s consensus statement on harassment and abuse as ‘non-accidental violence’ in sport (Mountjoy et al., 2016). This statement’s use of the word ‘violence’ rather than harm is explained to be in line with the IOC and the United Nations’ terminology (Mountjoy et al., 2016).

In their major 2011 study on the experiences of children participating in sport in the UK, Alexander and colleagues (2011) use the term ‘harm’ to explore maltreatment and negative experiences in sport settings. The authors describe different forms of ‘abuse’ that fall under an umbrella categorisation of ‘harm’ that is used to assess maltreatment

or negative experiences (Alexander et al., 2011). In doing so, they develop an 'informal index' of categories and types of harm represented by behaviours:

- Emotional harm including teasing, bullying and humiliating treatment
- Self-harm
- Sexual harm including sexual harassment, sexual abuse and organised abuse
- Physical harm including training while injured or exhausted and aggressive and violent behaviour. (Alexander et al., 2011, p. 21)

Emotional, self, sexual and physical harm are all forms of harm that exist outwith sport, but this index provides examples of how these terms may be applied or experienced within the sporting context. The collation of behaviours and actions by type of harm is pertinent because, as Alexander and colleagues (2011) explain, and as noted in relation to the 'sport ethic' earlier, some forms of harm are not always identified as such by children participating in sport, though they may "express distress" in relation to behaviours that would be categorised within this index (p. 36). This thesis therefore approaches the discussion of harm by drawing on these main categories offered by Alexander and colleagues (2011).

The language of 'non-accidental harm', or indeed of non-accidental violence (Brackenridge & Rhind, 2014; Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2020), infers the existence of 'accidental' harm, though this is generally not defined or explained, perhaps reflecting the assumption that sport may well involve accidental injury and other more general accidents. Indeed, participation in sport anticipates exertion and injury (Alexander et al., 2011) but research has noted that some training and injury, often known as 'overuse', can be a form of non-accidental harm, or that intensive exertion and training can lead to harm (Brenner et al., 2007; Malcom, 2006; Stafford et al., 2013a). In connection with this, Alexander and colleagues (2011) distinguish between perpetrated abuse and abuse or harm occurring due to "norms of sporting culture" or the "inherent physicality of the sport" (p. 78). This recognises different norms within, without and between sports that could influence constructions and understandings of harm, including around pain or exertion that is or is not understood to be harm.

In a recent paper, Anderson and colleagues (2023) argue that some forms of injury anticipated within sport are so serious that they should be categorised as a form of

child abuse – “child brain abuse” (p. 12). In their article, which focuses on boxing and rugby, the authors posit that the *intentionality* within sports that, they suggest, are structured to involve impact to the brain makes this impact a form of child abuse (Anderson et al., 2023). They also note that such injuries may fall under a form of neglect in the failure to protect from harm (Anderson et al., 2023). The authors describe contradictions in efforts to protect children from harm within sport but to allow the contact that they argue leads to “now brain injuries and later brain diseases” (Anderson et al., 2023, p. 2). These wellbeing concerns and implications in relation to consent to children’s participation in contact sports are discussed in several sections of this thesis, including, in particular, Chapters 6 and 7.

Finally, children’s harm in sport has also been considered in relation to children’s *rights* in sport. While the UNCRC does not contain any direct references to sports, the vast majority of its substantive provisions have a direct bearing on children in sport (David, 2005). This includes rights to protection from harm, as set out in Articles 19, 32-36 of the Convention, as well as participation rights (e.g. Articles 12-15, 17 and 31), the right to non-discrimination (Article 2) and to health (Article 24), among many other rights. In this regard, David highlights the importance of child-rights-compliant sport to protect children from all forms of harm, including violence, exploitation abuse and neglect (2005). Exploring children’s and coaches’ understandings, and experiences of rights in relation to sport in Sweden, Eliasson (2017) notes recognition that rights continue to be violated with sport, despite being propounded in international law and, in the case of Sweden, incorporated into national law. Reporting on empirical research relating to qualitative research with 12 children and six coaches in floorball and equestrianism, Eliasson (2017) found that, despite the inclusion of UNCRC rights in sports policy, awareness and implementation were both limited, leaving athletes vulnerable to violations and harm. Protection and promotion of children’s rights does not just protect from the direct violation of harm. Lang (2022) argues that taking a child rights approach to sports helps to secure children’s full enjoyment of participation rights while helping to secure protection rights by positioning children as rights bearers with power.

### **3.2.4. Explorations of children's wellbeing and harm in children's sport**

A review of literature relating to children and sport yields materials relating both to how sport may support positive wellbeing and how children's wellbeing may be threatened while playing it, including through different forms of harm, injury and pain.

Previous studies have connected sports, physical activity and children's wellbeing. Eime and colleagues (2013) conducted a systematic review of both psychological and social benefits to children and adolescents' participation in sport. The authors found that sports activity supported children and adolescents' self-esteem, social interaction and mental health wellbeing to the extent that it reduced symptoms of depression (Eime et al., 2013). In their contribution to the Handbook on Child Well-Being, Ommundsen and colleagues focus on the role of sport in child wellbeing, both in terms of positive and negative contributions to a child's physical, cognitive and mental, psychological and social aspects of wellbeing (Ommundsen et al., 2014). They note "clear evidence that sports, in particular team sports, can enhance well-being in children and youth" but further consider that "well-being outcomes of sport participation are conditional and required autonomy supportive and mastery-oriented motivational climates, allowing for children's self-determination, competence development and sense of being socially related" (Ommundsen et al., 2014, p. 934).

In their research, Van Woudenberg and colleagues (2020) explored connections between happiness and physical activity in 1,484 adolescents (aged 8-17 years old) in the Netherlands. While happiness is not the same as wellbeing, Ben Arie and colleagues (2014) consider it to be "understood as a basic indicator of subjective wellbeing, yet one that is difficult to capture by measurement" (p. 4). Thus, when van Woudenberg and colleagues (2020) note that physical activity and happiness are positively related, this suggests a connection between the experience of wellbeing and participation in physical activity or sport. Research conducted with 6,771 children aged 11-17 in New Zealand presents a similar view. Wilson and colleagues (2022) reported that as well as participation in sport having an overall positive impact on wellbeing, participation in *organised* sport and *team* sport reported higher benefits to wellbeing than recreational and individual activities. They suggest social, relational, competence and achievement based factors in the wellbeing benefits of sport to children, recalling the domains noted earlier (Wilson et al., 2022).

Fry and Gano-Overway (2010) have highlighted the potential positive impact of what they term 'caring climates' in team sports. They surveyed 184 soccer programme participants aged 10 to 17 years old, using the 'Caring Climate Scale' to assess the extent to which participants experienced their sporting environment to be caring and to assess the connection between this and enjoyment of the sport (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010). The study found that "youth sport participants' perceptions of the caring climate were positively associated with their enjoyment" (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010, p. 300). The impact of different sporting environments on children's experiences in sport has also been explored in relation to team-sport membership, including by Khan and colleagues (2023) who conducted longitudinal research with 4,242 children in Australia over eight years, starting when they were 6-7 years old (p. 1118). Their research found that "team sports participation was more strongly associated with positive mental health outcomes compared to individual sports" (Khan et al., 2023, p. 1122). While exploring potential reasons for this, the authors suggested that "peer acceptance during team sports may contribute to adolescents' enjoyment of physical activity, which may further promote their sports participation and improve wellbeing" (Khan et al., 2023, p. 1122).

Literature has also considered children's experiences in sport in connection with intersectionality including, but not limited to, gender, race, class and disability. Dagkas (2016), for example, argues: "Racism, sexism, classism, and other associated factors of disadvantage all play an important role in constraining BME young people's access to holistic, meaningful, and empowering learning in formal and informal sport and in physical culture experiences" (p. 227). In an example considering children's experiences of gendered practices within sport, Persson (2022) conducted ethnographic fieldwork with two recreational football teams for 14-15 year old girls in Norway. The author found that girls were limited by gendered practices including gendered hierarchies, gender-based views that girls were inferior to boys and the unequal distribution of resources as connected to perceived differences (Persson, 2022). Referring to Leonard's (2016) generagency, Persson (2022) also highlights children's practices of agency within gendered practices:

The girls in this study are themselves active in reproducing the current gender regime, as they to a large degree accept the premise that female players have

other (and limited) qualities and because they, understandably, allow their motives and participatory patterns within football to be shaped accordingly. (p. 12)

Research relating to children's sports and disability has also identified barriers to participation and marginalisation of children with disabilities. Scholars point to ableism within sport, with Hay (2013) explaining that:

Ability in sport is a concept that people tend to take for granted... conceptions of ability are almost always associated with the factors that differentiate between people. They represent the privileging of a certain understanding of ability rather than the existence of only one concept or paradigm. (p. 87)

Hay (2013) argues that the reconsidered social construction of ability within sport will increase its inclusivity. Darcy and colleagues (2020) also note that "ability is at the centre of sport" (p. 210), which, they argue, leads to marginalisation. In their research relating to the experiences of children with disabilities in sport, Darcy and colleagues (2020) administered an online survey seeking quantitative and qualitative data to children with disabilities, parents, coaches, teachers and officials at schools, sports clubs and "disability organizations" in New South Wales and Victoria, Australia (p. 209). The authors received 880 responses, including 379 qualitative responses, and found that external constraints "present disabling barriers to sport participation for CwD [children with disabilities]", highlighting such challenges as cost, flexibility, location, and age or competition structures (Darcy et al., 2020, p. 219).

In relation to the consideration of harm in sport, Alexander and colleagues (2011) conducted their UK-based study with over 6,000 participants aged 18-22 years old who responded in relation to their experiences of organised sport when under the age of 16. Participants were self-selecting and drawn from further education institutions within the UK and formed a large sample, which the authors recognised to be non-representative (Alexander et al., 2011). The study involved a sample size of 6,124 survey responses, which led to 89 follow-up in-depth telephone interviews (pp. 22-23). The study found that, in their main or second sport, 75 per cent of survey respondents had experienced emotional harm, 29 per cent had experienced sexual harassment, 24 per cent had experienced physical harm, 10 per cent self-harm and 3 per cent

sexual harm (Alexander et al., 2011, p. 32). The research team conducted in-depth individual interviews with 89 participants, adding qualitative data to support analysis in relation to children's experiences. The research findings suggest that the vast majority of children had experienced disrespectful treatment that, the authors suggest, would not be tolerated in other aspects of children's lives (Alexander et al., 2011). Overall, the authors note that children's experiences reflected a combination of positive and negative factors: "[i]n the main, young people painted a positive picture of sport participation. However, the survey results highlight that sitting alongside the considerable benefits of participating in sport were a range of more negative and harmful experiences" (Alexander et al., 2011, p. 94).

More recent research into interpersonal violence against children in sport in six European countries found a high prevalence of experiences of violence within sport (Hartill et al., 2023). The study brought together results from surveys in six countries – Austria, Belgium, Germany, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom – based on the novel Interpersonal Violence Against Children in Sport Questionnaire, which was administered with a total sample of 10,302 participants (Hartill et al., 2023). The survey sample was a convenience sample of adults aged 18 to 30 years old who had participated in sport while under the age of 18. The research covered seven national samples of 1,472 respondents each, with one nation – Belgium – having two sample sets and two individual responses deleted, to reach a total of 10,302 (Hartill et al., 2023). Hartill and colleagues (2023) found that 75.0 per cent of respondents reported at least one form of interpersonal violence within sport, with psychological violence being the most prevalent at 64.8 per cent, compared to physical (43.8 per cent), neglect (36.8 per cent), non-contact sexual violence at 34.6 per cent and contact sexual violence at 20.0 per cent (p. 6). The overall statistic of 75.0 per cent compares to a higher prevalence of violence experienced by respondents in relation to experiences outside of sport, at 81.5 per cent for all forms of violence (p. 6). This reflects that harm both within and outside of sport remains a concern.

As noted earlier, Alexander and colleagues (2011) recognise a potential difference between harm that is 'perpetrated' and that which is part of the "norms of sporting culture" or "inherent physicality of the sport" (p. 78). This recalls Malcom's (2006) research into recreational softball in the United States in which the author found that

the co-constructed 'sport ethic' encourages children to "deal with pain and minor injuries by 'shaking them off' and 'toughing them out'" such that pain becomes a normalised, expected and even desirable outcome of sporting participation (Malcom, 2006, p. 496). Here, the author refers to Hughes and Coakley's (1991) 'sport ethic', which is defined in relation to the key criteria for "being an athlete", which include "making sacrifices for the game", "striving for distinction", "accepting risks and playing through pain" and "refusing to accept limits in the pursuit of possibilities" (pp. 309-310). Thus the 'sport ethic' provides an approach to examine how child athletes may construct and understand harm, including acceptable experiences of 'harm' within their sport.

Research relating to harm in sport has also explored injury risk and incidence within child and youth sport. One area of focus for studies that have looked at the risk of sport injury is the incidence of injury in relation to sports specialisation. Carder and colleagues (2020), for example, conducted a systematic review of literature relating to children who play a variety of sports and those who specialise in one sport, finding that sports specialisation was significantly associated with a higher rate of injury. This study did not report on experiences of such injury, but the findings suggest that intensity of training may be connected to higher injury rates.

As noted earlier, Anderson and colleagues (2023) present extensive detail regarding the consequences of brain injury in impact sports including boxing and rugby, arguing that these risks are intentionally structured to be part of the sport. Others have examined injury rates in youth rugby union specifically, including West and colleagues (2023) who found that injuries most commonly occurred as a result of tackles, at 55 per cent of injury events for males and 71 per cent for females (p. 1376). Among the key points from this article include the description of injury and concussion rates as "high" and the finding that the most common injury sites for males are lower extremities or ligament sprains and head, neck and concussion injuries for female rugby players (West et al., 2023, p. 1376). Recognising these risks of injury and harm within rugby, and in sports in general, provides context and background to the discussions and exploration of children's experiences of harm and injury later in this thesis.

As explained in relation to the legal framework in England, parents have a duty to protect their children and support their wellbeing, within their 'parental responsibilities'

(Children Act 1989, s. 3). The role of parents in supporting and protecting children in sport has received attention within the literature. Knight and colleagues (2020), for example, have explored research relating to the role and impact of parents and child wellbeing in sports, noting the challenges and importance of parental engagement. They note that parents are heavily involved in and relied upon by children and institutions to facilitate children's participation in sport. They suggest that while research has identified both benefits and challenges in parental engagement, including, for example, positive support and negative pressure, there is complexity to parental engagement in children's sport. The authors highlight, for example, the fine balance between parental support and the child's experience of excessive burden or pressure to perform (Knight et al., 2020). Children's experiences of parental engagement also form part of the findings of empirical research by Harris and colleagues (2023), which highlights that children participating in specialised sports experience parental pride and encouragement as positive for children's wellbeing.

Research has also identified that parents can become "silent bystanders" to harm in sport (Kerr & Stirling, 2012, p. 201). Based on qualitative research involving 16 parents of retired elite child athletes, the authors identified a socialisation process by which parents became bystanders to this harm. This started from entry to a talent pathway to handing control of their child's experience to coaches, developing concerns over the elite athlete experience – e.g., the intensity of training – then accepting this, before experiencing guilt once the child had finished the sport and it was possible to look back on the experience (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). They suggest parental education and informational support may help prevent such abuse (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). In addition to literature on parental involvement (e.g., Knight, 2019) and the role of parents in protecting child athlete welfare (e.g., Kerr & Stirling, 2012), research into parenting and sport has also covered parental consent decision making in relation to in sports (e.g., Boneau et al., 2020), as explored below in Section 3.3 and within Chapter 7.

This review of existing literature has highlighted the presence and potential for both positive wellbeing and harm within children's competitive sport. Research relating to the positive impact of sport on children's wellbeing has tended to focus on wellbeing indicators connected with mental health (e.g., Eime et al., 2013) and happiness (e.g., van Woudenberg et al., 2020) or the enjoyment of a sport (e.g., Fry & Gano-Overway,

2010). However, there are gaps in relation to the exploration of children's experiences of wellbeing more broadly within sport. Similarly, research that has considered how children experience and understand wellbeing dimensions has not yet focused on sporting contexts but provides extensive background for the exploration of children's wellbeing experiences in sport (e.g., Fattore et al., 2017).

Research relating to harm towards children within sport provides context and support to the analysis of how children experience and understand harm within sport. There is now extensive research into the prevalence of maltreatment of children (e.g., Hartill et al., 2023), and discussion of normalised behaviours that can be considered harmful within sport (e.g., Malcom, 2006). However, this research study seeks to fill a gap in knowledge of how those involved in sport, particularly children, construct and understand harm, and how this can be connected to their experiences of wellbeing.

### **3.3. Parental and children's consent**

As set out earlier, a core consideration of this study is how children, parents and coaches view and understand parental and children's consent in the context of children's sport. The review in Section 3.1 discussed children's practices of agency, including in relation to their participation in sport, while Section 3.2 considered how wellbeing and harm within sport are closely linked to the decision – by and with a parent and/or child – to participate in a sport. The following section discusses consent and begins to consider how consent may connect to both the practice of agency and experiences of wellbeing and harm within children's sport.

Consent is a concept that functions across a wide range of frameworks and contexts. It can be understood as agreement to a specific act (Greenblatt & Valens, 2018) and is often highlighted in relation to its potentially 'transformative' function, which can make an action acceptable if it would otherwise not be so (Guerrero, 2021). For example, with appropriate consent, drawing on private property is a welcome, decorative mural, but without consent it could be criminal damage. This type of example exists across a range of contexts. Transporting someone else's child to in a car *with* consent is helpful but, without parental consent, is potentially a crime. Guerrero (2021) suggests that there are three "uncontroversial" properties of consent: 1) it is always attached to an agent; 2) there is always an object of consent; and 3) it is morally transformative (pp. 351-352). He also suggests that "there is always

*something* that someone is consenting *to*, even if that something has imprecise or underspecified boundaries” (Guerrero, 2021, p. 352, emphasis in original). For Guerrero (2021), boundaries that realise the potentially transformative nature of consent are crucial to the understanding and experience of consent, but, he notes:

[I]t is also hard to know the boundaries of the state of affairs to which consent has been given, even when one knows that the person in question possesses an attitude of affirmative endorsement to some state of affairs. (p. 360)

Guerrero (2021) explores this further by noting that parties to consent often engage in a range of efforts to clarify boundaries, whether through legal documents or detailed communication. One such example relates to the medical context: an incision by a knife *with* consent is surgery but without is a form of assault. Indeed, in the medical and research fields, informed consent is at the core of not only best practice but also *lawful* practice (see, e.g., Alderson, 2012, 2017; Azevedo & Dall'Agnol, 2019). Valid consent also sits at the core of legally valid contracts (McKendrick, 2021) and is crucial and transformative in criminal and tort law (Dyson & Randall, 2015).

As Hurd (1996) notes, “consent turns a trespass into a dinner party; a battery into a handshake...” with consent the crucial line between a social, civil or criminal offence and a welcome interaction (p. 123). Channon and Matthews (2021), writing about communication of consent in combat sport, suggest that consent “forms the basis upon which individual people interact with each other in mutually agreeable ways” (p. 900). As such, consent is often noticed in its absence (Weinberg, 2016) or (in)validity (Moore & Reynolds, 2018) and it is no longer valid once withdrawn. Key elements of valid consent include information, freedom and capacity to consent (Moore & Reynolds, 2018). The following sections review literature relating to parental and children’s consent generally, and in sporting contexts more specifically, setting the foundation for exploration and impact of both in the context of competitive sport. In these sections and the thesis as a whole, parental consent is consent given by parents to something that happens to or in relation to a child. Children’s consent is provided in relation to themselves.

### **3.3.1. Frameworks and experiences of parental and children's consent**

The concept and use of parental consent draws on the legal framework of parental responsibility (e.g., Children Act 1989, s.3) and parents' duties to "protect and maintain" the child and to protect the child from harm (e.g., Children Act 1989, s. 31; Adoption and Children Act 2002, s. 120). Under the Children Act 1989, parental responsibility lasts until a child reaches the age of 18 years old. This responsibility is automatically acquired by a child's birth mother and a partner who is married or in a civil partnership with the mother at the time of birth. Unmarried partners can acquire parental responsibility through birth registration, while other adults – for example, fathers or step-parents – can apply to the court for it. It is also possible that a guardian or local authority will obtain parental responsibility in limited cases related to care and protection. While parental responsibilities are not defined within the Children Act 1989, courts have interpreted them to include taking decisions over children's names, religion, education, medical treatment, protection, maintenance and lawful discipline (Foster, 2023).

Parental consent and children's consent interact differently depending on the subject matters or object of the consent decisions. In the medical framework, informed consent is one of the key principles of delivering medical intervention, deriving from 'autonomy' as one of the four prima facie medical ethical principles (Azevedo & Dall'Agnol, 2019). In medical practice, it is a standard requirement to seek consent from or in relation to a patient (Gillon, 1994) and the question over whether to seek a child's consent for their own treatment or whether parental consent is required relates to capacity and age. In medicine, children who are above the age of 16 years old are presumed to have the capacity to make their own consent decisions – unless the medical professionals have information suggesting otherwise (General Medical Council [GMC], 2018). Children who are younger than 16 years old will have their capacity assessed and medical professionals will decide whether, based on their ability to understand the treatment, its consequences, and to communicate their decision, they are capable of providing valid consent (GMC, 2018). Where children are assessed not to have capacity, parental consent will ordinarily be sought (GMC, 2018). Therefore, in the medical sphere, for a child over the age of 16 years old their age is nearly always determinative of whether their consent or parental consent is legally required for

treatment to take place. However, for those who are below the age of 16 years old, their capacity – and assessment of their capacity – is crucial.

Research is another area that provides extensive guidance – and debate – relating to whether parental consent, children’s consent or both are required for a child’s participation. As with medicine, such discussions are rooted in a deep concern that those who participate are informed of the nature of the research and have the capacity, freedom, and information required to provide informed consent and to withhold or withdraw this consent (Alderson, 2012). The contents of discussions and debates about children’s and parental consent to a child’s participation in research often relate to knowledge, consent and permission, taking in a range of possibilities. One such discussion is around whether to seek active parental consent or passive parental consent (sometimes considered ‘parental permission’). These can be distinguished as follows:

- **Active parental consent:** Requires that a parent is provided with information about the proposed research and that the parent actively provides their consent to their child’s participation in the research (e.g., van Woudenberg et al., 2023).
- **Passive parental consent/permission:** This also requires that parents are provided with information about the proposed research. Parents are given the opportunity to opt-out or withdraw their child from the research study but in the absence of this – including silence – the research with the child may proceed (e.g., Jason et al., 2001).
- **Children’s consent without parental awareness or involvement:** In some cases, researchers may assess that it would be appropriate to conduct research without parental knowledge (e.g., National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children [NSPCC], 2023).

This ‘active’ versus ‘passive/ opt-out’ determination articulates to the level of parental involvement that is required in relation to children’s participation in research. One consideration of this discussion is the potential that requiring parental consent can stifle children’s participation in research and indeed can affect its results. In a meta-analysis of the effects of requiring active versus passive parental consent, for example, Liu and colleagues (2017) found that requiring active parental consent led to reduced sample sizes, shifted demographic participation and that it affected results: “rates of

self-reported substance use were higher in studies using passive consent than those in active consent procedures” (p. 49). The authors suggest this may connect to the level of effort required by parents to provide consent and that children may be reluctant to participate in studies about challenging behaviours as they could feel that doing so suggests to their parents they have engaged in such behaviours (Liu et al., 2017).

Another framing of children’s and parental consent in research is that of ‘consent’ and ‘assent’. The concept of ‘assent’ has legal status within some jurisdictions, including within the United States (Protection of Human Subjects, 2009) wherein children may be considered unable to provide legal consent but researchers are required to obtain their agreement or ‘assent’ in addition to parental consent if the child is considered to have the capacity to ‘assent’. Research may also proceed with parental consent in some circumstances if it is considered directly beneficial to the child despite their non-assent. To note, Alderson and Morrow (2011) question the possibility of such benefits, criticising the concept of “therapeutic research” that allows consent refusal to be overridden (p. 106). Within England, the National Health Service Health Research Authority (2024) advises that children over the age of 16 are considered to have capacity to consent to clinical trials on their own behalf, absent information to the contrary. For those below the age of 16, consent from a parent or guardian is required for children’s participation (National Health Service [NHS] Health Research Authority, 2024). In social research, the NSPCC (2023) suggests that children below the age of eight years old should assent, as should those who are between the ages of eight and 15 years old but who do not have sufficient capacity to consent, while all others over the age of eight years old must consent to research (pp. 6-7). According to this guidance, “[i]n research, if a child does not consent or assent to participate, then this overrides the consent from the parent, guardian, carer, or other appropriate adult with a duty of care” (NSPCC, 2023, p. 5). The NSPCC suggests it is possible to conduct research with children once they reach the age of 16 years old without parental permission or awareness, subject to careful consideration (NSPCC, 2023).

Therefore, in England, while in research ages as low as eight years old may be relevant to assent and consent, as in medicine, the age of 16 years old remains a potentially relevant threshold for children’s capacity to consent. Considerations relating to parental and children’s consent in both medicine and research are

connected to presumptive capacity as suggested by reaching a specific age, alongside individual capacity assessments. As set out within Chapter 2, age, and especially the age of 16 years old, is also pertinent to several other matters for children. This includes the age at which children can consent to most sexual activity, the age children can normally leave home and the age children can file to change their own name (Coram Children's Legal Centre, n.d.). The transition to the age of 16 years old seems connected to a transition in a child's experiences and expectations of them.

Children's consent is also connected to children's rights under the UNCRC, though it is not mentioned directly within the Convention. It is of relevance to rights under Articles 5, 12 to 15 and 17 of the Convention, which cover rights relating to parental responsibilities and children's evolving capacities, participation, freedom of expression, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of association and peaceful assembly and access to information (McMellon & Tisdall, 2020). Article 12 is often highlighted in relation to the right to participation as it requires that States Parties:

...assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. (UNCRC, Art. 12.1)

These rights connect to children's consent to participation in sport to the extent that children's provision or withholding of consent requires the availability of information, freedom to make the decision and the right to express views and have an impact on decisions affecting them.

Parental consent, as set out above, is connected to the reasonable care and protection of a child. When a parent makes a consent decision regarding sport, in legal terms they do so in relation to their child's development and their protection. However, there are many other non-legal considerations involved in consent decisions. The remainder of this section explores literature relating to connections between parental and children's consent in sport.

### **3.3.2. Explorations of parental and children's consent in children's sport**

It is often considered appropriate and good practice for sports clubs or organisations to obtain parental consent for at least some aspects of a child's participation in the relevant activity. The NSPCC's Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) provides a template registration form for clubs that includes a 'Declaration of Consent' confirming emergency procedures for the administration of first aid, awareness of codes of conduct, transport, changing-room and photography, video, text and media policies and of the anti-bullying policies (Child Protection in Sport Unit, 2022). These are in part related to legal requirements. For instance, consent to administer first aid has the transformative effect of allowing an adult to touch a child and administer a plaster or cold compress where, without consent, this could fall within definitions of unwanted contact. Further, data-related permissions have the dual function of meeting data protection law requirements and taking account of permissions connected to child protection matters – for example, if a child is not permitted to have their image shown publicly for their safety or protection. Other aspects of these consent forms, including conduct and similar policies, appear to act as consent to adherence to behavioural expectations by the child and parents involved and by others.

One other element that is often a requirement of consent forms in sport is the acceptance of risk, waiver of liability and conformation of emergency procedures (Child Protection in Sport Unit, 2022). This has been explored in relation to legal culpability within sports, often in connection with consent to combat sports, which is necessary to insulate participants, organisations and staff members or volunteers from criminal charges for acts that are, outside of sport, potentially unlawful (e.g., Farrugia, 1997; Kershner & Kelly, 2020). Channon and Matthews (2021) also consider the *communication* of consent in relation to combat sports and propose four typologies:

- Overtly communicating consent: written affirmations and verbal negotiations
- Subtly communicating consent: gestures, rituals and implicit communication
- Assuming consent: inferences and normative expectations
- Deferring consent: leaving it up to others (Channon & Matthews, 2021, pp. 906-911)

The authors explore these different typologies to account for a range of ways in which consent is communicated by those participating in combat sports, and how those receiving this communication of consent understand it (Channon & Matthews, 2021). Their research findings suggest that the final three forms of communicated consent are more prevalent than overt communication, and caution whether these forms of consent support both effective provision and withdrawal of consent:

The complicating influence of cultural norms and close involvement of third parties – consistent features across each of the categories outlined above – suggests that what is considered to be the free, volitional, agentic practice of partner-to-partner consent in sport may be facilitated or disrupted in various ways. Thus, our findings lead us to question the degree to which athletes are always empowered to freely give consent to participate in ostensibly ‘violent’, potentially injurious sport on an ongoing and reflexive basis. (Channon & Matthews, 2021, p. 914)

Channon and Matthews (2021) urge more research into the construction of consent by children in sport, noting:

[Q]uestions over how children and young adults understand, communicate or defer decisions on consent to others are likely to be particularly instructive. Such analyses are sure to have important legal implications with respect to safeguarding and child welfare, making understanding the social practice of consent by children vitally important to various sports professionals. (p. 914)

This research study contributes to filling this research need.

Existing research relating to parental consent in sport has considered the consent decision made by parents, particularly in relation to anticipated harms within the context of contact sports (e.g. Kim & Connaughton, 2021; Memmini et al., 2021). Locating their research in connection to known risks of head injuries in tackle football, Boneau and colleagues (2020) use sensemaking theory to understand how parents arrive at the decision as to whether their children will participate. The authors describe sensemaking as an approach taken to “process and reconcile reality to decisions that have already been made” and therefore an appropriate lens through which to explore parental understandings of decision-making relating to tackle football (Boneau et al.,

2020, p. 27). The authors present a range of typologies of parents' decision-making processes in 'allowing' their children to play tackle football in the United States, including the football-first family, the safety-first family, and the laissez-faire family, which describe differing approaches to the decision for their children to play the sport (Boneau et al., 2020). These typologies, which describe differing approaches to the decision for a child to play the sport, were largely connected to the way in which families approached and understood the risks involved and are explored in greater depth throughout analysis of the findings, below (Boneau et al., 2020). Given the potential injury risks associated with rugby, this study's findings are considered and discussed at several points within this thesis.

Reflecting the importance of informed consent, the question of parental knowledge and consent to concussion in sport has received quite some attention in research literature. Anderson and colleagues (2022) have presented research and findings relating to parental consent to children's participation in rugby, focusing on parental perceptions of injury risk. The authors argue that parents used cognitive strategies including "minimalizing" the risks of injury, with parents aware of the existence and potential outcomes of these risks (Anderson et al., 2022, p. 9). The authors suggest that parents prioritised what they perceived to be social and individual benefits to their child of playing rugby over risk concerns (Anderson et al., 2022). In other research, noted above, Anderson and further colleagues (2023) have challenged the validity of parental consent (and children's consent) to children's participation in rugby and boxing, arguing that the potential for brain trauma within these sports can lead to such severe harm, both "'now' and 'later'", that valid consent is not possible in relation to children (Anderson et al., 2023, pp. 2-3).

Discussions of children's consent in competitive sports more generally remain somewhat limited. However, children's consent within sport has been considered in relation to the 'sport ethic' discussed earlier in this chapter to the extent that it reduces the freedom to withdraw, rest or recover during injury (Alexander et al., 2011; Malcom, 2006). Additionally, Farstad (2007) considers a minimum age for participation in elite sports, asking "do young children have the capacity to understand what it really involves and can they make an informed decision about it?" (p. 14). David (2005) also touched upon this query, focusing on the adaptation of children's sporting experiences

and expectations of them in accordance with age and capacity and noting that several sports federations have set minimum ages for participation at elite or adult competitive levels. Anderson and colleagues' (2023) recent article relating to consent to boxing and rugby raises similar questions over consent by and in relation to under 18s because of the risks involved.

The interaction between children's agency and consent and parental consent is connected to the broader parent-child relationship, something that sports research has also examined (e.g., Dorsch et al., 2021; Knight, 2019; Knight et al., 2020; Rouquette et al., 2021). Indeed, sports research has highlighted the range of difficulties parents face in supporting their children in elite sport as well as the negative impact parents can have on their children's wellbeing (e.g., Knight et al., 2020; Smits et al., 2017). Kerr and Stirling (2012), for instance, have explored the challenges parents face in identifying abuse towards their children, including through the normalisation of maltreatment and their "relinquishing of control" to coaches (p. 196). This touches upon one of the key research interests for this research: the perception and impact of parental consent in relation to children's wellbeing and harm. This also relates to how children perceive and understand parental consent and how this affects their agency and wellbeing and experiences of harm, including through normalisation of harm or perceptions of parental approval. Consider the words of an elite child gymnast who described her survival of sexual abuse by a sports doctor in her parent's presence: "he would position himself in between me and my mom, but since she was so close, I presumed that she was aware of what was going on. I didn't know until months later that she had no idea" (Cohen & Shenk, 2020, 45:51). As introduced earlier, the impact of parental engagement and consent on children's wellbeing is also evident in recent case examples including the Whyte Review (2022) and Sheldon Review (2021), which identified concerns over parental capacity and agency in relation to understanding children's harmful experiences in sport, and the associated impact on the children themselves.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

This chapter has presented a discussion of key literature and literary areas relevant to this research study as it relates to agency, wellbeing and harm and consent, including in the context of children's sport. I have explored and presented working definitions of

these concepts while recognising that my study will explore how those involved in competitive sport understand each of them in relation to children's experiences in sport. As set out above, there has been extensive consideration of these concepts in relation to children and childhood. There has also been some discussion of the same in relation to children in sport. However, gaps remain in understanding of the experiences of agency, wellbeing and harm and consent in children's sport.

In the context of children's agency, Section 3.1 set out different approaches that childhood scholars have taken to explore children's agency, including the practice of agency relationally. The section identified numerous frameworks and approaches that this research study can use to explore the research interest in children's experiences of agency within sport. Understandings of 'ambiguous agency' (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012) have been presented as particularly promising to extend knowledge in relation to children's experiences within a context that has a risk of harm, as shown by the extent of literature relation to wellbeing and harm within sport. Further, concepts of 'relational agency', including 'generagency' (Leonard, 2016), are particularly pertinent in the context of exploring children's practice of agency in relation to adults and other children involved in their experiences of sport. Reviewing the literature has highlighted potentialities and gaps in the consideration of children's agency in sport, which this research study seeks to fill.

As Section 3.2 outlined, a number of studies have explored children's experiences of wellbeing and harm within competitive sport (e.g., Alexander et al., 2011; Hartill et al., 2023; Stafford et al., 2013a). This research will add to the field in relation to how children, parents and coaches understand wellbeing and harm and make decisions based on these understandings (e.g., Boneau et al., 2020). This will contribute findings relating to normalisation (e.g., Alexander et al., 2011), the 'sport ethic' (e.g., Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Malcom, 2006), and, in policy implications, safeguarding measures.

Finally, in relation to consent, Section 3.3 presented literature relating to frameworks of consent that affect and interact with children's lives. It outlined previous discussions of parental consent in children's sport, including parental engagement and parental decision-making in connection with risk of injury (e.g., Anderson et al., 2022; Boneau et al., 2020). Channon and Matthews (2021) have called for further research relating to communication of consent, which they note will "have important legal implications

with respect to safeguarding and child welfare” (p. 914). In many ways this study addresses this call. Further, this section identified a gap in knowledge of how children understand and experience parental consent to their sports participation. This study will explore this, including in relation to how understandings of parental consent might affect children’s experiences of wellbeing and agency by influencing perceptions of boundaries, expectations and conceptualisations of wellbeing and harm.

While outlining the literature relating to conceptualisations and contexts of children’s agency, wellbeing and harm and consent, this chapter has highlighted areas in which this study contributes to the understanding of these key considerations as they affect children in sport. In line with this, this thesis seeks to add to this existing literature on the views and experiences of children, parents and coaches in each of these areas. Together, this literature review and the context setting chapter before it inform the research aim, the questions and the methodological approach for this study, as set out next in Chapter 4 – Methodology.

## **Chapter 4 – Methodology**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This research study adopted a qualitative approach using a single case study design with embedded units of analysis (e.g., Thomas, 2021; Yin, 2018). Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This chapter presents the full methodology, including the decision-making processes in relation to the adoption and application of this approach. The chapter begins with the study's research aim and questions. In Section 4.3, I set out my ontological and epistemological standpoint, discussing how these are connected and lead into the research approach and design. This is then presented in Section 4.4, which includes my case study site recruitment strategy and ultimate case selection, my sampling approach and recruitment of participants. Next, in Section 4.5, the chapter presents the research methods used, exploring the reasons for choosing each method, detailing how they were designed and implemented and noting any challenges or limitations. In this chapter, I also detail my selection and use of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) as an analytical approach and outline my data management actions to support the ethical and appropriate use of the field-research data.

Given that this research study involved research with children and their families, and that it touched upon potentially sensitive topics around wellbeing and harm, I held ethics as a primary consideration at all times (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). This is reflected in the study's design and implementation and is discussed in Section 4.8, within which I share my ethical approach, including the living ethical protocol I designed, and some of the challenges, dilemmas and decisions I experienced during the research process. The chapter ends with a reflexivity and positionality statement and a chapter conclusion.

### **4.2. Research aim and questions**

The overall aim of this research study was to examine the constructions of and interactions between children's wellbeing and harm, agency and consent, and parental consent in competitive sport. This aim was developed and refined following the background and literature review set out in Chapters 2 and 3.

The following research questions were developed to achieve the research aim:

1. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children's wellbeing, including 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable harm',<sup>4</sup> in competitive sport?
2. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children's agency and consent in competitive sport?
3. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand parental consent in competitive sport and how does this affect children's perceptions of their own wellbeing and harm, agency and consent?

In designing the research questions, I was mindful that they should "reflect the researcher's thinking on the most significant factors to study" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 78). Further, the questions were constructed in line with advice on case study research – "start and end with issues dominant" (Stake, 1995, p. 16) – thus focusing on wellbeing and harm, agency and consent. That the research questions should reflect my thinking on key issues made it crucial to engage in reflexivity during their development. Particularly in relation to wellbeing, this resulted in my framing of research question 1 to allow scope for the exploration of positive *and* negative factors, while also ensuring consideration of harm. This insight stemmed from reflexive practice in which I had noticed most of my research experience involved circumstances where children's wellbeing was threatened, and my experiences in sport could make me more alert to negative rather than positive wellbeing outcomes. The approach to addressing the research aim and questions is set out below.

### **4.3. Ontology and epistemology**

The term 'ontology' describes a standpoint about the nature of reality and existence, while the word 'epistemology' is the theory of knowledge about this nature of reality and existence (Grix, 2002). The term 'methodology' describes the ways to gather this knowledge (Grix, 2002). A research paradigm brings ontology, epistemology and

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<sup>4</sup> In initial considerations, this had been 'accidental and non-accidental harm' but, while developing the research tools, reflections on the research aim led to an adjustment of the question.

methodology together (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These terms, and the stances a researcher takes in relation to them, shape a research study in its approach and outcomes. This research study employed a *social constructionist* research paradigm, rooted in constructionist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. This is explained in the remainder of this section.

Social constructionism holds that, rather than there being one objective reality, multiple subjective realities are constructed by groups and that these social constructions are culturally and historically specific, sustained by knowledge, and intertwined with power and social action (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Clark and colleagues (2021) proffer that understandings of constructionism have more recently included the explicit notion that researchers' own world views are themselves constructions, such that "the researcher always presents a specific version of social reality" (p. 28). The authors suggest that both meanings of constructionism can be compared to objectivist and realist ontologies, respectively (Clark et al., 2021). Some scholars might suggest this second understanding of constructionism is more appropriately considered in relation to epistemology (e.g., Andrews, 2012), and Clark and colleagues (2021) appear to acknowledge this: "the second meaning describes constructionism in relation to the nature of knowledge of the social world (and indeed the natural world)" (p. 28). However, constructionism continues to be viewed as an ontology and I used it in this way (e.g., Clark et al., 2021; Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). Social constructionism can be distinguished from social constructivism. Guterman (2013) explains the difference: "although constructivism and social constructionism each endorses a subjectivist view of knowledge, the former emphasizes individuals' biological and cognitive processes, whereas the latter places knowledge in the domain of social interchange" (p. 20). This research took a social constructionist standpoint, particularly in connection with the collective, social interactive construction of knowledge.

Flowing from this, this research study understands childhood as socially constructed (James & Prout, 1997). James and Prout (1997) explain that understanding childhood to be socially constructed provides "an interpretive frame for contextualizing the early years of human life" (p. 8). This emphasises that meanings, understandings and experiences of childhood differ across cultures and societies. In adopting this approach, I was also influenced by a commitment to and respect for children's rights,

particularly as set out within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In this regard, Burr (1998) notes that adopting a *relativist* social constructionist approach can make advocating for one worldview (e.g., children's rights) problematic. While adopting a social constructionist paradigm, I recognise and respond to Burr's note, especially given my commitment to the realisation of children's rights. I therefore adopt a more realist than relativist approach, understanding things to be "at one and the same time socially constructed *and* real" (Burr, 1998, p. 30, emphasis in original).

In relation to epistemology, this research took forward an interpretivist stance. Two predominant epistemological standpoints are positivism and interpretivism. Positivism has been described as the "dominant epistemological paradigm in social science from the 1930s through to the 1960s, its core argument being that the social world exists externally to the researcher, and that its properties can be measured directly through observation" (Gray, 2021, p. 25). Clark and colleagues (2021) highlight that, in opposition to positivism, an interpretivist approach "is based on the view that there are fundamental differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences" (p. 25). According to Clark and colleagues, (2021) interpretivism requires – and argues for the requirement of – "distinct research methods that respect the differences between the natural world and the human one" (Clark et al., 2021, p. 25). The authors offer observations and semi-structured interviews as non-exhaustive examples of appropriate research methods (Uzzell et al., 2021). Following this, therefore, this study used a range of research methods in line with a qualitative approach to explore social experiences and meaning.

#### **4.4. Research design**

As introduced above, this research study took a qualitative approach to a single case study design with eight embedded units of analysis, or 'triads' of children, parent(s) and coaches. This section provides details relating to the research design and approach. Research methods, which included observation, group discussions, semi-structured interviews and document review are discussed below at Section 4.5.

##### **4.4.1. A qualitative research approach**

A qualitative research approach was suitable for the completion of this study given its synergy with a social constructionist approach (Burr, 2015) and because it would allow

the generation of data to address the research questions and aim (Hennink et al., 2020). Hennink and colleagues (2020) provide a detailed list of research contexts for which qualitative research is appropriate. This includes research that seeks to: “understand behaviour, beliefs, opinions and emotions from the perspective of the study participants themselves”, to “understand and explain people’s views and behaviours” as well as to support understanding of “experiences”, “social interactions” and “sensitive issues” (p. 11). These are all relevant to my research aims and questions. In particular, it was most significant that a qualitative approach would enable me to design a study to generate deep understandings of participants’ experiences and perspectives of the key issues involved.

Quality assurance is crucial to social research and is often considered in relation to reliability and validity, though there is discussion over the best way to approach these within qualitative research, particularly because ‘validity’ can imply measurement, which, per Clark and colleagues (2021), “is not a major preoccupation among qualitative researchers” (p. 363). Addressing this, proponents of qualitative research propose adapted or alternative approaches. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) focus on reducing “threats” (p. 32) to reliability and validity, proposing adjustments to make these terms more applicable to qualitative research. For example, the authors suggest using “internal validity” to consider the extent to which theoretical outputs comport with observations during fieldwork (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982, p. 32). They suggest a range of approaches to ensure qualitative research quality, including reflexive acknowledgment of the researcher’s role and clear presentation of research techniques (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also propose actions to support reliability and validity, including using multiple data sources, member checking, deep engagement with data and peer checking, all of which were part of this study’s research design. Lincoln and Guba (1985), on the other hand, propose new criteria for assessing qualitative research, linking these to its trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. They, too, propose a range of techniques to support these, including, for example, debriefing and checking with peers and ensuring clear and open discussion of the research approach (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Again, I have sought to follow this guidance within the delivery and presentation of this research study.

In some ways, the challenges in applying quantitative quality appraisal measures to qualitative research speak to typical critiques of qualitative research as overly subjective, not easily replicable or generalisable and lacking in transparency (Clark et al., 2021). Clark and colleagues (2021) suggest counterarguments to each of these. In relation to subjectivity, they explain that qualitative researchers position their research within existing literature and theory. In terms of replication, they consider that it is by design – and a strength of – qualitative research that it is difficult to replicate given that the researcher(s) are central to the work (Clark et al., 2021). They call upon Yin’s notions of “analytic generalization” (p. 37), discussed below, to counter suggestions that qualitative research lacks generalisability and they highlight the value of providing clarity and full description of methods to improving transparency in qualitative research (Clark et al., 2021). This research study has been implemented in line with the approaches Clark and colleagues (2021) highlight as strengthening quality within qualitative research, including through the use of reflexivity as part of the research design and within reflexive thematic data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) (see below). To this end, throughout this thesis I share excerpts from reflexive accounts to increase transparency and strengthen assurance.

#### **4.4.2. A case study design**

After selecting a qualitative approach, I chose a case study approach to address my research aim and questions as it involves a range of methods to generate rich data from different angles, providing a holistic view (Thomas, 2021). According to Stake (1995), “[c]ase study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). Stake’s approach is particularly relevant to this study given his tendency towards constructionism and focus on qualitative research (Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015). Stake (1995) suggests three types of case study: intrinsic, instrumental and collective. This study was *instrumental* because it sought to answer the research questions that look beyond the case. This compares to intrinsic studies, which focus on a case itself, seeking to answer questions relating to that alone, rather than learning about broader considerations (Stake, 1995). As my research sought to address a research aim and questions that reached beyond the case, it met the criteria of an instrumental case.

There are numerous case study research design options, including single and multiple case studies (Yin, 2018). Stake (1995), for example, also notes that it would be possible to conduct a collective case study, involving multiple instrumental cases. Multiple cases add richness but can be challenging for individual researchers (Schoch, 2020). Though it may have been possible to conduct multiple case studies, I felt it was a more effective use of the resources available to the study to prioritise depth over breadth. This was particularly important as I sought to explore understandings and experiences of children, parents and coaches in order to address the concerns relating to children's sport and the research gaps addressed within Chapters 2 and 3. The focus of resources and attention can therefore be an advantage of a single case. In considering the approach to completing the single case, Yin (2018) proposes the two options of holistic and embedded single case studies. Single embedded designs have subunits, while single holistic designs approach the case globally (Yin, 2018, see, also, Thomas (2021), and 'nested' cases). Yin (2018) suggests that "subunits can often add significant opportunity for extensive analysis, enhancing the insights into the single-case" (p. 54). I found this persuasive and, recognising the importance of children, parents and coaches to my research aim and questions, I chose to engage with a single case study using embedded unit 'triads' of children, parents and coaches. to strengthen analytical generalisability and richness.

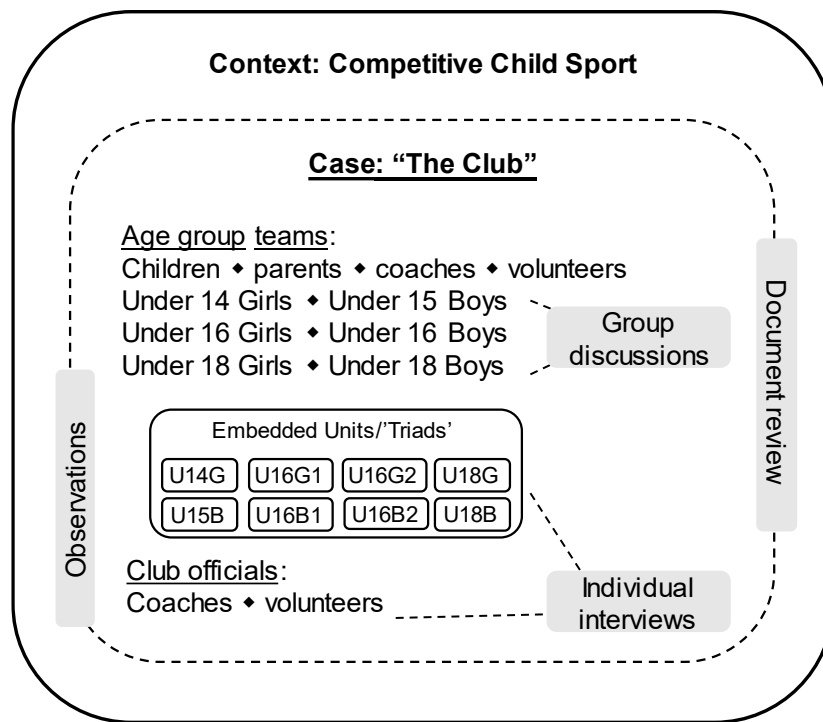
One common concern raised about case study research is that results are not generalisable (Clark et al., 2021). The argument is that despite a case study generating in-depth, detailed knowledge about a single case, that is all it does (Clark et al., 2021). However, as Clark and colleagues (2021) note, it is not the purpose of a case study to aim to produce findings that are generalisable in the way a representative quantitative survey may. As noted above, Yin (2018) argues it is possible to generalise *theory* from case studies, characterising this as "analytic generalization" (p. 37), which thus allows this research to consider applicability of findings from the case study to the wider sporting environment. In this research, confidence was supported by following case study guidance including by Yin (2018) and Stake (1995) and guidance on reflexive thematic analysis by Clarke and Braun (2021).

### 4.4.3. Embedded case study design

A visual overview of my case study approach is set out in Figure 1, with a detailed account of approach, design and implementation given later in this chapter.

**Figure 1**

*Case Study with Embedded Units of Analysis*



Legend:  
 E.g., U14G – Under 14 ‘girls’ team  
 E.g., U15B – Under 15 ‘boys’ team

This figure, which is in part inspired by Yin’s (2018) representations of case study research, reflects the breadth and scope of the research study. As noted within the introductory chapter, the field research included 61 observation participants who provided either written or valid verbal consent to participation depending on whether they were children, coaches or parents. There was a total of 111 participants including the 61 noted above who were present during training sessions and whose presence contributed to group dynamic analysis. The study also involved 29 semi-structured interview participants and 29 group discussion participants, which included six participants who also took part in interviews. I conducted a document review of over 40 governing body and club documents. Child participants ranged in age from 14 to 18 years old as one participant turned 18 shortly before their group discussion.

An early step in case study design is 'bounding' the case, which means setting the limits and enclosing the case in environmental, time-based and contextual parameters (Tight, 2017). Stake (1995) suggests it is this 'boundedness' that ensures a case study is viewed "as an object rather than a process" (p. 2). In this research, the case was to be a sports club with child participants, bounded by membership and participation and by the duration of a competitive season. The development of criteria and selection of the club are set out below. Ultimately, my case study club, 'The Club', was a youth section of a rugby club in England, which had child members competing in rugby matches. It was time-bounded by the rugby season beginning in late summer 2022 and ending in late spring 2023.

### **Selecting the case**

Thomas (2021) suggests three approaches to selecting a case once boundaries have been established: familiarity, a good example, and difference to the norm. The 'good example' is similar to what Yin (2018) calls a "common case", which explores everyday circumstances to understand "social processes related to some theoretical interest" (p. 50). Stake (1995) provides broader advice on this, noting that while seeking typical cases can be beneficial, "[c]ase study research is not sampling research" and that researchers should concentrate first and foremost on the need to "maximise what we can learn" which could be connected to feasibility and resource availability (p. 4). In line with the decision to use an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) and to seek a "good example" (Thomas, 2021, p. 112) with the potential for in-depth learning, I completed a mind map (Figure 2) informed by the literature review and my reflexive practice.

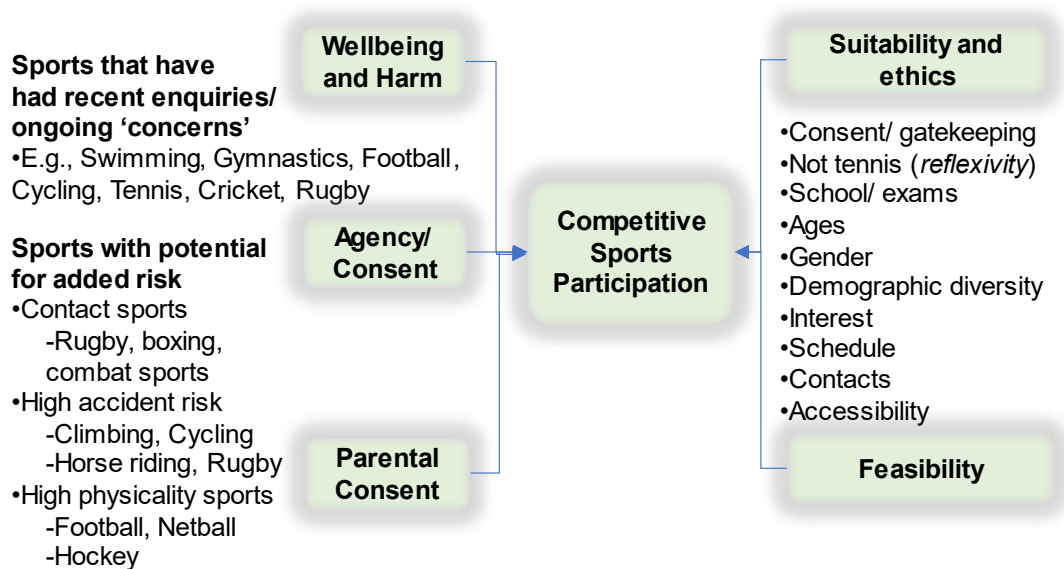
While determining potential selection criteria for the case, I took careful consideration of the purpose and scope of the study, particularly in relation to the potential for intersectional analysis. Intersectional research considers the interplay between social factors and identities, including, for example, race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, class, gender identity, sexuality, disability and other factors, and explores how these shape an individual's experiences (Misra et al., 2020). As identified within Chapters 2 and 3, literature relating to children and sport suggests that such factors could shape children's sporting experiences, resulting in differential access and outcomes, discrimination and marginalisation (e.g., Dagkas, 2016). It was of interest and concern

to me, particularly given my experience within and commitment to the child rights sphere, to consider whether it would be possible to integrate such intersectional considerations within my research design.

Ultimately, however, and for reasons closely connected to research ethics, I chose not to take an intersectional approach to the research. Within the context of an intensive case study design, I considered I would need to gather extensive and detailed personal information about participants to be able to isolate specific social factors to ensure analysis was accurate and relevant. As an intensive case study, I had anticipated a relatively small number of participants, which would not necessarily provide sufficient diversity of social factors and identities to facilitate this. It was therefore not ethically appropriate to select a case (or to seek participants) in connection with such factors. However, as sport is often structured with gender categorised teams, I was keen to add the presence of ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ teams to the selection criteria.

**Figure 2**

*Case Selection Mind Map*



On the left-hand side of the mind map, I considered the three main concepts from the research questions: wellbeing and harm, children’s agency and consent, and parental consent. I then added focus considerations, such as safeguarding concerns relating to abuse or injury, factors that increase risk of injury or harm, and sports in which physical contact is part of the sport. I noted some of the sports I would seek to find candidate clubs from. On the other side of the map, I added suitability and ethics criteria, alongside feasibility criteria. Following a reflexive exercise (see Section 4.9,

below), I added I would not engage in research with a tennis club as I had too close a connection to the sport. Feasibility issues included accessibility, a training schedule I was likely to be able to engage with and the use of contacts if I had them.

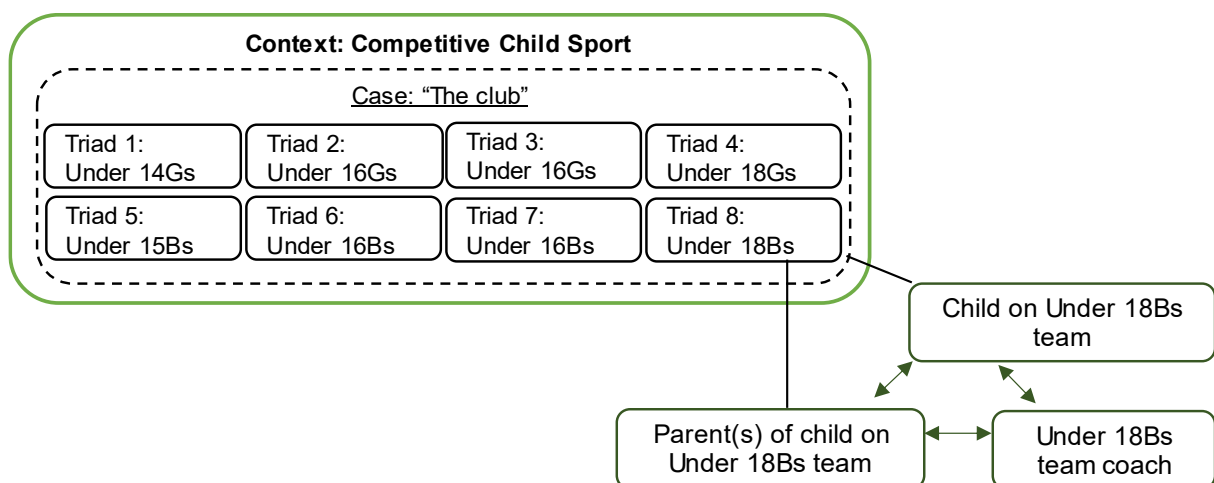
I moved from this mind map to a set of a primary selection criterion of a contact or high physicality sport to facilitate exploration of issues in a context in which contact/harm is likely and/or anticipated within the sport (e.g., Alexander et al., 2011). Beyond this, I sought a case study club with populations in line with my sampling strategy below and that it was feasible to access frequently enough to conduct fieldwork. While I hoped to secure a rugby club and contacted a large number of clubs across a wide geographical area within England, I also approached athletics, cycling, football, hockey and netball clubs. I finalised club selection after obtaining ethical approval from Moray House School of Education and Sport (MHSES) (detailed below and attached at Appendix A). I confirmed the first club that met the selection criteria and was towards the beginning of the playing season, and thus began working with The Club.

### Identifying embedded units of analysis

As stated above, I had opted to pursue embedded units of analysis to allow for a greater depth of analysis. My embedded units of analysis were ‘triads’ of children, parents and coaches, consistent with my interest in constructions and understandings between all three (see, e.g., Tates & Meeuwesen, 2001). Figure 3 shows a visualisation of the triads as embedded units of analysis.

**Figure 3**

*Research ‘Triads’*



Though the triads involved individual interviews (discussed in detail below), I viewed recruitment to them as a selection of mini cases, rather than the recruitment of individual participants. Yin (2018) notes that embedded units can be selected through sampling techniques. This research identified candidate units using purposeful sampling, which is suited to qualitative and case study research and employs tactics to select a sample (units) likely to produce relevant data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Viewing units as ‘mini cases’, I drew inspiration from Yin’s (2018) “theoretical replication”, within which the research seeks units that may lead to different results but from the same theoretical basis (p. 177). On this basis, I identified purposeful criteria as set out in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Planned Purposeful Selection Criteria for Embedded Units*

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Criteria</b>
Primary	Age (under/over 16); Gender categorisation of team (‘Girl’s’/ ‘Boy’s’)
Supplementary	Performance level, commitment, injury, other factors identified during group discussions.

These criteria were based on the literature review: for example, that the age of 16 is important to consent. Research suggests gender identity and categorisation affect sporting experience (Fasting et al., 2004), something I sought to explore by selecting children according to gender identification. I aimed for eight triads, including two each from ‘girls’ aged 14-15 and 16-17 and ‘boys’ aged 14-15 and 16-17. However, I soon realised the age groups lent themselves to working with six teams: Under 14 Girls (U14Gs), Under 15 Boys (U15Bs), U16Gs, U16Bs, U18Gs and U18Bs. I took one triad each from the Under 14/15 and Under 18 age groups and two from the Under 16 age groups. This was partly informed by my interest in the experiences of those around the age of 16 and because these teams had larger membership than the others.

When designing the purposeful selection criteria for these triads, in addition to age and gender categorisation of the teams, I set out supplementary criteria such as performance level, commitment, injury and ‘other factors’. These criteria evolved so that ‘other factors’ identified through observation, interviews and group discussions became increasingly important. For instance, I became aware of differences in experiences between those new to rugby and those who had played since age five or

six. I therefore selected the triads based on factors such as length of time playing rugby and parental engagement as well as performance and injury, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Actual Purposeful Selection Criteria for Embedded Units*

<b>Priority</b>	<b>Criteria</b>
Primary	Ages 14-17; Gender categorisation of team ('Girl's'/ 'Boy's')
Supplementary	High performance level; new to rugby/long-term players; from families with extensive/no rugby background; with/out parents involved in the club; with/out injury experience

During implementation, the selection of embedded units varied depending on the engagement with gatekeepers and the availability of participants. For example, it proved challenging to engage with older children, who had less flexibility over their availability – many worked and were studying for A-Levels or preparing university applications. In the end, I used four main methods of selection to the embedded units:

1. Two families expressed interest following an email request connected to group discussions. I recruited the children and parents after the group discussions, allowing the families to confirm their ongoing interest after having taken part in a research activity.
2. A coach proposed two families who had expressed interest based on selection criteria provided to the coach.
3. One player was eager to participate in individual research and met the sampling criteria for the triad.
4. I approached three parents directly, based on knowledge gathered from talking to them around The Club and their offers to 'help in any way' they could.

The embedded units of analysis/triads were thus as presented in Table 3. I have limited the data provided in this table to that which is pertinent to the presentation of this study. All names are pseudonyms. This helps in preserving the anonymity of participants and minimising risk of identification (see a detailed discussion in Section 4.8). Parents are known as 'mother' or 'father' of their child because they were being interviewed in connection with this relationship and role. As a parent myself, I expressed empathy while explaining the need to 'identify' them in this way.

**Table 3***Child and Coach Triad Participants*

<b>Age group</b>	<b>Child</b>	<b>Coach</b>	<b>Parent(s)</b>
U14Gs	Saskia	Henry	Mother
U15Bs	James	Paulo	Father
U16Gs	Marnie	Phil	Mother
U16Gs	Delilah	Phil	Mother
U16Bs	Mike	Stefan	Mother
U16Bs	Thor	Stefan	Mother/Father
U18Gs	Isla	Sam	Mother
U18Bs	Dan	Charlie	Father

Despite the fulfilment of purposeful selection criteria, implementation in this way has some limitations. Firstly, I was only able to recruit from those who were willing to be involved and had the opportunity to share their willingness with me. This included in relation to the parental interviews, for which I was reliant upon parents themselves to select whether one or both would participate, and to then volunteer for participation on this basis. While I developed awareness of relevant aspects of families' circumstances that allowed me to approach them directly, this was an incomplete picture, both in terms of the families I was familiar with and those I never properly met. I would not have been able to consider those who were not forthcoming or did not 'chat' with me unless presented by a coach. This may have excluded those who were less available for any number of reasons, including those that linked to vulnerabilities or disadvantages. Further, it is possible that there may have been participants who were interested but did not take the time to reach out. I find it regrettable to note this could have made it more difficult for those with challenges to their participation to be a part of my study.

**Sampling and recruitment**

Separate to the selection of triads, the research study required sampling and the recruitment of individuals to group discussions and coach and official interviews, and to the pilot semi-structured interviews and group discussion.

Patton (2015) cautions against strict rules on sample size in qualitative research, while Morse (2000) recommends considering factors including the usability of data when determining sample size. My sample size was driven by these considerations. I was also persuaded by Braun and Clarke (2022) and their caution against concepts of 'data

saturation' – considered to be the point in research where additional data will not lead to the identification of new ideas or understanding (Hennink et al., 2020). They, instead, favour Malterud and colleagues' (2016) 'information power.' Arguing this point, Braun and Clarke (2022) explain that "it [information power] invites the researcher to reflect on the information *richness* of their dataset and how that meshes with the aims and requirements of the study" (p. 28, emphasis in original). Therefore, I considered that I would conduct observations and seek group discussion participants in relation to relevant age groups, take triads as embedded units of analysis and seek to approach relevant officials, keeping in mind the 'power' of the information generated and seeking additional data if needed.

In terms of the sampling approach within these populations, I had intended to use maximum variation sampling for children in group discussions and criterion sampling for individual interviews with coaches and officials. Maximum variation sampling involves picking a range of cases to analyse for differences and similarities (Patton, 2015). The criteria I developed for maximum variation sampling were the same as those that I had identified in relation to the selection of case studies: age; team gender categorisation; length of time playing the sport; performance level; families with extensive/no rugby background; with/out parents involved in The Club; and with/out injury experience. In practice, I was able to accommodate all participants who wished to be involved and who met the parameters of the study in terms of belonging to the relevant age groups. Criterion sampling involves establishing criteria and seeking participants meeting them (Patton, 2015). In this case, individual interviews of coaches and officials included committee members and those connected with safeguarding and wellbeing at The Club. I also used snowball sampling (e.g., Patton, 2015) based on recommendations from other interview participants to recruit an official from a rugby wellbeing-related charity. To note, parents were recruited to the study on the basis of the embedded unit/triad approach. I chose not to conduct group discussions with parents as I was primarily seeking their individual (or paired/multiple) responses in relation to their children within this triad research.

Indicating an exact population by providing exact registration figures from The Club would be potentially identifying. However, a competitive team requires 15 players, plus substitutes, and most teams at The Club achieve this and more among their squads.

I was able to secure a proportion of children for group discussions and interviews that ranged from between 12 per cent and 23 per cent of all children registered to each age group (noting that some are registered but rarely attend). As discussed later, securing participation was more challenging for older age groups, where children had a wider range of constraints on their time, including employment and studying. Including those who provided consent to observation sessions, these proportions increased to between 38 per cent and 68 per cent, with the lowest percentage among the U18Bs team, reflecting that this observation took place shortly after examinations. One area of consideration in relation to the sample size was connected to what Malterud and colleagues frame as “specificity.” They explain:

[A] less extensive sample is needed with participants holding characteristics that are highly specific for the study aim compared with a sample containing participants of sparse specificity. Specificity concerns here participants who belong to the specified target group while also exhibiting some variation within the experiences to be explored. (Malterud et al., 2016, p. 1755)

Taking this into account, I continuously monitored and evaluated the dataset and sample size during fieldwork and analysis/writing up. This included reflections upon the richness of data generated in order to determine whether to add discussion sessions or seek further participants (for which I had ethical approval). I was content with the sample size and information achieved, particularly in the close proximity to the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, I have sought to reflect limitations of sample size as relevant, for example within the U18s teams, and potential impact on information power and data analysis within the writing up.

The resulting sample composition is set out in Table 4. As shown, the total number of participants in the *observations* was lower than that for which I had sought ethical approval. This was not unexpected as I had accounted for observation of all children and all parents should they have been present, but in the event not everyone attended.

**Table 4***Number of Participants – Planned and Actual*

Method	Planned		Actual	
	# of participants		# of participants	
<b>Pilot</b>	Child interview	1	Child interview	1
	Parent interview	1	Parent interview	1
	Group discussion	5-8	Group discussion	7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>7-10</b>		<b>9</b>
<b>Group Discussions</b>	G14-15	6-8	U14Gs	5
	B14-15	6-8	U15Bs	6
	G16-17	6-8	U16Gs	6
			U18Gs	3
	B16-17	6-8	U16Bs	7
			U18Bs	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>24-32</b>		<b>29<sup>5</sup></b>
	Children	8	Children	8
Parents	8-16	Parents	9	
<b>Interviews</b>	Coaches	8-10	Coaches	6
	Club safeguarding officers (CSOs)	4	Committee members/officials	6(7) <sup>6</sup>
	National/ regional officials	4	Rugby wellbeing charity official	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>32-42</b>		<b>30(31)</b>
	<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>344</b>		<b>170<sup>7</sup></b>
<b>Observations</b>	Children and young people	200		81
	Parents	50		18
	Coaching staff and CSOs	20		12
	<b>Total</b>	<b>270</b>		<b>111</b>

In relation to the pilot, the group discussions and the interviews, my planned and actual numbers were approximately the same. As noted, the figures for group discussions reflect that six of the eight child triad participants also took part in group discussions. In relation to the observations, these participation figures included 61 who provided consent forms or valid verbal consent from a total of 111 who were present and therefore included in data analysis – as discussed in Section 4.5.2.

<sup>5</sup> Six of the eight child triad participants also participated in group discussions.

<sup>6</sup> One parent also provided insights relating to acting in an official capacity

<sup>7</sup> With overlap between those in the group discussions, interviews and observations.

As noted earlier regarding the case study design, the research did not adopt an intersectional research approach. My approach to recruitment with regard to demographic diversity was such that I deliberately sought out participants who were members of both 'boys' and 'girls' teams. This allowed the exploration of data relating to differing or congruent experiences within The Club based on gender categorisation of the teams. Aside from this, I did not record demographic data relating to participants (see Section 4.8 for further discussion in relation to ethical considerations).

#### **4.4.4. Recruitment approach**

By the time I was preparing to recruit participants for the pilot and main case research, and in line with my ethical approval for the study, I had adopted the project title "We can: wellbeing, consent and agency in children's sport" as an accessible way to communicate the main issues of the research and the positivity and openness with which I was approaching it. In the section below, I share my approach to recruiting participants to the pilot and club research, for which I used the "We can" title.

#### **Pilot research – engagement and recruitment**

The pilot research was conducted at the same time as I was conducting preliminary conversations in relation to identifying and securing my main case. As noted above, I contacted several clubs across a wide geographical area while seeking my main case. In this process, I spoke to representatives of a club who were able to arrange a group discussion as a pilot but who could not support the full research. I piloted the focus group discussion tool with a group of children at this club. The individual child and parent 'dyad' was recruited through a snowballing technique (e.g., Patton, 2015) in that the recruitment was based on preliminary conversations I had with contacts who were involved in youth rugby. I had mentioned to these contacts that I might be seeking participants for pilot research, subject to ethical approval, and several of them mentioned potential families they thought might be willing to be involved. I was not able to secure the participation of a coach for the pilot but instead used the information from the pilot 'dyad' and group discussion to support the refinement of all research tools, including the observation form, child, parent and coach interview schedules, focus group discussions and document collection planning tool. Implementation of the pilot and refinements to the research tools that were made following the pilots are discussed below in Sections 4.5.3 and 4.5.4.

## **The Club – engagement and recruitment**

The Club I worked with was a grassroots rugby club based in England. The Club had a children's section comprising 'minis', 'boys youth' and 'girls youth'. The exact ages at which children progress from 'mini' to 'youth' rugby can vary across areas, and it would therefore be potentially (minimally) identifying to specify the age at which this transition occurs at The Club. As set out in Chapter 1, the age of transition is generally either at the Under 12s or Under 13s age groups. Once children move into the 'youth' section, they are no longer mixed, and instead participate within 'boys' and 'girls' teams. At the point of transition away from mixed rugby, many teams across England do not retain enough players on girls' squads to field teams, and many girls therefore move to a new club if they wish to keep playing. The Club, with its full girls' rugby programme, drew players for girls' teams from across numerous counties. It was therefore more common for members and coaches of girls' teams at The Club to have joined more recently than those on boys' teams, who were often relatively unchanged from early age groups.

In the 2022-23 season, The Club had children registered across a full range of 'boys youth' and 'girls youth' teams. The mini and youth section had its own committee run by volunteers which included a Club Safeguarding Officer and others focusing on the administration of the teams, their fixtures and membership. The Club was registered with the England Rugby Football Union (RFU) and affiliated with its county rugby board. There was also an adult section, though my research did not lead to engagement with this. The Club was run almost entirely by volunteers. Players came from nearby towns and villages and from multiple counties.

### ***Introductions***

After securing the support and endorsement of the committee and the Safeguarding Officer, I was provided with contacts for all coaches and a committee official sent an email to the coaches introducing my research. I responded to this group email with a brief introduction, thanks for support and a promise to be in touch soon. I emailed each coaching team separately asking to attend a training session for five minutes to introduce myself and hand out a package containing a participant information sheet (PIS) for parents and for children, a consent form for an observation session and an introductory cover sheet. These are included at Appendices B to D.

My introductions to teams took place before, during or after training sessions, depending on the coaches' preferences. All introductions took place around evening training sessions between November 2022 and January 2023. This meant that I entered into The Club once the playing season had already begun but had involved some time in making arrangements and some delay as several sessions were cancelled due to snow and frozen pitches. In these short sessions, I introduced myself, the study, the ways participants could get involved and what to expect from the next steps. I handed out envelopes with the information packages mentioned above to each child that was present and encouraged the children to read through the contents of these and to share the packages with their parents for them to read through as well. I also introduced myself to any parents present. If I already knew the date of the observation, I asked players to bring the signed observation consent forms to that session if they so wished. Otherwise, I explained that coaches would be in touch about when to have these ready.

### ***Recruitment and arrangements***

I used different recruitment approaches for the different research methods. For **observations**, I consulted with coaches to determine an appropriate session for me to watch. These decisions took account of, for example, the need to minimise distractions near 'important' matches, or to avoid doing observations in front of external parties such as guest coaches. This latter point was designed to help preserve The Club's anonymity by reducing knowledge of the research by those outside of The Club.

For **group discussions**, I worked with coaching teams to pick a time and date for the sessions. I emailed details to parents through or with support of the coaches, providing relevant PIS/consent forms, logistical information and asking about accommodations, support or dietary requirements. Two of the coaching teams supported me to seek interest at a training session, which I followed up over email, as set out above.

For the **individual interviews** that were part of the triads, I made arrangements with children and parents once I had their contact information, either through the coach (who sought permission of parents to share their details with me) or through their response to a general, team-wide request for interest. Coach and club official interviews were arranged based on shared contact information and organised on an individual basis.

My experience of recruitment and arrangements at The Club was highly positive. All of the coaches and officials – who were of crucial importance – were supportive, engaged and made themselves available to contribute. They were also encouraging of participation by the children (and parents) connected with their teams. The willingness of coaches and officials to be involved in, and their support in relation to, research activity arrangements was particularly impressive given that they were all volunteers, gave a large amount of time to The Club and their teams, and that even with my best efforts I could not make my research zero-effort for them.

#### 4.5. Research methods

As introduced above, fieldwork at The Club involved observations, group discussions, semi-structured individual interviews and document review. Figure 4 shows how each of these was designed to generate data to address the research questions. In this figure, the darkness of the ‘dot’ indicates the depth of data connection between the research method and the research question. This reflects that observations and document review provided more contextual data, compared to group discussions and interviews, which provided greater richness of data to directly answer the questions.

**Figure 4**

*How the Research Methods Address the Research Questions*

Research method	Question 1: Wellbeing and harm	Question 2: Children’s agency and consent	Question 3: Parental consent and impact
<b>Observation</b>	●	●	●
	<b>Data:</b> Context, environment, practices, co-familiarisation		
<b>Group discussion</b>	●	●	●
	<b>Data:</b> Responses, interactions, dynamics		
<b>Interview</b>	●	●	●
	<b>Data:</b> Responses, interactions		
<b>Document review</b>	●	●	●
	<b>Data:</b> Context, format, language, content		

Legend	●	Contextual data connection
	●	Direct data connection

#### **4.5.1. Pilot**

As noted above, before engaging in field research with The Club, I piloted the research tools. This included a parent and child dyad, interviewed separately, and a focus group discussion. Both pilot research activities helped to support the development of the research tools I ultimately used with The Club. The primary purpose of the pilot activities was to test and refine the research tools with participants who shared similar characteristics to those I would eventually be working with (i.e., rugby players and parents of a rugby player) (Hennink et al., 2020). The outcomes and impact of these piloting activities on research tools are discussed in connection with each of the research activities in the respective sub-sections below.


#### **4.5.2. Observations**



In research, the term ‘observation’ can apply to a range of data collection techniques. In ethnographic research, for example, researchers may conduct participant observation, immersing themselves in their research setting for in-depth analysis (Konstantoni & Kustatscher, 2016). Other forms of observation are less involved, including, for example simply “hanging around” for familiarisation (Marshall et al., 2022, p. 155). For several reasons, I determined the research study would be best served by a non-participatory approach to observation. This was not just a matter of my physical ability to become involved in the sport, though this was a factor (see, e.g., Clark et al., 2021). Indeed, children, parents, coaches and I had a few laughs about my avowed ‘non-participant’ status if the training seemed particularly intense or the ball got too close to me at pitchside. Rather, I was keen to observe and make notes regarding dynamics and interactions between children, parents and coaches who were present, and, with a limited number of observations planned, determined that this would be most effective without me inserting myself into the sessions and potentially disrupting dynamics (see, e.g., Takyi, 2015). The observations had the main purpose of my spending time at training sessions for context setting and familiarisation with The Club, the squads and training practice (e.g., Marshall et al., 2022). Familiarisation works both ways: I believe my presence helped to humanise me and my research, allowing participants to see me, ask questions and consider their interest in further research activities. To meet these purposes, I scheduled the observations for the

beginning of the research (Marshall et al., 2022), with the intended contributions set out in Figure 5.

**Figure 5**

*How Observations Contributed to the Research Study*

Research method	Question 1: Wellbeing and harm	Question 2: Children’s agency and consent	Question 3: Parental consent and impact
Observation	 <p><b>Data:</b> Context, environment, practices, co-familiarisation</p>		

Legend		Contextual data connection
		Direct data connection

### Designing and implementing the observations

*“It’s utterly freezing. My hands might freeze off.” (RB, observation notes)*

In designing the research observations, I was aware from literature about research methods that field notes in observation are notoriously challenging (e.g., Clark et al., 2021). I therefore planned to supplement written notes with voice recordings. I was also determined to write up my notes promptly to capture the most accurate account of each observation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I developed an observation form based on guidance for participant observation provided by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), who encourage noting six elements: physical setting, participants, activities and interactions, conversation, subtle factors and the researcher’s own behaviour. My form, shown in Figure 6, included sections for description and reflection – to support reflexivity – and was adapted from a sample and suggestions made by Cresswell and Cresswell-Baez (2020). I included a blank sheet for a map or other representations.

Before conducting the observations, I ‘piloted’ this observation form by watching publicly available YouTube videos of rugby training drills. I would get the video ready to play, then enter the space as if arriving at the training session, jotting down notes, before hitting the play button. I noticed, through this, that it would be important to add rows rather than having the open sheet and to minimise the number of sheets involved. I finalised the observation tool on this basis.

**Figure 6**  
*Observation Form*

**Observation Form – Training Sessions**

Reminders: Collect consent forms, record consent opt-outs below, record voice notes.

Opening notes	Details
Date	
Time observation started	
Training session details(who/where/type)	
Physical setting (location, environment, space, objects)	
Context/scene setting (weather, mood, etc)	
Researcher reflections at start (supplement with voice recording)	

Participant information	Opt-in (tally)	Other (tally)	Total	Notes
# of children in session				
# of players 18/over				
Coaches				
Parents/carers/adult spectators				
Other club adults				
Additional notes				

<b>Before Session</b>			
Issue	Descriptive Notes		Reflective Notes
Activities (what is/isn't happening?) (details re: time, types, sequence)			
Interactions (what happens, contact, discussions, mood/emotions)			
General notes			
<b>During Session</b>			
Issue	Descriptive Notes		Reflective Notes
Activities (what is/isn't happening?) (details re: time, types, sequence)			
Interactions (what happens, contact, discussions, mood/emotions)			
General notes			
<b>After Session</b>			
Issue	Descriptive Notes		Reflective Notes
Activities (what is/isn't happening?) (details re: time, types, sequence)			
Interactions (what happens, contact, discussions, mood/emotions)			
General notes			

I dutifully printed the form out for each session, but, invariably, the weather conditions meant I could not write – the temperature ranged from 0 to 5 degrees, not including windchill. I was lucky it rarely rained. I wore thick gloves to protect my fingers and was unable to make notes in most cases. I would quickly jot down maps of my location and try to tally participants but that was generally the extent of written notes. Instead, I recorded commentary into my voice recorder. I intended to talk as much as possible, in as much detail as possible, to ensure the richness and usefulness of the data

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I habitually started sentences with 'I notice' as a technique that encouraged my reflexive thinking.

As noted above, the main squads of interest were the U14Gs, U15Bs, U16Gs, U16Bs, U18Gs and U18Bs. However, on my first introduction to the U14Gs, I realised most of the team was under the age of 14. I did not have ethical approval for participants of that age and explained I could not conduct an observation of that age group. Observations of a single training session of the other five squads took place between November 2022 and January 2023, as detailed in Table 5.

**Table 5**  
*Observation Participation Numbers and Duration*

Team	Children	Parents	Coaches	Total	Observation length
<b>U15Bs</b>					
Consent form	8		2		
Verbal 'consent' <sup>8</sup>	1	4	2		
No consent	6	1	-		
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>		<b>50 min</b>
<b>U16Gs</b>					
Consent form	8		3		
Verbal 'consent'	4	6	-		
No consent	7	-	-		
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>3</b>		<b>77 min</b>
<b>U16Bs</b>					
Consent form	8		2		
Verbal 'consent'	2	4	-		
No consent	15	2	-		
<b>Total</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>60 min</b>
<b>U18Gs</b>					
Consent form	7		2		
Verbal 'consent'	3	1	-		
No consent	2	-	-		
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>		<b>60 min</b>
<b>U18Bs</b>					
Consent form	3	-	1		
Verbal 'consent'	4	-	-		
No consent	3	-	-		
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>		<b>42 min</b>
<b>Overall totals</b>					
Consent form	34		10		
Verbal 'consent'	14	15	2		
No consent	33	3	-		
<b>Total with 'valid' consent</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>61</b>	
<b>Total present</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>111</b>	<b>289 min</b>

<sup>8</sup> Note that for children, this form of consent indicated interest only.

When designing and planning my observations, I was aware that obtaining informed consent would likely be challenging (Gallagher, 2009). I expected there to be several 'groups' of people present during the observations. While my focus would be on the children and coaches in the target age groups, and the parents of those children, there would likely be other children, coaches and parents present at The Club and there could be visiting members of the public present. The first step was therefore to consider who would be the subjects of my observation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I was interested in the behaviours and interactions of those directly connected with and participating in the specific training sessions. Therefore, I considered it would not be necessary or appropriate to seek and obtain consent from outside of these groups. It would not be *necessary* because they would not contribute to the research data and it would be *inappropriate* because I wanted to protect the identity of The Club. To track down a non-observed visitor and provide information relating to the study would only raise public awareness of The Club's identity.

The next step was to determine what form of consent to seek from my observation subjects. I decided to seek written consent from coaches and players and verbal consent from parents who were present on the sidelines. Consent forms for children needed to be signed by the child and parent in relation to their child, in line with my ethical protocol. I considered it unlikely I'd receive written consent forms from all present, as some would not wish to consent and others would likely forget their forms. Guidelines suggest where the subject of observation is group dynamics, as in my case, analysis can be undertaken where participants who have consented interact with those who have not, but analysis of non-consenting individuals' specific actions is not appropriate (BERA, 2018, para. 17). Therefore, it was important for me to know who had consented. I had planned to use paper wristbands of the sort used typically used to signify payment at parks and other events in order to indicate consent, but the first group was not keen. That was a small observation with a high proportion of consent forms so I was able to keep track of consent anyway. In consultation with that team's coaches, I settled on sweatbands (see Figure 7) that players could wear on their heads, wrists, arms or anywhere they felt comfortable. For the remaining observations, participants would bring the completed consent forms (provided during introductions) and exchange them for a sweatband. This drew inspiration from Gallagher (2009) and Kustatcher (2014), who used stickers and magnets to signal consent respectively.

## Figure 7

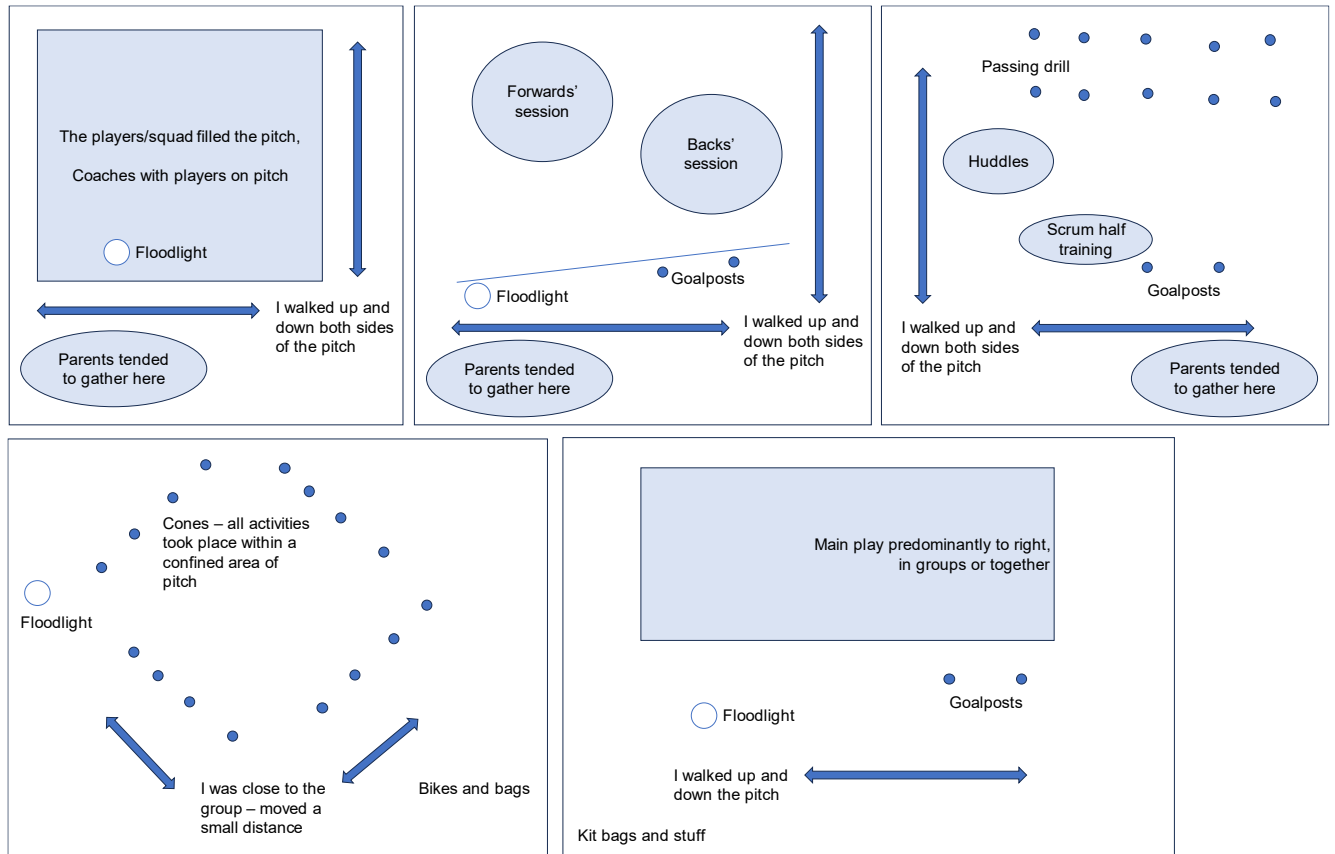
### *Observation Form and Sweatbands*



Across the five observations, there were varying proportions of players who did not provide consent forms. In many of these cases, several children told me that they had left their forms at home and that they *did* want to consent to the observation. However, I followed my protocol strictly and thanked them for their interest but did not give them a sweatband. In these cases, I considered that these children had not provided full consent to be observed in detail – recalling, also, that I had no indication of parental consent – but felt somewhat assured they were happy to be observed generally. In one case, a player was a little upset at not receiving a sweatband and her teammates encouraged me to find a way to help her. By sheer chance, the other consenting players had all taken ‘solid’ coloured bands. I gave this player a striped band to wear but treated her as not having provided consent. Where a person had not consented, I did not note their direct actions, but took notes regarding consenting individuals’ interactions with them, as related to the consenting individuals (BERA, 2018, para. 17). In practice, this meant I disregarded some incidents. Figure 8 presents diagrams of my presence at the observations.

**Figure 8**

*Diagrams of the Observations*



### Limitations and challenges of my observation activities

While my selection of non-participant, familiarisation-style observation was intentional, this approach does have limitations compared to other observational approaches, particularly in relation to the depth of data collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For example, had I become a participant in a coaching capacity, I would have been 'closer to the action' and could have gathered additional data. At times, I wondered whether I was being overly shy in not wishing to intrude on the training sessions. Ultimately, and after reflection in between sessions, I decided to continue with non-participant observation involving minimal intervention from myself, from a distance at which I was able to hear and observe interactions, comments and reactions (Clark et al., 2021).

A further limitation of the observation activities is that had I chosen to conduct multiple observations I could have tracked patterns and variations within the individual teams over time rather than only across teams. As it was, I was able to build on my knowledge of The Club over time through repeated visits. In relation to this, rather than adding

observations to my research plan, I revisited my original recordings and notes with the benefit of my additional experience at The Club and with a reflexive lens (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A final challenge in the observations was that it was unexpectedly difficult to count children and other participants who were present on the pitches. The process of consent was quick. Many players threw forms at me, grabbed bands and were 'gone' as they rushed off to start their training sessions. This meant that several minutes of each recording were taken up with me counting, re-counting, reassuring and reminding myself of the number of players and consent information. Sadly, I found my 'tally' section of the form unhelpful and I instead relied on this verbal counting, and, of course, the hard copy consent forms I collected. Overall, while I was not able to complete the observation forms during the sessions, they provided a useful guide for the voice recordings. I subsequently framed my 'write up' of these voice recordings around the forms, in order to organise the commentary and observational notes in line with the observational goals and approach.

#### **4.5.3. Group discussions**

A group discussion is "a focused discussion with several people on a specific topic or issue that also has an interest in the dynamics of the group discussion" (Clark et al., 2021, p. 452). They are facilitated through prompts, questions and activities (Cronin, 2015). Cyr (2015) notes that group discussions generate data about "the individual, the group, and the interaction", providing an advantage over individual interviews in this sense (p. 240). I chose to conduct group discussions to support the generation of interactive data, which I hoped would provide insight into shared constructions, and give data for analysis in relation to both the overall case and the embedded units. I was also particularly keen to conduct group discussions because they can support participation rights for children, who may enjoy discussions with their peers (Tisdall et al., 2009). As Hunleth (2011) explains in relation to research of a sensitive nature with children in Zambia, "[t]hey were accountable to their peers and engaging in dynamic conversations that shaped the discussion in ways not possible during one-on-one interviews in their house-holds" (p. 90). Further, group discussions can disrupt power dynamics that may occur between the research and participant(s) in one-to-one interviews (Adler et al., 2019). The group discussions were relevant to all research questions, as set out in Figure 9 below.

**Figure 9**

*How Group Discussions Contributed to the Research Study*

Research method	Question 1: Wellbeing and harm	Question 2: Children’s agency and consent	Question 3: Parental consent and impact
Group discussions	●	●	●
<b>Data:</b> Responses, interactions, dynamics			

Legend	●	Contextual data connection
	●	Direct data connection

In the pilot research, I recruited seven players in the 16-17 year old age category who competed within a ‘boys’ team. With regards to The Club, I had intended to hold group discussions for six to eight children following the purposeful sampling criteria set out above (Adler et al., 2019). I was aware of literature suggesting it can be appropriate to arrange group discussions by age group (e.g., Adler et al., 2019), and that ‘single-sex’ group discussions could be beneficial for adolescents to aid discussion, especially should gender-specific topics arise (e.g., Adler et al., 2019; Daley, 2013). For this reason, I planned to bring groups together based on gender categorisation of teams, and from across differing age brackets. This would have resulted in four discussions – those playing on ‘girls’ and ‘boys’ squads who were aged 14-15 years old and 16-17 years old. Once familiar with The Club, however, I changed my approach as I became increasingly aware of team bonds and the potential challenges of mixing teams, which could introduce challenging dynamics relating to age and ‘seniority’. I was particularly persuaded by wanting to ensure children felt comfortable discussing potentially sensitive topics. However, I was mindful that in avoiding one challenging dynamic I could introduce another – dynamics associated with existing groups – which can lead to some views dominating (Daley, 2013). I remained alert to this during implementation by monitoring the direction and tone of conversations and non-verbal demonstrations of (dis)comfort. I occasionally re-directed the conversation or intervened to prevent participants from being spoken over as needed.

## **Designing and implementing the group discussions**

*“So ... are you okay if we get started?...” (RB, group discussion with U15Bs)*

In designing the group discussions, I was mindful that a key purpose of group discussions is to “produce interaction between participants” (Clark et al., 2021, p. 453). Therefore, I sought to develop activities that would encourage discussion and interaction. I also noted advice from experts in participatory research with children that it would be important to keep the session short, to provide variety and to be limited to two main focus activities (Hill et al., 2009). In the initial design, the two main activities were: 1) a vignette activity, and 2) a ‘timeline’ activity. After the pilot discussion, for reasons set out below, the second activity became an ‘agree/disagree’ activity. I began each discussion with an introduction, an invitation to select fake names and a rule-setting activity. I closed the sessions with a thank you, next steps and by handing out vouchers and support information. I provided participants with sticky notes at the start of sessions so they could write thoughts, questions or notes, supporting the participation of those who may have been reluctant to speak or who wanted to add something without others knowing (Peterson & Barron, 2007). I had an ‘opt-out area’ and reminded participants their participation was voluntary at all times. In retrospect, although I had indicated to participants that there was an ‘opt-out area’ that had colouring sheets and other ‘doodling’ supplied, I felt after the first few sessions that this information was being lost. I decided, therefore, to hand out colouring sheets to participants at the start of the remaining sessions. In retrospect, and going forward, I would recommend a dual approach – having a designated space for ‘opt-out’, which could signal withdrawal from the activity, while also providing a subtler opportunity to step back by colouring or avoiding discussions. I recorded all group discussions using both a laptop camera and a voice recorder, cognisant that these could act as a ‘back up’ to each other. I transcribed the discussions verbatim.

## **Learning from the pilots**

As noted above, I carried out a pilot of the group discussion tool with a group of children aged 16 and 17 at a rugby club. During this discussion, I piloted a vignette activity and a timeline activity. I also practised my introductions, technology and discussion techniques. I had developed my group discussion facilitation style over many years of similar research in international contexts. I was aware of the differences

I might experience having previously worked almost exclusively through interpreters, so took the opportunity of the pilot to adjust to more direct interaction with participants as well as greater awareness of their side conversations and elements that may not be accessible to me when spoken in a different language. The focus of the vignette activity was the generation and co-construction of data relating to wellbeing and harm, while the focus of the timeline activity was the generation and co-construction of data relating to agency and consent. After implementation, I transcribed the discussion and reflected on the experience, including the impressions I had of how the exercises were received and experienced by participants and the utility of the data that was generated.

### *The vignettes*

Vignettes are “short stories, embedded in a tangible context, about a fictional individual or situation that is relevant to a specific theme” (Lee & Goh, 2020, p. 2). In their research into the use of vignettes to address sensitive topics with children in social work, Lee and Goh (2020) found that vignettes can provide ‘safe spaces’ for children, allowing difficult matters to be discussed without speaking directly to the child’s own personal circumstances. Tisdall and colleagues (2009) also note they can “de-personalize discussion of sensitive issues” (p. 230), while Erfanian and colleagues (2020) consider they “are definitely of great help in difficult or sensitive topics by the desensitization of subject matter” (p. 2136). To the extent that vignettes resonate with participants’ own lives, they may choose to speak to their own views and personal circumstances during research activities (Lee & Goh, 2020). While I considered vignettes well suited to generating data relating to my research questions, I was aware of potential limitations or challenges, especially if the stories were too far removed from participants’ experiences, as Erfanian and colleagues explain (2020): “If this gap is very huge, the participant will face serious problems while adopting the role of vignette characters” (p. 2137). Following this guidance, I developed three vignette stories. Figure 10 shows the final vignettes with amendments following the pilots reflected in underline (additions) and strike-through (deletion). The figure also shows the purpose of each story.

**Figure 10**

*Vignettes, Story Purposes and Amendments Following Pilot*

<b>Pilot vignette</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Amendments</b>
<p><b>Story 1: Alex</b> is 17 years old and has been playing rugby at county level since age <del>14</del> <u>15</u>. Alex's parents always watch training and games. This season, Alex is feeling unsure about rugby. Alex doesn't know why and doesn't know what to do about it. Alex <del>fell over on holiday in the summertime and Alex's leg still hurts</del> sometimes especially during really hard <u>finds excuses to miss drills or parts of training</u>. Alex wants to enjoy rugby as much as before.</p>	<p><i>To support discussion of:</i> reluctance to play, elite level participation, potential burnout, parental engagement, children's choices during rugby training, motivation to play and help-seeking behaviours.</p>	<p>1. Age change to reflect county level; 2. Change of injury circumstance to direct discussion to potential injury in the sport; 3. Change to discuss missing individual parts of training rather than hard parts to open discussions.</p>
<p><b>Story 2: Sam and Max</b> are siblings aged 15 and 16 years old. They only started rugby this year. Their parents are busy and drop them at training. Sam has got a few injuries after some hard tackles. Max tries to avoid contact. The coaches are very pleased with Sam and try to encourage Max by asking Max to be more like Sam.</p>	<p><i>To support discussion of:</i> comparison of players, parental non-engagement, relative lack of experience in rugby, contact, coaching behaviours and potential emotional harm.</p>	<p>No changes.</p>
<p><b>Story 3: George</b> is 14 years old and is 'all about rugby'. George's mum goes to every session. George is shy off the pitch but gets very excited on the pitch. If the team loses, George gets really upset. If the team wins, George feels happier than any other time. George is <u>really close to a particular coach and is thinking of asking senior players that coach</u> for one-to-one <u>training</u> sessions to train even harder.</p>	<p><i>To support discussion of:</i> intensity of emotions around winning and losing, team dynamics, coaching practices, parental engagement, and safeguarding concerns associated with one-to-one training.</p>	<p>1. Change from face-to-face with a senior player to a coach for a better fit with issues, and general context of youth-senior player interactions.</p>

The vignettes I ultimately used at The Club were similar to those in the pilot with most amendments made for the purposes of clarity or to bring the vignette into line with youth rugby practice. I made three ‘substantive’ changes across the first and last stories: removing the distracting detail relating to ‘holiday’ from Alex’s story and adding reluctance to play; and making it so that George was seeking individual time with a coach rather than a senior play. I discuss the implementation of the vignettes at The Club below.

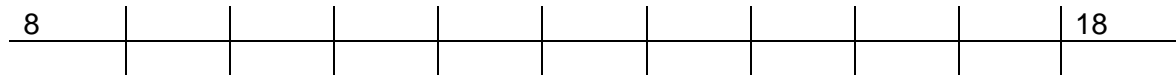
### *The timeline activity*

For the pilot, I had planned a timeline activity with the intention that this could allow participants to explore the youth rugby journey together. Figure 11 shows the guide for implementation that I used during the pilot.

**Figure 11**

### *Timeline Activity Guide*

I've got a long sheet of paper here with a start and an end. It starts at age 8 and ends at 18.



I've got four cards I'm going to hand out. I'm going to give you a few minutes to talk and work out where you want this type of thing to go on this timeline. You can mark this by putting a sticker on the timeline in a colour that matches your flashcard. If you want to choose more than one place, use more than one cross.

1. **Thinks about giving up rugby (RED)**
2. **Starts training extra hard during winning season (YELLOW)**
3. **Gets a bad injury and pushes through it (BLUE)**
4. **Joins a new rugby club (GREEN)**

Each one of these examples has some choices and decisions in it, whether it's the choice of training really hard, the choice to give up or continue, to play through injury or to join a club.

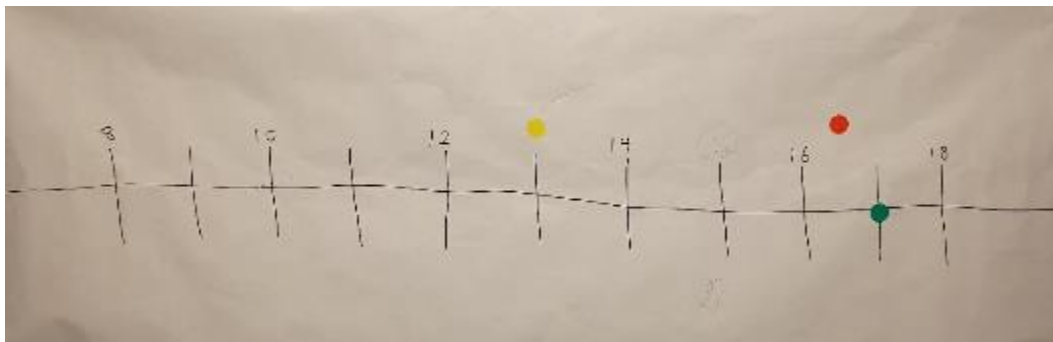
Who do you think is the main person making these decisions? Why? Who else matters? Does gender or age matter? Do children have the power to make a choice? (**Probes** – relationships, peers, parents, coaches, etc).

After the session, I reflected on how effective this activity had been in facilitating discussion and data generation. I was aware of a fair amount of conversation and some difficulties among participants in understanding what the activity meant. I had hoped the activity could lead to data-rich discussions about different time points in a

child's rugby experience, including threshold ages I had considered may be relevant based on Chapters 2 and 3. However, despite participants' best efforts, it was clear the activity was too short to elicit useful data, as shown in Figure 12, which shows the resulting timeline sheet with no notes. Without sufficient time to 'talk around it', the timeline was ineffective. I abandoned this approach and instead developed an 'agree/disagree' activity, which I discuss below.

**Figure 12**

*Timeline Activity Pilot Sheet*



### **Group discussions at The Club**

All but one of the discussions took place in a meeting area at The Club that was set away from the rest of the clubhouse so that we could not be overheard. The area did not have tables, so I set chairs up in a horseshoe shape with refreshments placed to one side. The remaining discussion took place in the clubhouse when we were assured nobody would enter. Discussions took between 35 and 45 minutes. An overview of the group discussion activities and planner is included at Appendix F.

Participants were provided with refreshments appropriate to the context of the session, whether breakfast pastries and fruit for morning sessions, energy bars, healthy snacks, water and squash for pre-training evening sessions or pizza for after-training sessions. Providing refreshments is common in research with children (Afkinich & Blachman-Demner, 2020). I was careful to check on allergies and other dietary requirements in advance. All participants in group discussions were given gift vouchers as honoraria, in respect of their time and resource commitment to the research activity. It was a requirement of the group discussions that players must have a written consent form signed by themselves and by a parent.

Discussions were recorded using a camera and conference microphone attached to my laptop and using a standalone audio recorder. I transferred the recordings immediately to my secure filing system (discussed in Section 4.6) and transcribed the discussions verbatim. Each discussion began with an introduction, reiteration of ongoing, informed and voluntary consent and a note regarding safeguarding and potential breaks in confidentiality. I also reminded participants that they could leave at any time and collect their voucher envelope, which also contained support information.

At the beginning of each session, I asked participants to choose a 'fake name' (e.g., Gallagher, 2009) and write this on a label they could wear or hold and on a name matching card that I collected and stored securely. This would allow me to match names in case of safeguarding or other concerns. Participants appeared to have some fun with this and it worked well as an icebreaker. Next, I presented the 'ground rules' flipchart paper that had been developed during the pilot and which I carried to each session for approval or amendment. The ground rules were to be respectful, to keep everything in the room, only use mobile phones if necessary and to take it seriously, although one group asked to maintain 'banter' as that was how they best interacted. I happily agreed, with a gentle reminder relating to the rule regarding respect. At the end of each discussion, I asked participants to complete a background sheet with simple information about the length of time they had played rugby, their position, the teams they played for and any other sports they participated in. A summary of the implementation of the groups is set out below in Table 6.

**Table 6***Group Discussion Details*

<b>Team</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Schedule</b>	<b>Recruitment</b>
U14Gs	5	Before evening training. Children permitted to be 15 min late for training.	Squad-wide email invitation with PIS/consent forms and details sent to those interested.
U15Bs	6	Before weekend training.	Squad-wide email invitation with PIS/consent forms and details sent to those interested.
U16Gs	6	After evening training. Children left training 15 min early.	Players asked for interest. Follow up email to parents with PIS/consent forms and details.
U16Bs	7	Before special training session.	Email invitation send to those attending special training session. PIS/consent forms and details sent to those interested.
U18Gs	3	Split into 2 sessions – First for 20 min after evening training. Second for 20 min at start of evening training following week.	Squad-wide email invitation with PIS/consent forms and details sent to those interested. In second session, one of two who had signed up did not attend so I recruited another player who was keen to participate and whose parent was present for consent purposes.
U18Bs	2	Before weekend training.	Coach suggested players for participation. I followed up with PIS/ consent forms and details.

As noted above, I updated the vignettes between the pilot and main research to make them more relevant and useful to The Club. The vignettes that I used for the case study research at The Club (including changes made following the pilot group discussion) are set out in Figure 13 below.

**Figure 13**

*Vignettes and Research Issues/Questions*

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Topics</li> <li>Age</li> <li>Level of rugby</li> <li>Parental engagement</li> <li>Injury and harm</li> <li>Rugby experience</li> <li>Coaching practices</li> <li>Help seeking</li> <li>Team dynamic</li> <li>Sport ethic</li> <li>Safeguarding</li> </ul>	<p><b>Story 1:</b> Alex is <u>17 years old</u> and has been playing rugby at <u>county level</u> since age 15. Alex's parents <u>always watch training and games</u>. This season, Alex is <u>feeling unsure</u> about rugby. Alex doesn't know why and <u>doesn't know what to do about it</u>. Alex sometimes finds excuses to miss <u>drills or parts of training</u>. Alex wants to enjoy rugby as much as before.</p> <p><b>Story 2:</b> Sam and Max are siblings aged <u>15 and 16 years old</u>. They <u>only started rugby this year</u>. Their parents are <u>busy and drop them at training</u>. Sam has got a few injuries after <u>some hard tackles</u>. Max <u>tries to avoid contact</u>. The coaches are very pleased with Sam and try to <u>encourage Max by asking Max to be more like Sam</u>.</p> <p><b>Story 3:</b> George is <u>14 years old</u> and is 'all about rugby'. <u>George's mum goes to every session</u>. George is shy off the pitch but gets very excited on the pitch. If the team loses, George gets really upset. If the <u>team wins</u>, George feels happier than any other time. George is <u>really close to a particular coach</u> and is thinking of asking that coach for <u>one-to-one training sessions to train even harder</u>.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research questions/issues</li> <li>Wellbeing</li> <li>Agency</li> <li>Consent</li> </ul>
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I found it interesting, in implementation, that while I had deliberately chosen 'gender neutral' names, all participants referred to the characters using he/him/his pronouns. I reflected that using initials could have provided more scope to support a broader interpretation of the gender identities of those in the stories, although it may also be telling that participants presumed each story was about characters who identified as male and/or used male pronouns. I handed cards with vignettes on them to small groups of participants and gave them time to consider and discuss them before bringing the conversation together with probes such as 'do you think the age matters' or 'can you see any harm here'. While I had checked with parents regarding any accommodations that might have been required, and had not received any responses to this effect, it was possible that some children would be less comfortable reading than others. I was careful to present several options to support any difficulties or sensitivities children may have had in this regard, for example by suggesting I could read the cards out, and by placing children in groups so that they could rely on friends to read the cards. These vignettes led to rich debate, discussion and agreement among participants.

The second exercise was an 'agree/disagree' exercise, similar to what Hill and colleagues (2009) call "debating statements" (p. 144). This type of activity is useful for encouraging debate and facilitates giving voice to different perspectives and views

(Hill et al., 2009). I presented small groups of participants with simple statements that would allow rich discussion on specific key issues, focusing on agency and consent.

The three disagree/agree statements were:

- Children have choices during rugby sessions.
- It's a child's own decision whether to play rugby.
- Children are the ones who decide how hard to work during rugby training.

After giving participants some time to read their statements and decide where to position themselves on a spectrum of 'disagree' to 'agree', I encouraged discussion by asking questions like "Okay, you've put yourself in the middle. Tell me about that," "Does anyone want to agree or disagree?," "Does this change, has this changed as you've moved up the age groups?" On reflection, I noticed I was using the language of 'me' rather than 'us', which was less inclusive than it could have been. Still, I felt the data that was generated reflected whole group interactions and shared constructions.

### **Limitations and challenges of the group discussions**

Group discussions have some known limitations, including in relation to existing group dynamics, which can be disruptive (Daley, 2013). At times, I became aware of tensions within the groups, though disagreements were usually quickly dispelled by those disagreeing or by other players. One area of tension was around county-level rugby. Some participants started discussing their experiences at this level, which some others who were not playing for county teams seemed to find interesting but others found difficult or frustrating to discuss. In one instance it was not until I reviewed the background information sheets that I realised how frustrated a couple of the players were – they noted they were not happy with this direction of the conversation. I reflected afterwards I wished I had been more aware of this at the time and re-routed the conversation or that I could have reiterated the possibility to opt-out for a time or to doodle, which may have given these participants a welcome distraction and option to remove themselves from this part of the discussion.

Recruitment to group discussions was challenging and involved working with coaches to select an appropriate date and time for the group discussion, and to invite players to express interest. There were some limitations to this approach. With the U16Bs, the group discussion took place before a special training session, which was scheduled

to support the twenty or so players who had been selected for the match-day squad prior to a key match. This meant I was drawing from a smaller pool of potential participants. However, I was comfortable with this approach as over half of the squad was invited to the session and there was a range of experiences and levels even within this group. I also suspected that the increased familiarity of this particular group might facilitate more beneficial dynamics that would be more conducive to the discussion (e.g., Daley, 2013). In practice, it was a lively discussion which seemed to have a positive, interactive dynamic in which all children participated.

It was another limitation that recruitment and scheduling made it impossible to ensure coaches were unaware of which players took part. To the extent that it was possible, I kept coaches out of planning for discussions once players had been invited, but, in many cases, the coaches' children were participants, making it impossible to provide full assurance that coaches would not be aware of who had been involved. I was particularly cautious to emphasise during session introductions that it was possible others within The Club would be aware of who had participated and who had said what, but that we must, as part of the ground rules and my research practices, do our best to keep discussions 'within the room'.

Several adjustments to my original plan were necessary so that discussions could go ahead. For example, with the U18s groups, it became clear I would not be able to recruit more than two children at a time for discussions. I therefore conducted paired discussions using the group discussion framework. In the planning stages, I had concerns that hosting discussions after a training session would be too challenging for players, which could cause harm or affect data quality (see, e.g., Kennedy et al., 2001). I was reassured by coaches, parents and children that this was not a concern for the two age groups that were to participate after training. After the discussions had taken place, I was confident this had been the case, though I was careful to bring plenty of refreshments, to check in with participants and to keep the heaters on to make them comfortable when it was particularly cold outside.

#### **4.5.4. *Semi-structured interviews***

Interviews are a data collection method in which the researcher asks participants questions (Gilbert & Stoneman, 2016). In semi-structured interviews, the researcher has a schedule of questions or topics but has flexibility (Clark et al., 2021). Interviews

are suitable to qualitative research and are a rich source of data. Further, and particularly in relation to sensitive topics, they can be effective in allowing participants to share ideas – and sometimes personal experiences – that they might be uncomfortable sharing in a group setting (e.g., Gallagher, 2009). Punch (2013) notes they are useful for “accessing people’s perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality” (p. 144). Koro-Ljungberg (2008) agrees that interviews have an important role in constructionist research: “constructionist perspectives of interviewing should shift the focus from mining individual minds to the co-construction of (temporarily) shared discourses” (p. 431). I chose to use semi-structured interviews of players, parents/carers, coaches and club officials to contribute to answering all research questions as set out in Figure 14. I considered interviews particularly useful for the triads as interviewing each person within the triad would allow me to access, compare and contrast individual views and perspectives.

**Figure 14**

*How Interviews Contributed to the Research Study*

Research method	Question 1: Wellbeing and harm	Question 2: Children’s agency and consent	Question 3: Parental consent and impact
Interviews	●	●	●
	<b>Data contribution:</b> Responses, interactions		

Legend	●	Contextual data connection
	●	Direct data connection

### Designing and implementing the interviews

*RB - “I think we’re done.”*

*Child - “Lovely” (looking at training pitch)*

*RB - “Do you wanna just head off?”*

*Child - “Yeah” (laughs)*

*RB - “Cool, thank you!”*

It was important to decide whether I would conduct interviews individually or in pairs. This decision was relevant to all participants with different ethical and research considerations attached to each decision. I preferred to interview children separately to their parents, to support their ability to speak freely, and to reduce potential influence

on their answers (Gardner & Randall, 2012), but I gave them the option to have a friend for support. With regards to parents, I referred to Harden and colleagues' (2010) discussion of the benefits of multiple perspectives to "develop a sense of the family as a whole but still retain sight of the different perspectives from which we formed the bigger picture" (p. 450). I therefore decided to give parents the option to participate as they wished – with one or two parents contributing to each triad, participating together or alone. In seven of the triads, only one parent participated, while, in the eighth, two parents asked to be interviewed separately, with the second parent quipping "this will be the third time you've heard it!" The triad approach necessitated individual interviews of coaches, while officials were so busy it would be challenging to bring them together, and I decided to interview them separately.

At the time of designing and planning my research, Moray House PhD students had recently been permitted to conduct face-to-face research subject to COVID-19-related procedures. This was important to my study because I was determined to conduct face-to-face research with children, partly due to safeguarding concerns. There can be difficulties in safeguarding those participating in sensitive research topics remotely, including in relation to ensuring privacy and providing support and follow-up if it is needed (e.g., Bhatia et al., 2022). I was unconvinced that I would be able to mitigate these concerns and therefore chose face-to-face research with children.

I determined that interviews with children would take place in person at a location agreed upon with the child and a parent/carer, but that interviews with adults could take place in person or online (see further discussion of the benefits and disadvantages of online versus face to face interviews below). The interview schedule used a number of different approaches to different topics and areas of interest. I asked directly about consent and wellbeing while approaching agency indirectly. All interviews were recorded using a voice recorder, while those carried out on MS Teams were also recorded through the MS Teams software. I then transcribed all interviews verbatim. An abridged version of the interview schedule is set out in Figure 15.

**Figure 15**

*(Abridged) Interview Schedule*

<b>Activity/Topic</b>	<b>Details/Prompts</b>
1. Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introductions, confirmation of consent/ withdrawal, note re: privacy and confidentiality; safeguarding protocol.</li></ul>
2. Background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Questions about the participant's background in rugby</li></ul>
3. Team story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Questions about team (context, level of success, relevant info)</li></ul>
4. Session story	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Talking through a typical training session this season – a good session/ a 'not so good' session</li><li>• Probes on: wellbeing, agency and consent</li></ul>
5. Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Specific questions on wellbeing in rugby, at club and in team</li><li>• Probes on wellbeing generally and in relation to injuries/harm.</li><li>• Specific question:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "I'm going to suggest something and see what you think – if a parent agrees to their child playing rugby, does that mean they agree to everything that happens?"</li></ul></li><li>• Final question: what are your hopes and dreams/ what do you want for the children you coach/from rugby/for your child from rugby?</li></ul>
6. Closing and next steps	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Thank you, chance for further comments, next steps, including withdrawal, voucher and support information</li></ul>

### **Learning from the pilot**

After completing the pilot interviews with one parent and one child, I transcribed the interview recordings verbatim and reflected on these transcripts, my experience and the perceived experience of my participants. Starting with the latter, I observed that we had productive, friendly interactions and both participants were forthcoming and seemed to respond well to the discussions. I noted it seemed unlikely an interview with a child would exceed 30 minutes, as I noticed a change of pace and energy towards this limit. After considering the transcripts, the tool itself changed very minimally, with the main changes relating to my approach to specific questions and proposed follow up 'probes'.

### **Interviews at The Club**

I felt confident, particularly following the pilot research, that participants were likely to be able to discuss 'wellbeing', and at least would not be put off by the term, certainly in comparison to the term 'agency'. I had considered at length how to structure the tool

to generate data on agency. In reviewing the literature, I noticed that the majority of studies did not ask directly about agency, but rather identified agency indirectly during analysis. For example, Stoecklin and Fattore (2018), in their work on wellbeing and agency, sought children's ideas about wellbeing before identifying "aspects of wellbeing relevant to understanding the multidimensionality of agency" (p. 51) during analysis. Further, Morrison and colleagues (2019), exploring agency within children's statutory interactions with social workers, describe the combined process of analysing based on codes targeted to agency while also reviewing their full dataset in order to retain a fuller appreciation of children's practices of agency in context. In the youth sport context, Flaherty and Sagas (2021) conducted research encouraging participants to speak about experiences at different sporting age groups before generating codes and themes that contributed to analysis relating to agency. On this basis, I asked participants to tell me stories about their experiences in their teams, in their sport and in sporting sessions from the case study season, to generate rich data that could be analysed in relation to agency. An example of a semi-structured interview tool is set out at Appendix E.

Although I enjoyed the flexibility associated with the semi-structured interview approach, in that it was possible for me to add or change questions in response to the flow of the conversation, for the most part, I asked questions in line with the schedule. In addition, I included a specific question relating to children's consent and parental consent, that I asked in each interaction. I often prefaced this by explaining it was a difficult and 'clunky' question but if they could bear with me, we could work through it together. I felt this helped to ease any discomfort they may have had in not understanding the slightly difficult question, or not knowing how to answer. The question was "I'm going to suggest something and see what you think – if a parent agrees to their child playing rugby, does that mean they agree to everything that happens? What do you think?" This had high levels of success in the quality of data generated, as discussed in Section 7.5.

In all, I conducted six interviews with triad coaches, eight interviews with triad players and nine interviews with triad parents. I also conducted six interviews with officials. Interviews followed a common overall structure, adjusted for relevance to participants. Of the 29 individual interviews conducted, six took place at The Club, four took place

in families' homes, two took place in a café/restaurant and the remainder took place online using MS Teams. I audio recorded all interviews using a simple voice recorder and transferred the recorded files to my online storage system upon return to my office, in line with my data management plan (Section 4.6). I transcribed all interviews verbatim.

Despite their limited availability and the voluntary nature of the coaching role, I was pleased to have a high level of responsiveness and agreement from the committee members and coaching teams I approached for an interview. All committee members were interviewed over MS Teams. Of the six coach interviews, two took place at The Club and one at a local café, with the remaining three over MS Teams. They took between 35 and 75 minutes to complete. I found a particularly fruitful moment came at the end of each interview when I would say something along the lines of "I think that's everything, but while I'm looking through my notes, please let me know if there's anything you want to add, based on what we've talked about." This often led to the generation of rich data led by the participant.

Children were recruited to the interviews and to form triads as set out above. Some children were recruited directly through the coaches, while others volunteered their interest directly to me following a broad invitation to their team. In each case, arrangements were made through parents. Where relevant, I flagged up to parents of participants of group discussions that they could let me know if their family was interested in being part of the individual interviews. I was mindful of the possibility a child might want to participate but not receive parental consent, whether out of objection to or rejection of the research study or for practical reasons. I was, therefore, careful to remind participants parental consent would always be required, and gently suggested I appreciated it might not be possible for everyone to spare the time. This was to avoid causing friction within family relationships. In the event, every child who approached me to ask to participate was given parental consent to do so.

Though an interview offers greater privacy and the opportunity to provide individual insights, it can be more intimidating and power dynamics between researchers and participants can be more pronounced (Tisdall et al., 2009). I tried to establish rapport with small talk and a light 'tone' while reminding the participants they could refuse to answer any questions or withdraw at any moment. I was also careful to keep an eye

on the clock, ensuring participants were aware of how long the interview would take, how much time had passed, and how much time was remaining. I gave children the choice of where to interview. Three chose to be interviewed at The Club before a training session, three chose to be interviewed at home, with these interviews taking place in the kitchens or living areas with parents present in the house, one chose to be interviewed at a local restaurant, with their parent one table over, so they could see us but could not hear the conversation. The final player split their interview over two parts between The Club and their home. This was not as anticipated but local traffic problems cut the first interview short, and the child, who was very keen to participate, offered to complete the remaining questions at home. I did so with the player's parent present in the house, as I had done when interviewing other children in their homes.

As noted above, I invited parents to participate with others with parental responsibility or alone. I was aware that parents have childcare, professional and other logistical challenges (Adler et al., 2019) and gave them the option to participate online. I interviewed nine parents. Two chose to be interviewed at The Club, one chose to be interviewed at home and the other six were interviewed online.

In practice, I found there to be few noticeable differences in the data generated during online and face-to-face meetings. I suspect this is because the interviews took place after the COVID-19 pandemic had forced many people to become familiar with MS Teams, and quite used to having online interactions. One observation was that the face-to-face meetings varied far more in terms of the time taken. For example, with two parents, the discussion took place walking around the rugby pitch and took no longer than 20 minutes. With one coach, we met at a coffee shop and talked for well over an hour. This may reflect the greater interactive responsiveness of in-person interviews. The shorter meetings may have been shorter due to a number of reasons, such as: it was cold, perhaps the parents were keen to support but also wished to watch the rugby session, and the questions went smoothly, quickly identifying the next areas of discussion and so forth. Similarly, at the cafe, the conversation flowed, involved cake and coffee and both the participant and I appeared to appreciate the content and length of the discussion. This can be compared to online discussions, which are often scheduled, with a timer in the corner of the screen and are entered into a diary or calendar, which can both lengthen and constrain them.

## **Limitations and challenges of the interviews**

One area of challenge and a potential limitation is that the recruitment for interviews (and in this sense the selection for triads) was dependent on who was interested. While this is appropriate in relation to the voluntary nature of the research, I cannot be sure that all those who might have been interested came to my attention.

As with the group discussions, I was aware that I could not offer participants complete confidentiality of their participation. Though I would do my best to anonymise the data by removing identifying details to the extent possible, I was aware it could be possible for others to recognise them, and to use their existing knowledge to identify their data (e.g., Saunders et al., 2015; Tolich, 2004). I was careful to make participants aware of the challenge, both in terms of their participation and relating to their data. The following is an explanation I gave to one participant in relation to confidentiality:

My auntie, if she read this report, she wouldn't have a clue who anybody was because she, she's not involved at all, doesn't know, and that will go for anybody outside of the club. But within the club, there is a possibility, and I've been telling all the participants, there is a chance that someone will say, 'Oh, I think that person was involved'. And they might go, 'Oh, that sounds a bit like so and so'. I'm going to do my best to minimise all of that, and to be really sensible about protecting people's identities

Finally, and though I found the online interviews to be productive of data, it has been suggested that though online research has practical advantages it may result in less detailed data (Johnson et al., 2021). According to Johnson and colleagues (2021) in their analysis of more than 300 interviews, in-person interviews provided greater depth of data, more words and more context notes, with the authors suggesting this is due to their "conversational and more detailed nature" (p. 1155). This can be considered a potential limitation given that the majority of interviews with adults took place online. However, it was borne of necessity, and the depth of data is enhanced by the overall case study approach and data generated through other methods.

### **4.5.5. Document collection and analysis**

Documentary collection and analysis involves gathering existing documents for review. In this sense, it relies on data that have already been created (Tight, 2019).

According to Linders (2008), careful selection of documents to review is imperative. Figure 16 shows how the document review connected to the research questions.

**Figure 16**

*How Document Analysis Contributed to the Research Study*

Research method	Question 1: Wellbeing and harm	Question 2: Children’s agency and consent	Question 3: Parental consent and impact
Document review	●	●	●
<b>Data contribution:</b> Context, format, language, content			

Legend	●	Contextual data connection
	●	Direct data connection

I sought and gathered documents relating to coaching and playing practices, safeguarding, health and safety, child and parent consent, risk, codes of conducts, educational or wellbeing materials and similar documentation from the RFU and from The Club. To facilitate this, I developed a checklist as a guide to myself during research activities at The Club. I accessed a range of documents from The Club’s website and received some directly from officials. I also accessed publicly available documents through searches and review of the RFU website, ensuring that the documents I found were up to date. I made note of participants’ comments relating to potentially relevant documents, seeking these out on the RFU website as appropriate. This was mainly in relation to training documentation but included statements and regulations. I gathered approximately 40 documents in total, detailed in Table 7.

**Table 7***Summary of Documents Collected*

<b>Source</b>	<b>Document</b>
<b>RFU</b>	<p><u>Age Grade Rugby materials</u>: out of season activities guide; RFU regulations (especially Regulations 15 and 21, relating to Age Grade Rugby and Safeguarding)</p> <p><u>Safeguarding materials</u>: Club Safeguarding Officer Role Description; DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) Case Management Process and Frequently Asked Questions; Safeguarding Policy Booklet and Posters; Safeguarding considerations for training rooms; Information for those who have had a concern raised against them; Sharing concerns; When to involve the police; Parental attendance at rugby; Photography and use of imagery guidance; Encouraging positive behaviour; Protocol for Contact in Rugby; Physical intervention in rugby.</p> <p><u>Coaching and training materials</u>: Tacklesafe; Introduction to safeguarding; Headcase concussion awareness training; Lineout FAQ</p> <p><u>Registration materials</u>: GMS (Game Management System) User Guide; RFU Community Rugby Help Website/Hub</p>
<b>Club</b>	<p>Variety of documents, including safeguarding policy, codes of conduct, changing room and photography policies.</p> <p><i>To prevent identification of The Club, exact titles and details of documents are not included in this list.</i></p>

During data analysis, I conducted additional searches on the RFU website in relation to the phrase ‘rugby family’, which was a prominent concept identified during reflexive thematic analysis (see Chapter 5). These searches were conducted on the RFU website using its search function and searching for terms such as ‘rugby family’ and ‘family’. The purpose of limiting the search to the governing body’s website was to enquire into their published information in order to seek data relating to their presentation and construction of the terms.

### **Limitations and challenges of the document collection and analysis**

Linders (2008) offers two limitations of documentary analysis: working with what is available and recognising that “not all data sources are equal” (p. 468). The question of ‘what is available’ covers both whether materials exist and whether they are shared. I collected materials that were publicly available from the RFU, including by using their search function, and as shared by The Club. It is possible, therefore, that I missed documentation, though my efforts to check with participants and be attentive to the

mention of additional documents helped mitigate this. I addressed Linders's (2008) 'inequality of data sources' by being cognisant of the source and intended purpose and audience of each document and analysing with this in mind.

#### **4.5.6. Reflections on implementation**

I was very pleased with the level of contact and interaction and the access to data I was able to achieve at The Club. This was made possible by a hugely supportive and interested committee and membership. Of course, there were some challenges, as set out above. In addition to those already noted, it is important to recognise that my research took place shortly after the full relaxation of COVID-19 regulations. This meant my ethical protocol and documentation recognised COVID-19 and it was still an important factor in my mind, and I expect for others, in relation to sharing or touching items and being in close spaces. I feel fortunate I was able to work in spaces that were airy, had windows and had the space to support safe working.

Throughout my research, I made several reflexive journal entries noting how lucky and grateful I felt to conduct the research, to have found and recruited a suitable club and to have what I knew to be, even from an early glance, some extremely useful data. One pertinent reflexive thinking session came as I wondered how to leave The Club:

I feel so grateful and lucky I've been able to work with these amazing people. I don't know what exactly it will look like when the analysis is all done. All I know is those acknowledgements sections in PhD theses where the author says "I couldn't have done this without..." must only scratch the surface of how grateful those researchers are. I will say goodbye and I think I will just remember this feeling of gratitude and take it with me. It feels a bit like I wish there was more to it! But that's the way it goes – I'll mark the end of this phase and move to the next, and maybe see some people again after summer.

As I was leaving The Club, I considered it good practice (and polite) to mark my departure and set expectations relating to next steps. I sent all coaches a thank you message and said goodbye to each team in a different way. With one, I shared a wave and a thumbs up. With another, just prior to a match, I shared a 'good luck' and 'thank you so much' and received a round of applause. With one other team, I simply said 'thanks, all the best' and watched them run off to their next training session.

#### **4.6. Data management**

Children's rights, ethics and research quality are served by effective and efficient data management (e.g., Marshall et al., 2022). This is also a legal requirement and a condition of my doctoral research. I developed a data management plan based on literature, experience and following recommendations from the University of Edinburgh's Data Protection for Research course. My data management included careful labelling and storage of both soft and hard copy data. Electronic data were saved and backed up on my account within the University of Edinburgh's OneDrive storage system. I accessed this through a laptop that was encrypted and password protected. Hard copies of documents, including consent forms, written background sheets and name/pseudonym matching cards were scanned to the relevant OneDrive folder and stored separately and securely in a locked filing cabinet with a schedule for destruction at the end of the study.

Audio and video recordings of observation notes, group discussions and interviews were transcribed verbatim for data analysis with data anonymised during transcription. These became the primary sources of data that I used throughout the analysis and reporting, with the original recordings saved securely and separately on the University's system, including within password-protected folders. Original recordings were retained for the duration of the project to preserve the possibility of data verification. Data management and usage are a particularly important ethical consideration, especially in research relating to children, families and sensitive subject matter. I agree with Alderson and Morrow (2011) that the benefits of research include the potential for improvement of systems to benefit children and consider it a researcher's duty to make maximum use of data from research interactions with participants. By taking these data management steps, I was able to ensure maximum use of the research data while minimising the potential for any harm or 'cost'.

In the longer term, my data management plan dictated the destruction of all recordings after acceptance of the final thesis. Only anonymised data were to be retained, in a closed archive, in line with my ethical protocol and as set out in the PIS and consent forms. In this regard, I was careful to return to each transcript for a final time in the final stages of 'writing up' the thesis. In this step, I used the benefit of my increased knowledge about rugby and The Club to ensure that all potential identifiers were

removed. It was possible that I could have been unaware of details that were identifying of The Club during initial transcription. This step allowed the data to be stored safely, in a closed data vault, for potential future use with my permission and only in line with the PIS and consent forms.

#### **4.7. Data analysis**

I followed a reflective thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) approach in the analysis of data obtained and generated through the research methods described above. Braun and Clarke (2022) describe thematic analysis as “a method for developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic processing of data coding to develop themes” (p. 4). I selected this approach because thematic analysis, in its flexibility, is suited to the social constructionist research paradigm used throughout the research and facilitates the exploration of a range of research questions (Terry et al., 2017). In addition, I considered the reflexive nature of thematic analysis both inescapable, from a social constructionist perspective, and crucial to my authentic engagement in the research, as someone with considerable experience in sport, in safeguarding and as a parent. Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise and celebrate the researcher’s role in reflexive thematic analysis, noting that theme production is “inherently subjective and situated” and that “researcher subjectivity is the primary tool for reflexive TA” (p. 8).

In line with the single embedded case study design and following guidance relating to multiple case studies (Stake, 2005) and embedded units of analysis (Yin, 2018), my overall analytical approach was to analyse embedded units first before bringing this analysis together for the case study as a whole. This was an overall approach but, given the role of the embedded units as informing the full case, and given the importance and richness of other data from the group discussions, observations and document review, I continued to familiarise myself with all data, moving between and among the full dataset throughout analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2022) provide detailed guidance for the thematic analysis process, recommending six phases: 1) data familiarisation, 2) data coding, 3) initial theme generation, 4) theme development and review, 5) theme refining, defining and naming, and 6) writing up (p. 6). Below, I provide a brief account of this process. Although I set these out in turn and followed these phases primarily ‘in order’, Braun and Clarke

(2022) emphasise these phases describe a “process” rather than a set of “steps” or “rules” (p. 10) and therefore the following was not fully linear in operation.

### **Phase one – data familiarisation**

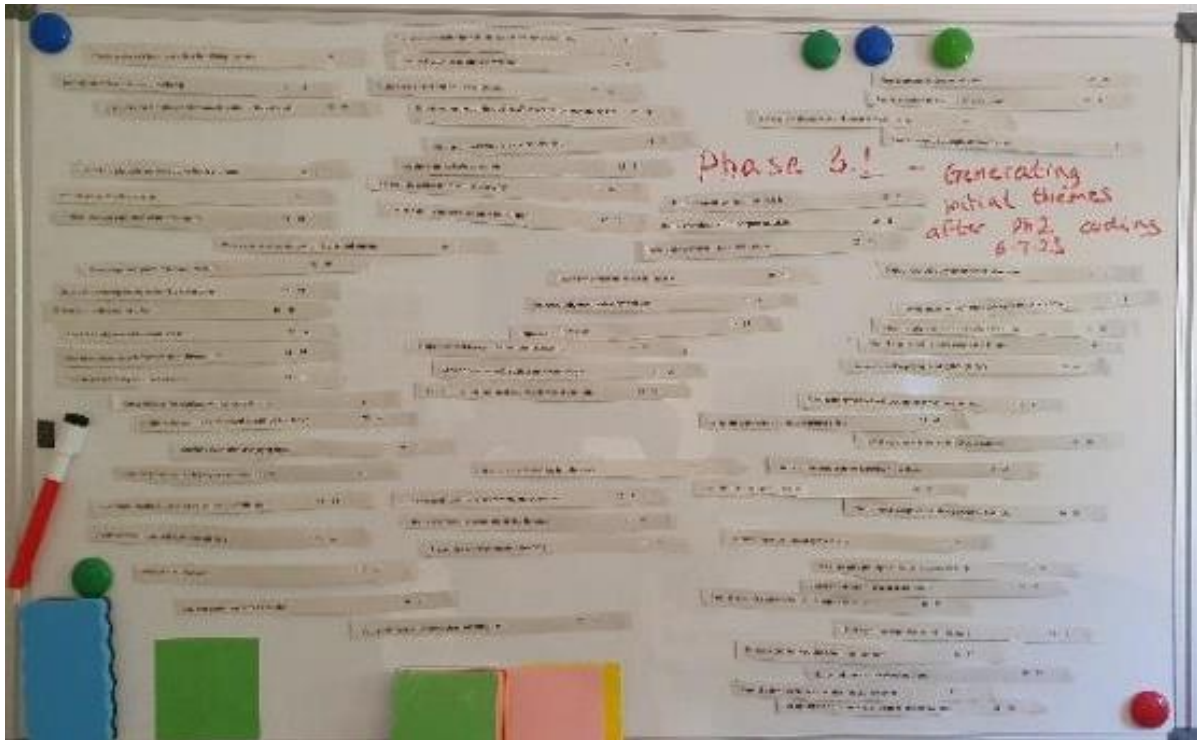
Data analysis began with the first phase of data familiarisation and note taking. For this, I transcribed all interviews and group discussions. This involved listening through each research recording at least twice, which served the double purpose of ensuring the accuracy of transcription while also increasing familiarisation. I also completed observation forms on the basis of voice recordings made during the observation sessions. I saved and organised all documents within a filing system that allowed me to identify and quickly retrieve relevant documents. Revision of observation data and document review played a crucial role in phase one because, as set out in Sections 4.5.2 and 4.5.5 respectively, these research activities were designed to gather contextual information about the sport of rugby and about The Club. This supported familiarisation with the data and set the foundation for the initial coding in phase two, as discussed below.

### **Phase two – data coding**

In the second phase, data coding, I used the software programme NVivo to code all transcripts in detail, including the observation notes. I generated codes with a bearing on the research aim and questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I began with a first triad, coding in detail and developing a sense of how the components of the triads could interact. I shared these codes with my supervisors along with the anonymised transcripts and received feedback on my coding approach and reflections on supplementary or differing codes. After applying this learning and development to the remaining triads, my codebook contained over 68 code labels. As Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest, several “segments” of my data were coded to numerous code labels (p. 53). I found considerable richness in this phase of the analysis and across the 68 code labels there were over 2,000 segments of data. Recognising this phase as a “process” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 53), and seeking to engage physically with the process, I printed the coding labels and placed them at random on a whiteboard, as shown in Figure 17. Putting these labels on the whiteboard allowed me to stand up, move around, touch, move, place and replace the codes in preparation for Phase 3 (e.g., Nicksic et al., 2020).

**Figure 17**

*Whiteboard Following Phase Two of Thematic Analysis*

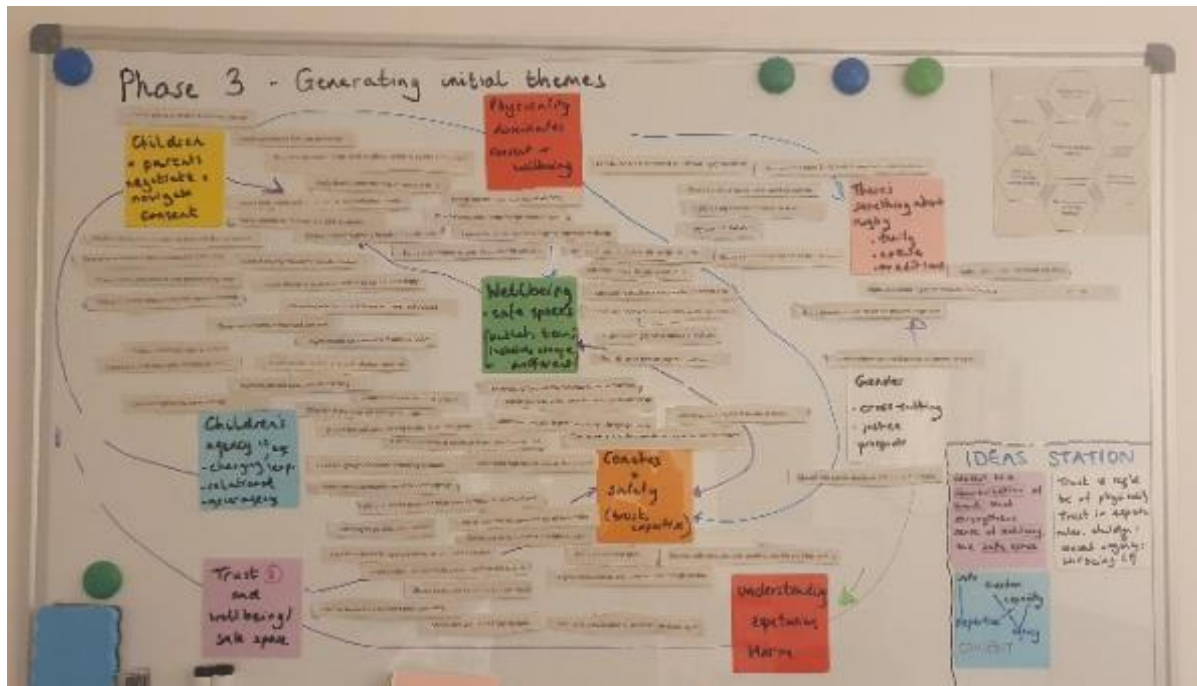


**Phase three – initial theme generation**

In the next phase of analysis, phase three – generating initial themes, I grouped codes into initial themes that contributed to answering the research questions. Figure 18 and the following discussion relate to this phase.

**Figure 18**

*Whiteboard Following Phase Three of Thematic Analysis*



Within phase three, I spent time re-reading the transcripts, focusing on the child-parent-coach triads to retain the approach of analysing as embedded units and in a cross-triad/full case analysis (e.g., Yin, 2018). In this phase, shown in Figure 18, I reviewed the codes, seeking patterns and generating initial themes. This was supported by clustering the coding strips on the whiteboard around initial theme ideas. I fed these back into NVivo, rearranging coding labels to set out initial themes. I also, at this point, set out an ‘ideas station’ on my whiteboard to support thinking and reflections. I used this to note down any ideas that came to mind during the coding, pattern and theme-generation process.

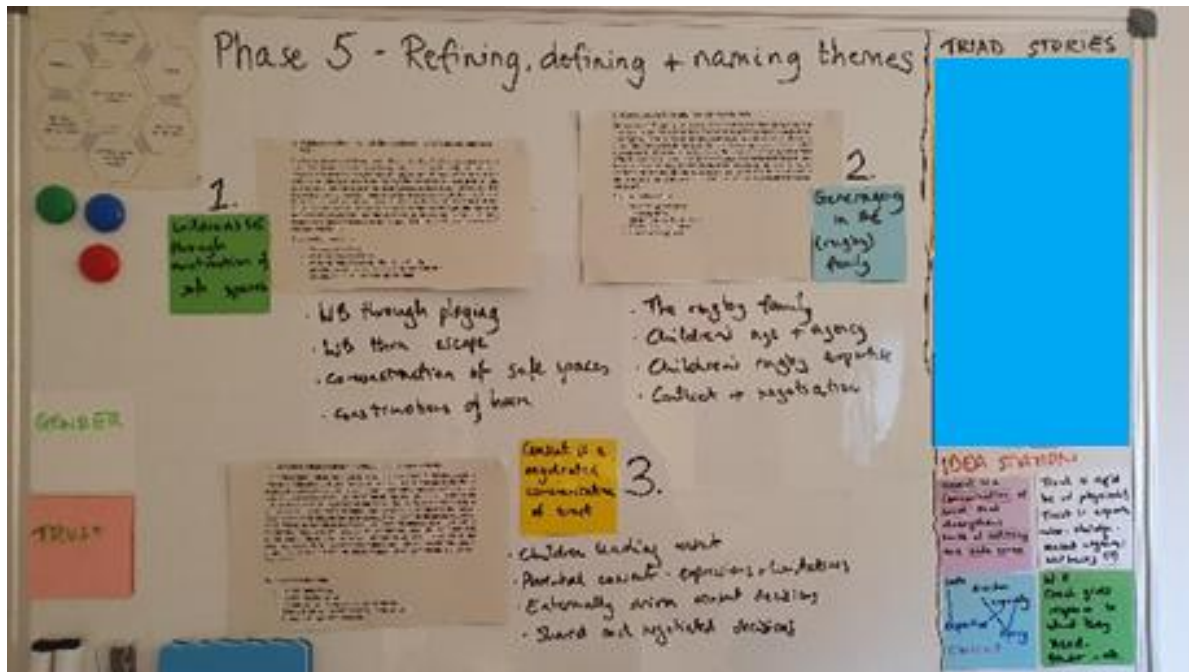
### **Phase four – theme development and review**

In phase four, I assessed the ‘candidate themes’ for analytical fit and integrity with the dataset. This phase is reflected in Figure 19.



**Figure 20**

*Whiteboard for Phase Five of Thematic Analysis*



During this phase, I also considered ‘counter’ evidence to help test these themes and their suitability to addressing the research aim and questions. Within this phase, I also returned to the documents I had gathered from The Club and from rugby more generally. I considered the themes I had generated and whether they were recognisable within the context provided by the documents. At this point, I also highlighted particular documents that resonated with the themes and that I noted would be useful to include within the presentation of findings. This resulted in taking forward the three themes of “children’s wellbeing through the co-construction of safe spaces”, “generacy in the (rugby) family” and “consent is a negotiated communication of trust.” Part of the phase involved considering how to integrate analysis and consideration of gender. Considerations relating to gender had been present within many codes and were situated within all three main themes. I, therefore, determined that I would include gender as a cross-cutting theme that would be present within the analysis of all themes and findings chapters.

### **Phase six – writing up**

In this final phase of analysis, I drafted this thesis. I returned to the data through the drafting process to remain close to and familiar with the data, and to ensure that the

written product was data analysis driven. During analysis and while drafting this thesis, I was determined to maintain the highest possible standards. This involved careful consideration of guidance relating to reflexive thematic analysis, including practising reflexivity, maintaining a coding audit trail, and working with my supervisors for support and feedback (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). This engagement with my supervisory team was essential, not as a form of dual coding of data, but, as Braun and Clarke (2022) recommend, to facilitate conversations around my analytical thinking, to consider alternative analytical ideas and to explore the analysis from a critical perspective.

#### **4.7.1. Validation and engagement**

Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that participant validation can be appropriate in thematic analysis where the themes or ideas “might be recognisable to participants as an account of their experience” (p. 277). I judged this to be the case within my research study and considered how best to engage in forms of participation engagement. Given the potential sensitivity of the research, the participation of children and the importance of “network confidentiality” (Harden et al., 2010, p. 447), I had considered from early on that I would not plan formal validation workshops involving detailed quotations and data, but would potentially share high-level findings, along with support and contact information and a channel for participants to ask questions or share comments.

By the time I was in a position to engage in participant validation, the rugby season by which the case study had been bounded was completed. This had several ethical implications. First and foremost were concerns over maintaining confidentiality of participation. As we had moved into a new rugby season, new children might have joined The Club. This would mean any communication regarding the research would enlighten a new group of people to the involvement of The Club in the research, contrary to one strand of maintaining confidentiality, which had been to minimise the number of people aware of The Club’s participation in the study. I was determined any validation activities would not compromise this. I was also conscious that planning any in-person activities could lead to renewed discussions of the research, and potential questions over who had participated, which could compromise the confidentiality of individual participation. While I had hoped it might be possible to hold participatory workshops at The Club, asking children, parents and coaches to respond to poster

presentations and provide brief insights, I decided I could not justify the potential compromise to confidentiality. Instead, I contacted those who had participated in the research with a single sheet leaflet relating to the initial findings (Appendix G). I invited discussions and had casual non-data-producing conversations with two coaches who expressed interest and kind, encouraging responses from several others who asked to be kept informed of future publications.

In addition to this thesis, which is available to participants should they wish to access it, I developed a highlights document to share with participants who requested to remain informed (e.g., Hill, 2006).

#### **4.8. Ethics**

My research required extremely careful, detailed and ongoing ethical consideration because it involved children and their parents and potentially sensitive issues including wellbeing, harm and relationships. My research ethics were guided by the University's requirements, the Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA) and literature, including Alderson and Morrow (2011). I received ethical approval from MHSES in September 2022 (see Appendix A). Alongside the University's approval process, I developed and maintained a live ethical protocol, shared with my supervisors and attached as part of my ethical application, that covered the ethical issues set out below.

##### **4.8.1. Consent**

Voluntary informed consent was essential to my study and was sought for all aspects of the research on an ongoing basis (BERA, 2018). The PIS I developed provided details to all participants to support their informed consent, and I encouraged participants to ask me questions, either through my university email address, when I was at The Club or during research activities (PIS and consent forms are included at Appendices C and D). As part of my ethical protocol, and in line with the University's expectations, I required that child participants must have consent forms signed by themselves and a parent/guardian in order to participate in the group discussions and interviews and to be considered to have consented to the observations. Throughout my research, I remained aware a participant could wish to withdraw from any aspect or all of the research (BERA, 2018). I reminded participants of this frequently so that they were aware it remained an option at all times. As noted, I provided an opt-out

area and colouring-in supplies during the focus groups so that participants could signal their withdrawal, or avoid an activity (Hill et al., 2009). I also emphasised that the vouchers I was offering as a 'thank you' for their time were available to participants at any time, whether they stayed for the full session or left at the very start. I hoped this would reduce any pressure to stay or continue.

I received consent forms directly, mainly by collecting hard copies, but also by receiving copies electronically to my University email address. I had hoped that coaches, as gatekeepers, might have been able to collect consent forms for me but I found that to be an administrative and ethical challenge. Firstly, it felt a burden to ask the coaches to take on that additional task as it would have involved careful collection, logging and storage. Secondly, I was not confident of being able to arrange a secure, ethically acceptable process for this collection, logging and storage. Finally, it would have been challenging for me to know which children and families had provided consent, particularly for observations. Even by taking a register during training sessions or having a list of players who had provided consent forms, it would have been extremely difficult and time-consuming to match consent forms to players and to know who from the children present had requisite consent to participate in the observations. It would also have been immensely time-consuming during an evening session that should have been training-focused. Based on all of this, I decided it would be important for me to have children's consent forms submitted directly to me. For observations, I decided these must all be collected in hard copy so that I would see the child provide me with the form and select the headband to wear (see discussion under Section 4.5.2). In the group discussions and interviews, the number of participants was smaller and I was in control of the situation, which enabled me to check people in and ensure I had all the necessary forms. Coaches (and other officials) supported the research by reminding the teams to bring consent forms for observations, and in the other ways mentioned in this chapter.

One challenge regarding consent forms was that some participants and their parents felt that once they had provided consent to one activity – most commonly the observation as a first action – they had provided consent to all activities. On reflection and considering the frequency with which I know parents are asked for consent forms and permission slips, I understood the confusion. I had considered developing a

consent form that included all activities but decided against this on the basis I wanted to be assured of the ongoing consent to each activity. This was a difficult decision and I was apologetic of this need in conversations with participants in which I empathised with having extra parenting paperwork. Though it was an additional administrative burden on everyone, I considered it important and a 'best option' and ultimately appreciated the collective patience with this.

#### **4.8.2. Harms and benefits**

Alderson and Morrow (2011) note the importance of considering the harms and benefits to children taking part in the research, not as a simple calculation, but viewing the totality of the risks and potential benefits to decide whether and how to proceed. When designing my research, I identified that the main risks of harm included distress during participation, consequences on relationships, behaviours or performance, or any negative impact, including emotional responses, following publication (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). I sought to limit these risks as far as possible through careful research tool development, for example, by using vignettes in the group discussions (Lee & Goh, 2020) and by approaching the issue of harm delicately within interviews (see Sections 4.5.3 and 4.5.4 for further discussion). I also maintained close attention to whether participants were experiencing distress or discomfort. In this regard, I noticed a small number of occasions during interviews on which it was important to change the direction of the conversation and return to a thread at a later stage. In an effort to reduce the risk of harm after participation, I ended each interaction with a forward-looking discussion, for example asking about hopes and dreams for the future, and by sharing support information with participants (e.g., Hill et al., 2009). This support information included details about national and local support services that were relevant to the research, particularly in relation to wellbeing. As discussed through the research methods section above, and explored in detail below, I was especially aware of potential harms relating to privacy and confidentiality, including in relation to the impact on existing relationships in the event that individuals or triads were identified internally within the triad, team or club (Lowton, 2018). I discuss this further in relation to my efforts to protect confidentiality and privacy below (Section 4.8.3).

Kennan and Dolan (2017) highlight the tension between harm and benefits, and the delicateness of this balance:

There is the risk that promoting CYP's [children and young people's] participation in research, in the absence of reflection on the risks involved, can expose them to harm and exploitation. Equally, overly erring on the side of protection can silence their voices and deny the research community the opportunity to generate knowledge informed by their perspectives and lived experiences. (p. 309)

Kennan and Dolan (2017) encourage consideration of the research's purpose and context and participants' preferences and of their time and resources as practical steps to take in assessing benefits and harms. I took heed of this throughout the research, for example minimising the logistical impact of participation by attending interviews in people's houses at times that suited their families or offering to conduct the research in locations that suited interview participants. I was also as accommodating as possible in relation to the timings and locations of group discussions. Considering the positive impact of research, Neelakantan and colleagues (2022) have identified benefits to adolescents of involvement in research on sensitive issues, including emotional benefits, strengthened interpersonal skills and enjoyment. Children's participation in research and consultations has also been suggested to bring benefits to the children of contributing knowledge for positive purposes (Cody, 2017). I made sure to set out to participants the potential benefits their contributions could make in relation to research, policy and practice in order to amplify these potential positive consequences that they might experience.

As indicated under Section 4.4 regarding case selection, sampling and recruitment, I determined that this would not be an intersectional research study. In addition to the reasons noted earlier in this chapter, this determination was connected to my assessment of the potential harms and benefits for participants, particularly in relation to the impact of gathering sensitive personal data. Under relevant data protection regulations, some data that supports intersectional research – for example relating to race, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation – are considered 'sensitive personal data' (Room, 2021; Christensen & Jensen, 2012). It is permissible to gather such data with "explicit consent" (Room, 2021, p. 194). However, given the case study size, it was not clear I would obtain sufficient quantity and diversity of experiences to accommodate intersectional analysis. Further, within a relatively small sample, the risks to

confidentiality and privacy were likely to be too great to accommodate reporting relating to this analysis. On this basis, I considered that the usefulness of the data would be limited, rendering its benefits insufficient to merit the intrusion of gathering it (see, e.g., Alderson & Morrow, 2011).

During implementation, there were some moments of challenge and personal reflection relating to harms and benefits. For example, as coaches were extremely supportive of the research, many generously encouraged players to participate in the research activities by explaining I was “here to help,” “trustworthy,” and “part of the team.” I greatly appreciated this camaraderie, and especially the feeling of inclusion into The Club. At the same time, I was careful to explain the extent and limits of the research’s purpose and outcomes to all participants so that it was clear what were the potential benefits and harms.

#### **4.8.3. Confidentiality and privacy**

Privacy and confidentiality were extremely important at all points in this study. Children have a right to privacy under Article 16 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and all participants’ privacy rights are protected in domestic law under data protection legislation. Confidentiality requires that “data in which individual participants can be identified should not be passed on to other people without the explicit consent of those participants” (Tisdall et al., 2009, p. 20). Confidentiality helps to protect children’s right to privacy (Punch, 2013). Anonymity, which is connected, refers to the non-identification of research participants within research outputs (Tisdall et al., 2009).

I was particularly concerned about harms that could result from the identification of participants or breaches of confidentiality (Alderson & Morrow, 2011). I protected the identity of the club from those *outside the club*, and added a layer of protection to participants’ anonymity, by referring to it only as ‘The Club’ (BERA, 2018, para. 40). To reduce identification *within* The Club, I tried to minimise the risk of onlookers, or others who were aware of who was participating. This involved, for example, arranging to conduct research with children before their teammates had arrived at The Club rather than taking them from training to participate. To protect their identities even further, I asked child participants to choose pseudonyms and discussed with parents that I would use their roles rather than names. I asked each of the triad coaches to choose a pseudonym, which some did, while others asked me to choose a name for them. Six

of the eight child triad participants also participated in focus group discussions. In the interests of increased anonymity, I chose a second name for them for the individual interviews – to ensure that their group discussants were less likely to identify their individual contributions through their group contributions. Where possible, I returned to the participant to check their happiness with the name I had chosen. No real names appear within this thesis. Overall, I was cautious to remove identifiers while maintaining analytical strength (Saunders et al., 2015). However, I recognise the risk of what Tolich (2004) names ‘deductive disclosure’ and ‘internal identification’ wherein those within The Club identify others based on their knowledge that The Club hosted the research, and their familiarity with other club members.

Confidentiality and anonymity within the triads were more challenging because their nature is such that the parents/players know they each participated and know who their coaches are (see, e.g., Lowton, 2018). I handled this through a sensitive approach to data reporting, to preserve confidentiality and anonymity to the extent possible. For example, I was careful to share only the data necessary throughout this thesis, making sure it is accurate and that it does not do harm to the people involved. I retained flexibility in the presentation of data, for example in Section 7.5 where I removed pseudonyms from some figures representing triads. Harden and colleagues (2010) note the importance of “network confidentiality” (p. 477), which, for this research, meant not sharing information between triad participants. Though this relates, in particular, to the ‘substantive’ aspects of research, I was careful to exercise good practice in this regard, reminding myself not to reflexively answer seemingly innocuous questions such as “Oh, did [child] mention their siblings” to support this form of confidentiality.

I always knew parents and children would be aware that they each had participated, but, during the fieldwork, I became increasingly aware that coaches would have a high chance of being aware or becoming aware of which families had taken part in the triads. Though I would not share this information myself, players who wished to be interviewed at The Club might be seen, others might speak about the experience and some coaches actively supported me in recruiting families to the individual triad interviews. Based on this, I was careful to include a caution relating to anonymity, confidentiality and identification in each interaction, making clear that I would do my

best to anonymise but those within The Club and the triad could potentially 'figure it out'. I decided it was appropriate to seek consent on this transparent basis, rather than promising complete anonymity, which I did not believe was possible.

In the final stages of drafting this thesis, before submission, I conducted two additional 'ethics sense checks' by reading through and applying a different lens of scrutiny each time. For the first check, I focused on ensuring I had maintained confidentiality and anonymity to the extent possible so that, for example, details provided in separate sections of the document could not be combined to increase the risk of identification of participants or The Club (Kaiser, 2009). I then conducted a further review, ensuring any data I included would cause no harm in the event participants were able to recognise themselves or their family members (Harden et al., 2010; Saunders et al., 2015). Where I was uncertain, for example in relation to the section introducing The Club, I contacted a club official for extra assurance. These checks ensured compliance with the highest ethical standards.

#### ***4.8.4. Child protection and safeguarding***

As part of every research interaction, and within my PIS and consent forms, I explained to participants I might breach confidentiality if concerned anyone was currently at risk of significant harm. When explaining this to child participants, I was careful to use as child-friendly terms as possible. For this, I explained that if I thought they were being hurt or that someone else was being hurt, and I was worried about it, I might need to tell someone, but that I would also tell them about this first. I was prepared to stop a group discussion or interview immediately if anything urgent came up but was also sensitive to the fact that this could cause a child additional distress. I was therefore prepared to handle a situation in which I needed to complete the research activity and return to the safeguarding matter at the end of the session. I had experience of developing and implementing safeguarding referral protocols through my previous professional role and existing voluntary position and used this to develop a safeguarding referral pathway that incorporated the RFU's safeguarding protocols (see Figure 21).

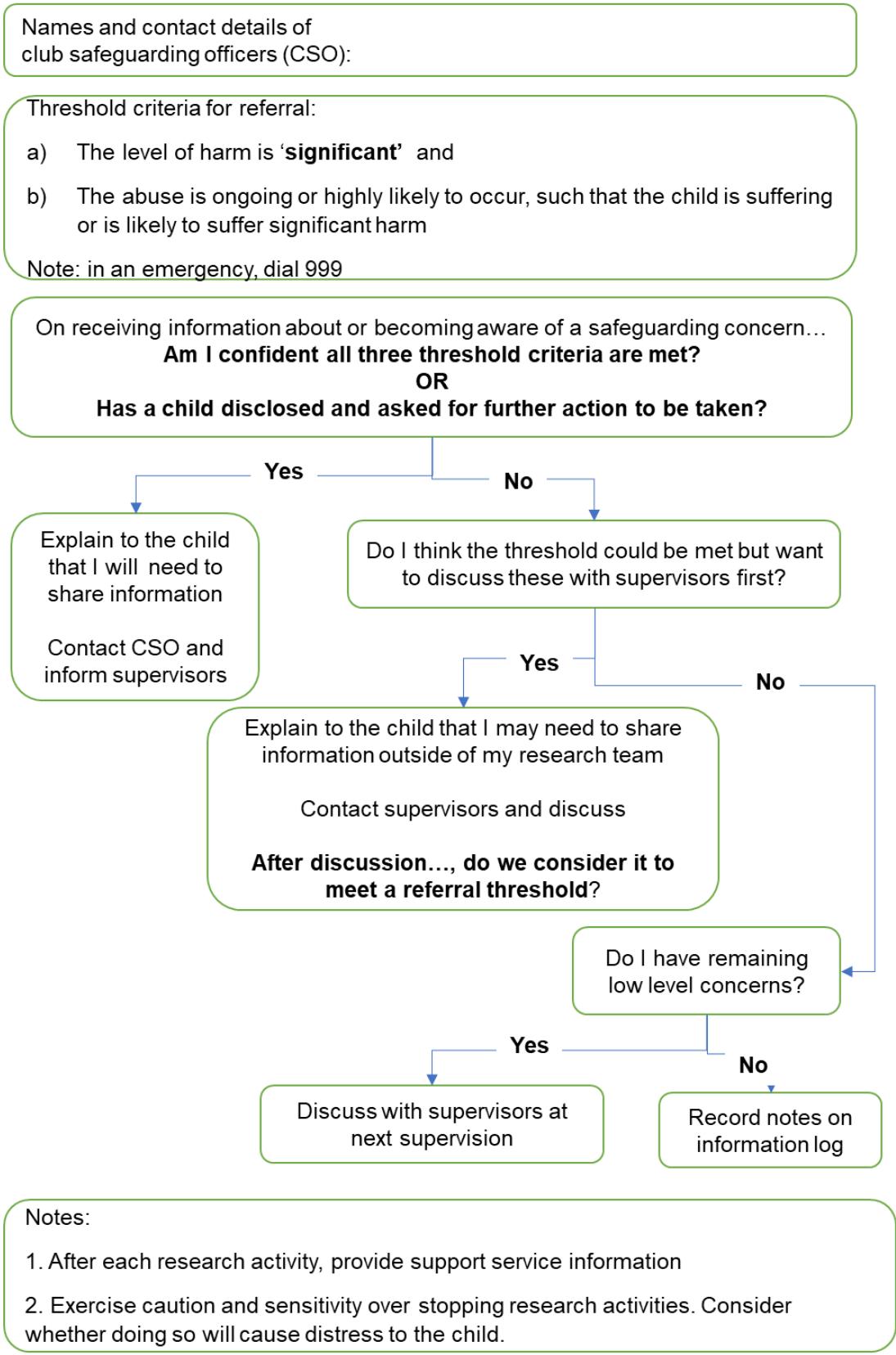
In this, I determined that The Club's safeguarding officer (CSO) would be the first point of contact outside of my supervisory team for referral of serious concerns or disclosure or for information sharing for lower-level concerns. Though I was prepared to go

directly to the CSO if confident I had received information about significant harm, I decided it would be important to discuss any less clear-cut matters with my supervisory team first (BERA, 2018, paras. 52-3). This would help support confidentiality and avoid over-sharing. My supervisory team was highly experienced in conducting research, including sensitive research with children. I kept a confidential safeguarding log, noting reflections or concerns that I wished to discuss, and any actions taken. I also developed a strong connection with the safeguarding lead, which gave me confidence that any safeguarding concerns I might have raised would have been taken seriously and handled appropriately. I did not make any safeguarding referrals.

**Figure 21**

*Safeguarding Referral and Information Sharing Protocol*

**Child protection/ disclosure protocol**



#### **4.8.5. Health and safety**

In addition to the MHSES COVID-19 risk assessment, I conducted my own risk assessment for research at the pilot locations and The Club. This included considerations relating to transportation, time of day and safety of facilities – bearing in mind that most of my fieldwork took place in evenings during winter. I upgraded my mobile telephone data package to ensure I would always be contactable and able to contact others. I carried a personal alarm and I ensured my partner was aware of my schedule and I contacted him to check in and out of all journeys and research activities.

Perhaps of greater concern was the potential impact on me emotionally and/or psychologically given the sensitivity of the issues addressed. There were, indeed, occasions on which the subject matter was difficult. I allowed myself to experience this. I considered options for self-care in advance and developed a personalised ‘toolkit’ to support this (Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018). This included debriefs, maintaining confidentiality, with my support network (Coles et al., 2014) and regular personal reflexivity and journalling. Confidential support from the University was also available to me had I needed it, and I made sure that I was aware of the various services on offer. My self-care practices also included exercise, colouring and the occasional video game. In relation to reflexivity, I found that ‘stream of consciousness’ dictation in which I focused on my own thoughts and feelings and what I noticed about them were helpful and allowed me to ‘close’ any challenging moments. As it happened, I found a particular resonance with the story-telling nature of the country music genre and listened to country music radio on every post-research journey.

#### **4.8.6. Accommodations and support**

While planning all stages of interactions with potential participants, I considered it vital and proper practice to support all participants who wished to take part by minimising barriers to involvement. To facilitate this, I was mindful of the potential need to provide accommodations and support to participants with disabilities or with additional needs (Fry et al., 2017). This may have included language support or other requirements. Support in this regard would have included, for example, providing parents with assistance to understand and complete the PIS and consent forms. For this, I was prepared to seek translation services to support participation.

In the event, consultation with coaches, observation activities and introductory discussions with parents did not lead me to identify any such needs. Still, in each exchange with coaches, officials and parents, whether verbal or over email, I made sure to ask about access or other needs to support the planned research activities. When contacting parents (and coaches) in relation to group discussions, I was careful to ask about and reiterate my willingness to accommodate dietary requirements, including allergies, and any other support needs children may have had. I was also careful to provide children with different ways to participate during the group discussions, including using sticky notes or designating a reader or speaker, for example, so that they would not be forced to read or to write if not confident to do so, and would not need to disclose any difficulties they might have to their fellow discussants.

#### **4.9. Reflexivity and positionality**

Reflexivity acknowledges the researcher's role in influencing and constructing research (Burr, 2015). Braun and Clarke (2022) link reflexivity and positionality in reflexive thematic analysis, requiring the researcher to locate themselves and their positions. Reflexivity tools include journaling, discussions and mapping (Finlay & Gough, 2003; Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Rix et al., 2014). My preference is to engage in free-speech dictation or to mind map. I began reflexivity early and mapped positionality, acknowledging myself as a white cis female from a middle-class background, without disabilities and in my early 40s. As an early outcome of reflexive methods, I engaged in reflexive journaling focusing on my motivation for conducting the research and my choice of sports:

In this research, I am bringing together two important, hugely influential pieces of my personal background. My motivation and interest come from both my experiences of over 13 years of professional socio-legal and policy work on children's rights and a childhood as an elite junior tennis player.

Now, as an adult, I often make observations on wellbeing in sport, reflecting on experiences in childhood sport, current affairs or my role as a parent and aunt of children on their own sporting adventures. At times, I have wondered whether my childhood experiences made me more inclined towards a career in children's rights. No doubt my experience of childhood sport contributes to my

view of childhoods, experienced differently, both individually and collectively. But what of wellbeing and harm? I trained with, and under, coaches who have since been convicted of sexual offences against children. I observed poor practices. I also experienced happiness, made great friendships that continue today, and appreciate the life-lessons. These are important reflections going forward...

Based on this, I decided not to seek out tennis as a case study sport, and that it would be important to retain an openness to all aspects of wellbeing within my research approach, as discussed above. I engaged in further reflexive journalling throughout implementation, with this practice providing me the opportunity to untangle my personal responses to research activities separately to their analysis. For example, I was particularly moved after one research interaction and found that 'free-flowing' writing enabled me to explore and understand this before transcribing for analysis. In addition to the checks noted above in relation to my data analysis, I shared these reflections with my supervision team, allowing me to remain alert to any difficulties and to discuss any concerns or additional support I may have required.

Reflexivity continued as part of the thematic analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This involved pausing to reflect on the analysis to allow free-flowing dictation of my experiences and reflections and to critically consider how these affect the analysis. Relevant considerations are noted throughout the thesis.

#### **4.10. Conclusion**

This chapter has presented key information regarding the methodology of this research study. This has included an introduction to the ontological and epistemological standpoints, as well as the social constructionist research paradigm. The chapter has also introduced the decision to adopt a qualitative research approach in order to gather rich data about participants' views, understandings and experiences (Thomas, 2021). In this chapter, I presented and explained the single embedded case study approach and how this led to the case study at The Club with eight triads as embedded units of analysis. The chapter then turned to the research methods – observation, group discussions, semi-structured interviews and document collection – and how relevant tools were developed, piloted, amended and implemented. I provided a detailed discussion of this implementation, including challenges and

limitations, and the management and analysis of data. In relation to this, I also presented an in-depth discussion of ethical considerations and measures that I took. Finally, the chapter shared a statement of reflexivity and positionality. The following three chapters, Chapters 5-7, set out findings from the data analysis.

## **Chapter 5 – (Gener)agency in ‘the rugby family’**

Children’s participation in rugby involves multifaceted practices of agency within various inter- and intragenerational relationships. There is practice of agency in the decision to play rugby, to attend training, matches and social activities and in the choice to exert varying levels of effort within these contexts. These practices are situated relationally within interactions and dynamics with teammates, parents, coaches and others. This chapter discusses the practices of agency within these generational relationships, exploring children’s negotiation and resistance (e.g., Leonard, 2020) in the choices that they make participating in rugby at The Club.

One unexpectedly prominent finding from the data analysis was that of the ‘rugby family’ as a shared concept existing within the wider sport of rugby and understood and experienced by many research participants at The Club. Indeed, this concept appeared to be viewed by many participants as highly relevant to their enjoyment, appreciation and perception of both the sport and The Club. The ‘rugby family’ motif has relevance to practices of agency: it establishes and reinforces inter- and intragenerational dynamics between children, coaches and parents that are different (and connected) to those existing outside of rugby. Further, the ‘family practices’ (Morgan, 1996, 2011b) associated with ‘rugby family’ serve as a framework and context for children’s choices and decision-making in the sport. Discussion and exploration of ‘rugby family’ and children’s practices of agency are at the foundation of this chapter.

This is the first of three chapters presenting the findings based on the reflexive thematic analysis of research data, as set out in Chapter 4. This chapter begins with a discussion of the meaning of family, presenting ‘rugby family’ as a concept identified during thematic analysis. The chapter then applies understandings of family and Morgan’s (1996, 2011b) ‘family practices’ to three different conceptualisations of ‘rugby family’ within the research study: ‘the rugby family’, ‘the rugby family in The Club’ and ‘rugby families’. Drawing from and positioning findings in connection to this motif, the chapter explores children’s practices of agency at The Club to address the first part of the study’s second research question:

2. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children’s agency and consent in competitive sport?

The second part of this question, which relates to children's consent, is discussed in Chapter 7. In exploring views and understandings of practices of agency at The Club, the chapter draws from theorisations relating to agency introduced in Chapter 3, including, in particular, Leonard's (2016) generagency.

### **5.1. The meaning and importance of 'family'**

In their work on European perspectives of family, Schneider and Kreyenfeld (2021), suggest that definitions of family have changed over time, extending previous understandings, particularly in respect of shared experiences and relationships:

[T]he family is increasingly defined as a community of responsibility and care that extends beyond the boundaries of household, marriage, kinship, and even parenthood. In addition, it has been argued that the family should be understood not only as a structural form, but as a dynamic process that is shaped by a series of transitions, and the resulting phases and breaks. (p. 5)

This highlights a shifting landscape of what it means to be a family within Europe, including, for example, increasing societal acceptance of single-, same-sex and multiple-parenting relationships and arrangements in families (Schneider & Kreyenfeld, 2021). This passage also reflects what the authors explain as growing interest by scholars in exploring *processes* and *dynamics* rather than family *structures* (Schneider & Kreyenfeld, 2021). This approach creates space for the exploration of generational relationships at The Club in the context of 'rugby family' in the following sections, and the practice of generagency within these in the remainder of the chapter.

Sanner and colleagues (2021), in their work relating to research with families, suggest that the notion that families are socially constructed by family members is now so widely accepted that it might be considered "a generally accepted 'truth' that researchers mention quickly in research papers with little elaboration" (p. 423). In line with the research study's social constructionist research paradigm, the following analysis understands the family to be socially constructed. Morgan's (1996, 2011b) conceptualisation of 'family practices' is aligned with this as it supports an understanding of family-like relationships and connections and presents the concept of families as socially constructed by everyday practices of 'family' members. Morgan (1996, 2011b) proposed the concept of 'family practices' to reflect what he describes as the fluidity of family connection, and to challenge the implications of a normative

“the family” (Morgan, 2011b, p. 3). He offers five main overlapping and interactive “senses” of family practices:

- The sense that it is “active”, with families practising a range of activities in relation to each other, such that being a family implies “doing” (Morgan, 2011b, p. 6);
- The sense that it is “everyday”, meaning both constant and unremarkable (Morgan, 2011b, p. 6);
- The sense of “the regular”, such that it involves repeated patterns as part of family living (Morgan, 2011b, pp. 6-7);
- That it is ‘fluid’, in terms of the boundaries and membership of the family across activities and time (Morgan, 2011b, p. 7); and
- That it involves the “linking” of history and biography (Morgan, 2011b, p. 7).

Further, Morgan (2011b) notes that ‘family practices’ can take place “away from home”, both in terms of context, such as in a workplace, and in terms of physical location, for example, on holiday (p. 9).

Fletcher (2020) brings Morgan’s ‘family practices’ to his research relating to experiences of fatherhood within sport. In this, Fletcher (2020) reflects that ‘family practices’, as a concept, focuses on the *doing* rather than the *being* in relation to familyhood. The author argues that sports clubs offer a “home” location and bring together generations of the local community through events but also through archived and displayed records, thereby acting as an “extended extended family” (p. 159). The sections below apply these concepts to The Club, discussing the socially constructed ‘rugby family’ and ‘family practices’ at The Club and their implications and impact on children’s practices of agency.

Forsdike and colleagues (2019) have examined sportspersons’ experiences of family in their study relating to women’s hockey players’ experiences at their club. Here, the authors use Pahl’s (2000) exploration of friendship as ‘family by choice’ (Forsdike et al., 2019). They found that several participants in their case study hockey club experienced the club as ‘like a family’ based on strong support bonds fostered by a “ready-made family and friendship network” and on the sense of “belonging” and being at “home” in their club (Forsdike et al., 2019, pp. 487-489). The authors also found that, for some participants, a shift in the club operation towards professionalism

affected this sense of belonging and threatened these ‘family practices’ (Forsdike et al., 2019). The result of these changes was that several club members began viewing the individual *teams* as family and disconnecting from the club, while others were considering leaving the club altogether (Forsdike et al., 2019). The ability to choose whether to leave a family, or how to identify, boundary and understand that family, reflects the fluidity of ‘family practices’, which differs from other – perhaps more traditional – conceptions of family, for example, the ‘birth family’, or a family one grows up in, which it may not be possible to truly ever leave (e.g., Fletcher, 2020; Morgan, 2011b). Additionally, the finding that a change in the experience of family was enough for some players to want to leave the club entirely demonstrates how closely club and family practices can be connected (e.g., Forsdike et al., 2019; Morgan, 2011b). It also reminds that there are practices of agency within these family practices, in the form of choice, negotiation and resistance.

Within the literature relating to ‘family’ and ‘families,’ there are clear and powerful reminders that, in addition to being potentially supportive and nurturing environments, families may also be locations of harm (e.g., Clarke-Stewart, 2006; Kertesz et al., 2021). This includes contexts of family violence and abuse (for discussion, see e.g., Burton et al., 2024). Family dynamics can involve power, pressure and coercion across a full range of inter- and intragenerational relationships (Frieze et al. 2020; Updegraff, 2017). Further, relationships within families can be strained, leading to alienation, marginalisation and estrangements (e.g. r & Dorrance Hall, 2017). The analysis in this and subsequent chapters therefore incorporates awareness that constructions and experiences of family may be positive and/or negative and are frequently complex.

## **5.2. The rugby family**

The discussion above has set out how ‘family’ can be understood and what ‘family practices’ might mean in the context of sport. The co-construction of ‘rugby family’ was strongly reinforced by inputs from research participants at The Club. Throughout the fieldwork, data coding and thematic generation process, many participants across all cohorts associated rugby with ‘family’, often using language of ‘family’ when expressing this connection. Data from The Club suggest that the symbolism of the rugby family was particularly strongly articulated as not just experienced ‘family practices’ but understood as a ‘rugby family’ motif. The persistent and repeated use of

this language relating to 'rugby family' suggests some element of performativity (Butler, 1988; Huntington, 2013). Bell (1999) writes that "performativity of belonging 'cites' the norms that constitute or make present the 'community' or group as such" (p. 3). By sharing and re-sharing 'rugby family' as a term with meaning and values, research participants contribute to this performative belonging and co-construction of the term (Bell, 1999). For participants, the term 'rugby family' was a construct actively communicated with me as a researcher, and with each other.

In line with Fletcher's (2020) discussion of 'sporting family practices', and in light of Forsdike and colleagues' (2019) findings in the women's hockey club they worked with, it is possible to understand the sport of rugby and The Club itself as reflecting a co-constructed family and family practices. Taking Morgan's (2011b) "regularity" (pp. 6-7), for instance, the sport of rugby and rugby clubs have rules and repeated patterns of activity in their training and match schedule and in the structure of sessions. Further, the "sense of the active" can be identified in the "doing" of coaching, parenting and playing the sport (Morgan, 2011b, p. 6). As noted above, Fletcher (2020) locates the sense of 'linking' in a sports clubhouse in relation to the displays and records of past, present and (implied) future club practices. The idea that family practices take place beyond just the "home" is captured by Morgan (2011b): "family practices may take place on holiday locations or in department stores or supermarkets" (p. 9). As Fletcher (2020) notes, Morgan's (2011b) sense of "fluidity" affords the potential for rugby and its clubs to be viewed in the context of what Fletcher refers to as "sporting family practices" (p. 256). Applying this to the context of rugby at The Club, this 'family' is enacted within and beyond the clubhouse and home ground. As per Fletcher (2020), there is the clubhouse, which has photographs, trophies, notes about upcoming events, and safeguarding and wellbeing-related information. Additionally, teams regularly travel to play matches and take rugby 'tours', which are, in effect, 'family' holidays taken to play other teams and build camaraderie, complete with 'family' photographs and memories repeated and revisited over years to come.

Although many club members and research participants at The Club were from the same household, including parents, children and sibling groups, the inter- and intragenerational relationships in this research took place predominantly outside of the external family, or even extended kinship connections (Sanner et al., 2021). Many participants at The Club adopted, and continued to contribute to, the construct of the

'rugby family' to mean both the family of those that play rugby worldwide, and the 'family practices' experienced within The Club. Some participants also used or understood the term 'a rugby family' to describe a family in which several family members enjoy or play rugby. The next sections introduce all three of these uses of 'rugby family'. Later, from Section 5.4, I situate these inter- and intragenerational relationships, and explore the practice of children's agency, within the context of these 'family practices' (Morgan, 2011b).

### **5.2.1. Rugby as family**

*"Rugby becomes a family." (Mother of girls' team player)*

Fieldwork data reflect the co-construction of 'rugby as family'. Several parents and coaches – particularly those of older children who were likely to be progressing away from The Club relatively soon – commented upon the existence of the 'rugby family' in a broad sense. This is exemplified by the U18Gs coach's response when asked about her hopes for the players' futures: "what we say is 'rugby family, rugby family is for life'. Like if you're... if you've ever been involved in rugby, you are part of the rugby family and you're in for life" (Sam, U18G coach). In relation to this, Sam also noted that players could choose to stop playing rugby but would always be welcome to rejoin a club "anywhere on the planet." Here, Sam introduces the idea that playing rugby can be a life-long pursuit but, perhaps most powerfully, that even if they do not continue to play, team members will continue to belong to the 'family'. In using the words "rugby family" and "we", Sam presents 'rugby family' as a shared and understood concept (e.g., Bell, 1999). Indeed, Sam had described how being a rugby player from a young age had drawn her to coach the sport when her own child began playing, at the encouragement of Sam's rugby teammates. This reflects both experience and expectation that players belong to, and continue to belong to, a supportive network (e.g., Forsdike et al., 2019) that will extend temporally, perhaps permanently, and beyond their time at The Club.

A sense of continued membership was also presented by Dan's father, who was interviewed as a parent but also had coaching experience. He shared his view of the permanency of the rugby family connection, explaining "they're our boys, you know, and when I'm in my 70s and they've got their kids, and, you know, you can ... smile..." later sharing the hope that: "when I'm in my 70s you know, that they, you know, they've

played rugby and their sons and daughters continue to play, and that's what I want, continuation, but only as long as he feels that it's, you know, it's something that he wants." Dan's father offers not only the expectation of a long-term connection, but one involving multiple generations of family – "they've got their kids" – and presented as a shared construction – "they're our boys." Within this permanency or enduring family, there is also fluidity of membership – extending to anyone who plays rugby and to their (growing) families.

The term 'rugby family' and other language connected with 'family practices' were also evident in documents collected online from the RFU and from The Club during document review. The RFU sets out the core values TREDs – Teamwork, Respect, Enjoyment, Discipline and Sportsmanship – values mentioned by several coaches during field research. Within 'TREDs,' the value 'Enjoyment' is set out by the RFU as follows:

Enjoyment is the reason we play and support rugby union. We encourage players to enjoy training and playing. We use our sport to adopt a healthy lifestyle and build life skills. We safeguard our young players and help them have fun. We enjoy being part of a team and part of the *rugby family*. (RFU, n.d.-b, emphasis added)

There is much within this and the other TREDs values that speaks to the 'family practices' within a 'rugby family'. For example, there is the explicit reference to being "part of the rugby family," positioned as supplementary to being part of a team, suggesting that the rugby family is bigger than an individual club or team. Other TREDs values include reference to, for instance, "welcome all new team members and include all because working as a team enriches our lives" (Teamwork) and "the rugby tradition of camaraderie with teammates and opposition" (Sportsmanship) (RFU, n.d.-b). The TREDs language recalls the discussion of performative belonging above, as the values are clearly established, expressed and repeatedly linked to the rugby family (e.g., Bell, 1999).

Consolidating this, family practices and values connected to 'rugby family' are repeated elsewhere on the RFU's website. For example, in introducing the sport, the organisation describes rugby as a "family sport" encouraging clubs to "play together, stay together" (RFU, n.d.-f). Further, a search for the term 'rugby family' on the RFU

website returned a number of public-facing communications referring to ‘rugby family’. Community news articles included: “Time for rugby family to help remarkable little boy” (RFU, 2021c); “Rosslyn Park women urge rugby family to help NHS” (RFU, 2021b); and “Families Fund bringing new members into the rugby family” (RFU, 2021a). In each of these, the language used reflects and contributes to the construction of rugby itself as a ‘family’. One story, “Welcome to the rugby family Isla-Rose” (RFU, 2022), covers the birth of a child whose mother was supported by the RFU Injured Players Foundation, a charity that “support[s] players who sustain a catastrophic spinal cord or traumatic brain injury, and help prevent future injuries through research and education” (RFU Injured Players Foundation, n.d.). Completing the temporal spectrum and recalling the inputs from Sam and from Dan’s father, the article implies the ‘rugby family’ starts at birth for relatives of those already in the family. These articles reflect several layers of Morgan’s (2011b) ‘family practices’, especially in the *doing* of activities that are described or requested. The use of ‘rugby family’ in articles encouraging readers to support charitable causes and recognising community actions contributes to the performativity of this construct – it appears important that the ‘rugby family’ is recognised as community-orientated and welcoming, in line with the core values noted above (Bell, 1999).

Documents from The Club also appear to seek to establish and contribute to a sense of ‘family’ or ‘family practices’. The Club’s documentation for its mini and youth section sets out a club “ethos” that emphasises the primary importance of a caring and fun environment for mini and youth players, and encourages all club members, which, according to club materials, includes all family members, to consider the clubhouse a “home”. As noted above, Fletcher (2020) suggests that sports clubs, with their ‘home’ venues, offer a clear example of the spatial dimension of ‘family practices’. By explicitly considering the clubhouse a “home”, The Club is working within this same approach. Exemplifying this, one official explained the importance of parental presence: “we want to try and promote that, you know, family community atmosphere, and if we want the parents down there, having a chat making friends and, you know, being part of the club” (George, Official). This statement is somewhat complicated by the data – discussed throughout this thesis – that suggest many parents do not regularly stay pitchside, and some do not stay at The Club during training sessions in particular. As George also noted, another reason for encouraging parents to be present lies in the

challenges in coaches having to stay with children in emergency circumstances, for example during the wait for an ambulance, which could take several hours. This recalls the contrasting complexion that, in addition to the 'rugby family', children have external families with parental responsibilities (see Chapter 7). Nonetheless, documents and participant contributions from The Club, alongside the RFU's guidance, project an intent towards the creation of a sense of family. The question remains as to how children, parents and coaches experience this at The Club. This is addressed below.

### **5.2.2. 'The rugby family' in the club**

*"I have a separate family because of rugby." (Mother of girls' team player)*

Several research participants described their experiences at The Club in ways suggesting the experience of 'family practices'. This was common across all cohorts, including parents and coaches, who invoked the language of 'family' but also children, who spoke of close connections and family-like relationships with teammates. As a typical example of this, Mike's mother, when asked about her experience at The Club, said:

I think it is a family. I know it sounds a bit corny, but I think it is a family. We've been going there so long now so many people recognise you and just say hello and, you just sort of mix and interact and just feel, I feel safe there.

The language of family and especially the connection to safety and belonging make this a particularly meaningful statement. For some, The Club offered support and safety and something additional to a family outside of rugby. One participant noted, for example, that for children without a father-figure in their lives, it could be beneficial to be a part of The Club because the child could be nurtured by positive male role models in the fathers present there, including coaches. The suggestion that a club-based rugby family is additional to a family, or household outside of rugby, was reinforced by Delilah's mother, who explained: "I have a separate family because of rugby." In this case, Delilah's family had changed clubs and retained contact with club members from their previous club. Delilah's mother explained that both former and current club members supported Delilah's rugby by attending match fixtures. These comments, in their presentation of separate and extended families, exemplify the

application of Pahl's (2000) family by choice and Fletcher's (2020) 'extended extended family' in relation to their experiences at The Club.

Other parents' views and experiences seemed more closely connected to The Club's overall fit with their experience and understanding of 'family' rather than that they viewed The Club as family. As an example of this framing, James's father explained that club culture played an important role in the family's decision to play rugby there: "the overall ethos of the club is a key part of why we've been happy for him to join it and, you know, they do push a very sort of family-oriented... my neighbour's children all go." Not only does the club ethos appeal to James's father as compatible with their own family, but the endorsement by the neighbour's family appears important. Similarly, Thor's father, when asked to describe his son's team, said: "it's been a very good, very positive experience for us all, actually, for the family." For these parents, it seems not so much that The Club itself becomes a family, but rather that they experience a connection between their family, the valuing of 'family' and The Club.

Child participants, including those in triads and group discussions, often spoke of team 'belonging' and of 'supporting' those from other age groups within The Club but did not always mention 'family'. Further, children tended to associate these concepts with their specific teams, rather than with The Club as a whole. As a typical example of how players demonstrated this, in the older boys' group discussion, a player reached to put his arm around a teammate when explaining they had played together for over 12 years, saying: "always played together at this club... [he's] my boy." Further, some child participants used the language of 'family' to describe their experiences with their teams. Mike, from the U16Bs team, described his team as "a bit of a family" while Summer and Francesca described the U14Gs team as "a second family". These responses recall the constructions of family-like practices identified by Forsdike and colleagues (2019) in the hockey club they worked with. In the case of the 'rugby family', however, data from The Club emphasise the possibility that 'family by choice' is more enduring than friendship, in that, in line with 'family practices', it will sustain and remain for children and other family members to return to at any point – and anywhere – in the future (see, e.g., Sam's comment in Section 5.2.1).

The experiences of several coaches at The Club also reflect this collective experience of family, both in terms of the construction of a family at The Club and in terms of valuing family. Henry, coach to the youngest girls' squad, noted the importance of the

“family vibe”, while Charlie, coach to the older boys’ age group, commented that being a coach can be like being “an extension of parents” and described being “in loco parentis” when coaching the teams. In an example that reveals the depth of connection between teams, Phil, who had coached his daughter’s team for six years, described the “really strong bonds” with players and explained with sadness how difficult it can be to stop coaching players when they change age group.<sup>9</sup> Stefan, coach to a boys’ team, explained the profound impact of coaching on his experiences as a father:

I feel incredibly lucky, and fortunate, to have been a part of this group’s journey from under sixes, under sevens... nothing has helped me keep my feet on the ground, my social awareness sharp, and helped me be a better dad, I think, ... than coaching.

These excerpts can be situated with the overall theme of a family-like experience in teams. In particular, coaches’ experiences of fulfilling a parenting role while coaching articulate to Morgan’s (2011b) sense of “fluidity” (p. 7) in that experiences of ‘family’ contract and expand to take on different forms and members.

While this chapter has, so far, considered the composition of and inclusion into rugby families, the notion of exclusion, or potential exclusion, also emerged during data analysis. This reflects one way in which family dynamics, as noted earlier, can be isolating or alienating and can include feelings of exclusion within and from family relationships (e.g., Updegraff, 2017). For those in Forsdike and colleagues’ (2019) study, feelings of exclusion and isolation were enough to make participants consider leaving the team. The responses of some participants in the present study also speak to the possibility and awareness of exclusion, alienation or marginalisation. For example, while participants did not share negative experiences about their current teams, some commented upon experiences of differential treatment in previous teams or clubs based on perceived playing ability, noting that this was divisive to the team and upsetting to them (see further discussion in relation to wellbeing in Section 6.2.2).

Further, in relation to team gender categorisation, several parents, coaches and children from the girls’ section mentioned challenges they and their teams faced in relation to rugby in general and at The Club, suggesting the experience (or awareness

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<sup>9</sup> Age groups move up in two year age brackets, while parents tend to stay with their own children, meaning that each year they keep half the group and change half, while the other half either stays behind in an age group or graduates to a new one.

of) unequal treatment and access. Participants remained positive about their team-based experiences, positioning their coaches, volunteers and teammates as advocates for girls rugby. Further, they acknowledged that The Club had made efforts to address previous shortcomings, like arranging appropriate clothing and providing period products, as well as encouraging attendance at girls' rugby fixtures. However, there were complaints that girls' teams were not given equal access to pitches, facilities or recognition. These experiences match a wider issue that women's and girls' sports, including rugby, have historically been under-resourced and under-supported, and efforts are underway to address this through funding and other resource investment (e.g., Petrie et al., 2024; RFU, 2023b).

Considering these experiences within the context of 'rugby family,' gender inequality in families has been studied extensively, including in relation to gender roles of parents and differential treatment of children based on gender (e.g., Adams, 2018). The distribution of resources among siblings of different genders has also been explored in studies relating to educational and family resources, with mixed results in terms of where parents invest most, often as a result of gender roles (e.g. Quadlin, 2019). Given the particular constraints relating to access to girls' rugby – exemplified by the fact that fewer clubs have girls' teams and therefore players on the girls' teams at The Club came from a significantly wider radius than those on the boys' teams – differences in resource allocation and treatment could lead to challenges for girls' teams. Indeed, several participants explained they experienced reduced opportunities to forge camaraderie and connections. Lack of these interactions could have a potential impact on the experiences of 'family' and 'family practices' by reducing the off pitch contact that may contribute to the creation of bonds and performativity of family (Bell, 1999). Inequality experienced and observed by participants and how it affects children's practices of generativity are discussed below, while findings relating to wellbeing are addressed in Chapter 6.

### **5.2.3. Rugby (in the) family**

*“Rugby has been in the family. All my male cousins have played rugby ... so, on that side, a rugby family, so, across two generations, you know, three generations actually.”*  
(Father of boys' team player)

A third and final way in which participants understood the 'rugby family' was in relation to existing families that identified as 'a rugby family'. In this case, in contrast to the 'rugby family' set out in Sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2, above, participants were explicitly asked whether they considered themselves to come from a rugby family, or whether there was rugby in their family background. This was included in interviews with the intention of strengthening analysis of participants' experiences in rugby at The Club by increasing understanding of their knowledge and expertise. It also supported analysis relating to understandings of wellbeing and harm and in relation to consent, covered in Chapters 6 and 7 respectively.

As noted within Section 5.1, family contexts are frequently complex and can involve experiences that are detrimental to children's wellbeing (e.g., Clarke-Stewart, 2006). Research suggests that where families identify with or are intensively involved with a sport this has an impact on children experiences within that sport (Lindstrom Bremer, 2012). Intensive family involvement can be supportive and protective of children's wellbeing but it has also been found to contribute to children's experiences of parental pressure, control and negative wellbeing experiences (Knight et al., 2020). Family identification with a sport may also influence parental experiences of sport, including in relation to decision making (e.g., Boneau et al., 2020) and in connection with resource strain (Lindstrom Bremer, 2012). The experienced and potential impact of such family links is explored within the remainder of this chapter (and thesis).

Many participants understood the term 'a rugby family' to mean generational engagement in the sport. As noted above, the father of one boys' team player explained that there was an extensive background of rugby playing in their family, while others often shared that their parents, grandparents and other – mainly male – extended family members had played rugby, or that all family members had enjoyed watching rugby. Mike, a player on a boys' team, explained that his grandmother had always enjoyed rugby and that she had always encouraged him to play, even though she had only watched the game. Delilah, a girls' team player, also had a strong family connection to rugby, with cousins and uncles all playing: "my whole childhood weekend was basically centred around rugby... and my family, my family's watched ever since I can remember." This implies that, for some children at The Club, the sport itself forms part of family history and linkages (Morgan, 2011b) that extend through

time – in historical family links, and, perhaps, future family expectations as shared by the several coaches who hoped to one day see players' children playing rugby.

Some participants who did not consider themselves to be from a rugby family described feeling sufficient connection to the sport that they would adopt this family identity. Henry's experience exemplified this. Coach to the youngest girls' team, he explained that given the amount of rugby now played within his household it would be fair to call them a 'rugby family', despite not being historically connected to the sport. James's father, too, explained that having come from a different sporting background, it would be fair to now call them a 'rugby family' as it was the sport most played in their household. This recalls the 'flexibility' of Morgan's (1996) family practices, in that these families have adopted the 'rugby family' identity as a result of their experiences within rugby at The Club.

#### ***5.2.4. Mapping the meaning of rugby family at The Club***

As part of the analysis relating to the meaning of rugby family at The Club, I used a mapping exercise to develop a map of 'family practices' situated within an adapted spatial representation of The Club. In doing this, I combined mapping as an analytical exercise (e.g., Fearnley, 2022) with a form of spatial mapping that is more commonly used with research participants as a data collection tool (e.g., Maschke & Wellnitz, 2020). Mapping exercises are commonly used in qualitative data collection and can include narrative and visual elements: for example, participants may be asked to draw a representation of their communities while responding to questions about what they have drawn and why (e.g., Marx, 2023; Maschke & Wellnitz, 2020). I was inspired to apply this to my own analytical process by Fearnley (2022) who has written of the benefits of 'mind mapping' in doctoral studies, particularly for "those looking to be more creative with the ways they engage with data" (p. 2). I found this approach to be appropriate as contributing to my reflexive thematic analysis process.

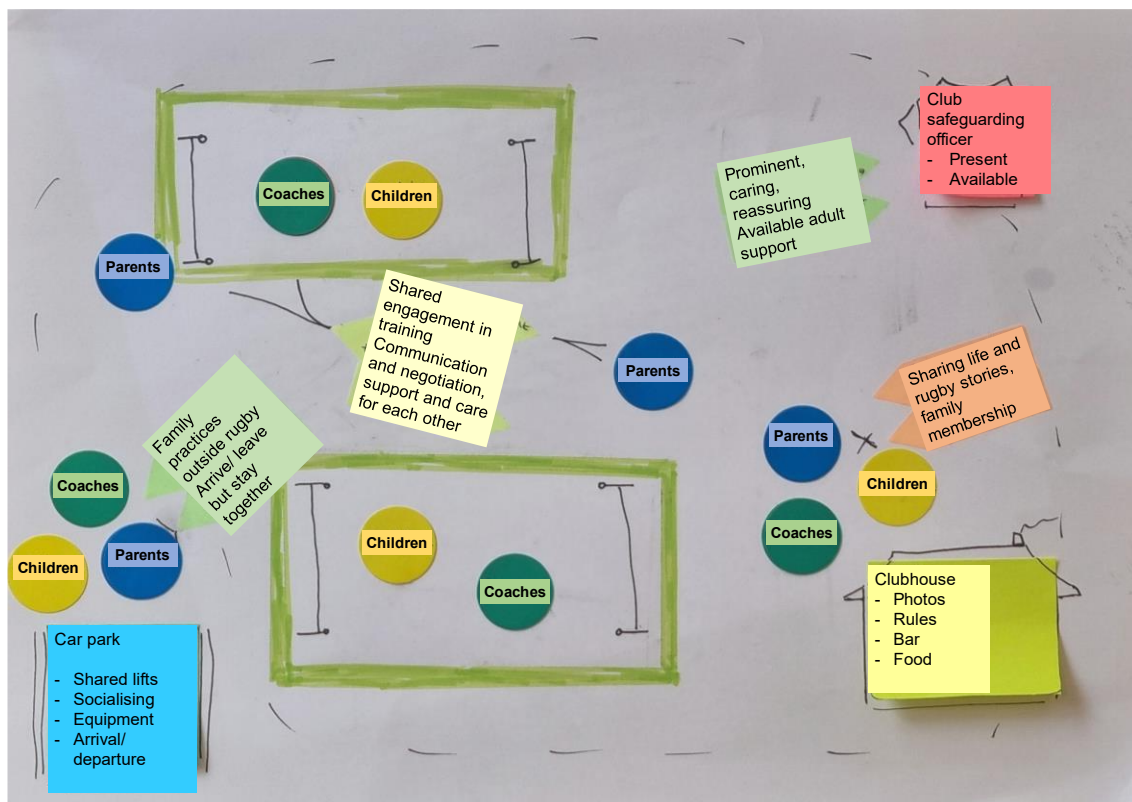
I therefore applied a mapping practice to explore my understandings based on experiences during fieldwork and data analysis (Fearnley, 2022). My mapping is shared in Figure 22. It captures both spatial elements in the presentation of areas and locations at The Club, and relational components connected to family practices. In the interests of reflexivity and positionality, I acknowledge that I developed this map from the perspective of a researcher who had conducted fieldwork at The Club. Positionally,

I carried out this exercise as a parent of three young children who were yet to participate in competitive sports, and as a former competitive sportsperson with extensive lived childhood experience of several community tennis clubs, clubhouses and sports-related car parks.

To protect the anonymity of The Club and participants, positionings of the clubhouse, car park and pitches have been altered, though I sought to preserve spatial relations between them in the image presented so that each entity – clubhouse, car park, pitches – is presented in a manner that reflects how they interact in practice at The Club. For clarity, I have superimposed typed text over my written notes.

**Figure 22**

*Researcher's Mapping of 'Family' at The Club*



In the sections above, I identified three main ways in which 'rugby family' is co-constructed and enacted at The Club – in the sport, at The Club and in individual families. The figure above reflects the practices of these. For example, there are two pitches on the diagram. These have players and coaches on them who are communicating with, negotiating with and supporting each other. Parents stand to the side, chatting and watching the play. These teams draw participants from families, act

as their own families and exist within the broader family of The Club and in kinship with all those in 'the rugby family'.

In the bottom right-hand corner of the image, I note the clubhouse, highlighted by Fletcher (2020) and discussed earlier in this section. Here, parents, coaches and children congregate, socialise, share stories from outside of and within rugby and enforce and reinforce connections to each other. The clubhouse has photographs, guidance documents, trophies, awards and records boards, rules and other materials connecting past membership to the present and future – and connecting The Club to rugby more generally. In the top right hand corner of the diagram, I highlight the presence of the Club Safeguarding Officer, who was often available during training and matchdays. The presence of this officer communicates assurance and safety while reinforcing safeguarding related rules of conduct and behaviour. The officer's presence reinforces the inclusion of those within the physical parameters of The Club – even opposition are part of 'the rugby family'.

To the bottom left-hand corner of the diagram is the car park. It is here that coaches, parents and players arrive and depart. This highlights the fluidity and active family practices at The Club as cars, bikes and pedestrians arrive in a range of configurations. Parent drivers might bring multiple children, including siblings from various teams and their teammates. Older children might arrive in cars with younger siblings and teammates but no adults. As they arrive, they wear club uniforms and attire and bring out their equipment. Players help coaches transport equipment from cars to an informal congregation point near the clubhouse before teams disperse to their designated pitches. In a sense, a transformation takes place in which the rugby family is reunited during transportation and upon arrival at The Club. Indeed, part of the 'rugby family' dynamic is that it is not just the player that belongs to the family – the association extends to players' families – and it is not just while at The Club that the family exists (e.g., Bean et al., 2014; Morgan, 2011b). This was evidenced throughout research interactions by the retelling of rugby-related conversations within parent-child and sibling relationships in households, in social settings and in schools.

Overall, this image reflects the significance and meaning of 'rugby family' both within The Club and in the kinship with other teams. The family dynamics present across the teams and in rugby more generally are reinforced by the performative buy-in and reproduction of language and actions (e.g., Bell, 1999). Coming to The Club to play

rugby is about more than just any aspect of the exercise, social interaction, or break from school; it is about engagement with a set of rules and expectations within sporting family practices.

### **5.3. Concepts and understandings of agency**

The literature review in Chapter 3 explored the many and varied ways in which scholars have approached concepts of agency and structure in relation to childhood. This highlighted, in particular, literature that seeks to challenge normative affirmations of children's practices of agency (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012; Gallagher, 2019; Tisdall, 2016) and argues for the value in understanding agency as relational (Leonard, 2016; Moran-Ellis, 2013). The consideration and conceptualisation of children's agency in connection with both ambiguity and relationality flows from the background, context and literature provided in Chapters 2 and 3, and from the extended discussion of 'rugby family' earlier within this present chapter. As discussed in Section 5.2, for many children, belonging to teams evoked 'family practices', while for adults, the connection of belonging extended to The Club and rugby itself. This 'rugby family' motif reflects relationships (and structure) in which children practice agency.

The following sections explore children's practice of agency at The Club primarily through Leonard's (2016) model of generagency, along with its subsidiary concepts of 'intergeneragency' and 'intrageneragency'. Thematic data analysis suggests that family and associated dynamics play a critical role in children's, parents' and coaches' experiences of rugby at The Club. As presented and explored in the remainder of this chapter, I suggest that much of the practice of agency at The Club is situated within these 'family practices' and relationships. Additionally, understandings of the relational practice of agency, including Leonard's (2016) model of generagency, are relevant to this research due to the stated focus on and relevance of generational dynamics and connections.

Further, in connection with potentially counter-normative practice of agency, the context and literature reviews raised concerns over children's experiences of harm within sport, including as a result of exertion, injury and perpetrated harm (e.g., Alexander et al., 2011; Malcom, 2006; West et al., 2023). As identified within the literature review, Klocker's (2007) proposed "thick" and "thin" agency may be applied to the practice of agency resulting or existing within a circumstance of harm. In the

following analysis, factors that may contribute to thinning or thickening of children's agency are highlighted and discussed, particularly in connection with the practice of agency that is connected to wellbeing concerns.

#### **5.4. Exploring generagency at The Club**

As noted above, within The Club there is an interplay of inter- and intragenerational dynamics set in an overall framework of family, 'rugby family' and 'family practices'. A child's participation in rugby encompasses practices of agency in the initial decision to play, followed by the decision to attend training and matches, and in choices while participating in these sessions – for example in relation to exertion or rests (Lang, 2022).

Leonard (2016) uses the term intergeneragency "to refer to the myriad ways in which childhood and adulthood have to be performed and enacted across the various locations that make up the everyday lives of adults and children" (p. 132). Explaining that this term captures the different locations from which children and adults experience "the same world," Leonard explores children's agency as resistant, challenging and transformative, and within the context of reciprocal generational dynamics (Leonard, 2016, p. 132). In applying this model to empirical research relating to work, children and adults in Belfast, Leonard (2016) describes how children in her study created relationships with adults to gain access to resources, through babysitting or running errands. The relationship with the adults in question determined the nature of these activities: "babysitting emerged as either an unpaid family expectation or an autonomous paid choice, depending on the relationship between the child and the adult" (p, 139). Thus, Leonard applies intergeneragency to understand the impact and interaction of intergenerational relationships on children's practices of agency. Sections 5.4.1 and 5.4.2 draw on this and on previous context-setting sections to discuss children's intergeneragency at The Club.

As Leonard (2020) also explains, intrageneragency "focuses on the complexity and heterogeneity that exists within the umbrella term of childhood and allows reflection on the multiple power relationships that occur within their everyday relationships with each other" (pp. 413-414). In discussing this part of generagency, Leonard highlights the constant changes within children's relationships with each other and the practices of agency within these. Applying the term in a study of children's experiences of

housework, Leonard (2020) found that intragenerational factors affected the allocation of tasks within households, particularly in relation to age and gender, as tasks were assigned or carried out in line with age and gender role expectations. Leonard (2020) also found that children practised agency in the resistance or negotiation of actions by executing tasks poorly, or by otherwise avoiding the chores that their siblings or other children would have to do.

In the following section, I first explore children's practices of intergeneracy in relation to their parents and to coaches, considering the impact of intergenerational dynamics on their decisions to play rugby and how hard to work during training sessions. Next, I consider children's agency in connection with the intragenerational relationships and dynamics experienced within the teams themselves, in line with the many reports from child research participants that their teams begin to feel 'like family'. Within this, I draw out data relating to the interplay between agency and structure, reflecting Leonard's (2019) presentation of generation as "a framework for understanding more fully how childhood and adulthood is produced and practised within frameworks that enable and constrain the everyday attitudes and practices of both children and adults" (p. 413) and of generacy as a tool to explore this interplay. To facilitate the exploration of views and understandings of children's agency and participation in rugby, children's group discussion participants were asked for their views on three statements:

1. It's a child's own decision whether to play rugby;
2. Children have choices during rugby sessions; and
3. Children are the ones who decide how hard to work during rugby training.

All six groups were asked to consider each statement, to think about and discuss these individually or as part of pairs or groups, and to indicate their views by standing across a spectrum from 'agree' to 'disagree'. Participants were invited to share and discuss their reasons for standing where they were. Finally, participants were asked to consider and comment on who else, other than the child, might influence this decision, and how. Parents and coaches were asked questions also touching upon these issues during interviews. Data from these discussions were analysed in relation to children's practices of agency situated within the dynamics of child-parent, child-coach and child-to-child dynamics, as set out below.

#### **5.4.1. Intergeneracy and the decision to play rugby**

*“I feel like when we were younger more people were pushed into it by their parents whereas now, if you've stuck around, you actually want to be here [laughs].” (Girls' team player)*

Discussions and negotiations over whose decision it is to play rugby are primarily situated in parent-child relationships, speaking to practices of intergeneracy in a family context that exists both within and outside of rugby. The ‘decision’ to play encompasses a spectrum of participation, starting with the initial point of contact with the sport and becoming increasingly involved and complex if the child attends for a second time, registers with The Club and plays with regularity, becoming part of the team and competing in matches. Across all six child discussion groups, conversations about the decision to play rugby took a similar course and resulted in consistent – and strongly articulated – views that not only was it primarily a child’s decision whether to play rugby, it was important children were not ‘forced’ to play. In this way, discussions clearly signalled that participants placed value in the experience of ‘thick’ versus ‘thin’ agency within this intergenerational dynamic.

While asserting that children should hold and make the decision over whether to play rugby, children were equally clear that parents had some influence over this, recognising constraining factors associated with intergeneracy. Participants reflected on both the practical consideration that parental resources were required to play and the view that parents had a legitimate interest in encouraging children to play sport for exercise. For most children at The Club, this speaks to the reality of family life and negotiations outside of the sport. Many children playing rugby, especially those in younger age groups, are reliant upon parental support for fees and transportation (see, e.g., Knight, 2019). Even for older children who make their own way to The Club or earn money with which they could pay fees, reducing the impact of this resource constraint, ongoing participation requires some form of parental agreement through the registration process and takes place in the context of family relationships, arrangements and negotiations (for discussion of parental consent, see Chapter 7). Thus, parents are seen as facilitative of a child’s decision to play rugby and to have some ‘say’ in this.

Participants across all cohorts demonstrated nuanced appreciation of how the intergenerational dynamic may interact with the decision over time as relational contexts adjust, bringing with them changes to enabling and constraining factors. The consensus across all child age groups was that it was more likely in ‘younger’ groups – meaning those that were younger than their own – that parents could be the driving force behind decisions to play, whether initial or ongoing. There was then perceived to be a ‘shift’ that took place over time towards children having more influence and control over this decision. Groups tended not to identify an exact age of this ‘shift’, instead explaining simply that younger children could be ‘made’ to go to training and to play, but most people in their respective age group could not. Francesca, from the U14Gs group, described a recollection that her teammates agreed with: “you can visibly see that the children did not want to be there” but that “they forced the child to go into it and I don’t think that’s fair on them [the child].” This and similar responses seemed to reflect a perception that the motivation behind the initial decision to play rugby could impact a child’s practice of agency in their continued involvement in the sport. As Jessie, an U16Gs group participant, explained:

I think a lot of the time when children are, like, under the age of, I would say, like, 12, parents almost live through their children and, like, like, ‘I played rugby, and now I want my children to play rugby, and I want them to be more successful than I was’.

Jessie’s identification that children may be directed into the sport by parents who had also played was something adults at The Club appeared alert to. In one example, an official, George, suggested that fathers in particular may be “living vicariously” through their children – often with expectations around exertion and conditions that had applied in the past but were no longer appropriate (and that The Club thus attempted to address).

Formulation of parental decision-making in a way that ‘thins’ (Klocker, 2007) children’s agency would be consistent with research relating to ‘football families’ and the decision to engage in middle-school (ages 11 to 13 years old) tackle (American) football in the United States (Boneau et al., 2020). In this, the authors found that family identity as “football first” families led some parents to choose tackle football *for* their children, despite their children not wishing to play (Boneau et al., 2020). Given the strength of the collective experience of ‘rugby family’ at The Club, it would appear reasonable to

consider whether this could constitute a negative consequence of the ‘family practices’ identified throughout this chapter. Child participants seemed aware of this potential dynamic, as shown by Jessie’s and Francesca’s comments, which reflected perceptions that other children had experienced pressure in connection with their families’ links to the sport. On the other hand, participants who may have been considered to come from ‘rugby families’ did not suggest the experience of feeling pressured to play – they were clear it was their own decision. Indeed, the connection between the ‘rugby family’ and ‘thin’ agency was not inevitable. As Ruby from the U18Gs discussion exemplified: “my dad always said, because he used to play rugby, he used to play a lot of rugby, he always said to me, he said ‘I never want you to play rugby because I played rugby’,” thereby highlighting that her family itself had directly addressed potential pressure to play rugby.

Further, older age groups of children assured me that the majority of players in their teams would only be *continuing* to play because they wanted to. The suggestion was that those who did not want to play would already have stopped playing with children in control of the decision either way. Moe, from the U18Bs group discussion noted: “if the child doesn’t want to play, [they] can’t really be made to.” Similarly, Zara from the U18Gs discussion explained that younger children were more likely to be “pushed” into rugby by their parents, and that “now, if you’ve stuck around, you actually want to be here”. Ruby, one of Zara’s co-discussants, agreed and noted that when children do not want to play rugby it can increase the risk of physical harm: “with rugby you have to put everything into it, otherwise, you will get injured.” This highlights the connection between children’s practices of agency and their wellbeing or potential harm, both in the experience of feeling forced to play and in the experience of risk to physical wellbeing.

Discussions about the ‘shift’ in children’s influence as related to age recall earlier explorations of the ages of 16 and 17 years old as somehow different from other childhood ages (see Chapters 2 and 3). Research findings point to the experience of a transition in children’s practice of agency as they progress through age groups. Indeed, to research participants, children in the oldest age groups were, almost exclusively, making their own decisions about whether to play. Participants’ responses suggest changes both in the practice of intergeneracy in relation to parents, and in ‘thickening’ of agency (e.g., Klocker, 2007; Leonard, 2020). In relation to the former,

for many older children, this was a time of age-related transition, where they may have learned to drive and would travel to training themselves or with teammates, and where other demands on their time including examinations or employment may have taken priority over rugby. Changing family relationships and expectations and increasing independence can mean children experience the decision to play as fully within their control. At the same time, the 'shift' in influence appears connected to developing experience and expertise, which may even exceed that of their parents, as enabling of their agency. This is reflective of Alderson's (2012) suggestion that children are "highly informed" (p. 188), as it relates to consent decisions when their long-term health conditions lead to extensive knowledge of potential consequences, with this related to experience rather than age. Isla's mother summarised this when rejecting the notion her daughter's increased influence was connected to age: "It's more of a mindset."

As alluded to earlier, discussion groups' predominant conversation and *concern* about the decision to play rugby focused on any suggestions of parents 'forcing' children to play. Participants shared strong views that it was not acceptable for children to play rugby simply because their parents wanted them to. Moreover, participants were adamant that children must not be 'forced' to play and that being so would be detrimental to wellbeing. Exemplifying this, Dan from the U16Bs group highlighted the wellbeing impact of a child being forced to play compared to them choosing to play:

If someone didn't want to play rugby, and you're forcing them to, and it's just gonna, like, affect them. They're gonna feel like they're gonna have pressure on them to actually, like, act like they wanna be there, like just kind of fake the whole situation. Whereas if someone wanted to play rugby, they're gonna be passionate about playing when they're there.

Similarly, Summer, from the U14Gs discussion said: "I feel like if a parent decided for them to play rugby and they don't like rugby... I feel like that's not fair on them because then they've got to, like, do something they're not happy with." Several coaches echoed these views during interviews, describing a small number of occasions on which parents, and therefore children, had been guided away from the sport by coaches or other officials because the children were not enjoying it, despite the parents' initial determination that the children should keep playing.

The language of 'force' is, in fact, part of the parental code of conduct at The Club, which states "encourage children to play rugby – do not force them." This was reiterated by the Club Safeguarding Officer, who noted that forcing a child to rugby would be unacceptable: "that in itself is a concern." A small number of parents used the language of 'force' when discussing children's participation in rugby. Marnie's mother, for example, explained: "I would never force her ...if she said to me, 'I don't want to go', I would never make her go" while James's dad said: "ultimately you can't force them to do something they don't want to do. So, they've got to enjoy doing it to want to keep doing it." Parental pressure in children's sport has been linked to negative outcomes for children, including anxiety, stress and attrition, and is often contrasted to parental supportiveness and positive engagement (Bonavolonta et al., 2021; Dorsch et al., 2021). Participants' inputs from this study suggest resistance to parental pressure. Furthermore, though children may urge against ever being forced, there appears to be some recognition that such pressure can, and does, happen, but becomes increasingly difficult with age. This appears to reflect a complex interplay between generational and agency such that increased age may reduce the constraints of agency that may see a child being pressure or forced to play rugby, while improved expertise may enable a child's practice of agency in the choice to play. To this end, Zara and Ruby's discussion (and Dan, Jessie and Francesca's comments) suggests that children reach a point at which they are practising intergeneracy that has been thickened and enabled by the expertise – and perception of competence by adults – that they gain over time.

Finally, it feels appropriate to highlight that there was no suggestion any research participants were playing without wanting to. Some even mentioned that they had stopped previously and chosen to restart or had contemplated stopping but decided not to. The nature of the research as voluntary and focussed on wellbeing, agency and consent makes it possible any children who were playing without wanting to would have been less likely to volunteer. This is also worth noting, especially as some participants suggested knowledge of (unnamed) players in this very situation.

#### ***5.4.2. Intergeneracy and children's choices during training sessions***

Data suggest that there is an influential intergenerational dynamic between coaches and players that is located within teams, which suggests the presence of 'family practices' within which children practice intergeneracy. The vast majority of

coaches at The Club were the parents of at least one player on the team they coached, and, potentially, of children on other teams. Many had coached their own children and their children's teammates for several years, for example from the age of six to 18 years old. The process of moving up age groups sees coaches often coaching their own child and those one year younger or older in alternate years. To reiterate, here, gender is an influencing factor as it is more common for members and coaches of girls' teams at The Club to have joined more recently than those on boys' teams.

Much of the negotiation as to whether children have choices during training sessions took place between children and coaches, within a context of intergenerational relationships and The Club and teams' 'family practices'. To access views and understandings of children's agency in relation to training sessions, participants were asked about the degree to which children have choices within rugby, and, if so, what choices they have. Based on this, analysis identified age-group-based patterns in understandings of children's choices and coach control during training. It appeared that groups perceived children to have increasing choice in line with the increase in players' ages – the older the age group in question, the more likely research participants viewed and understood children to have choices during rugby sessions. This reinforces the findings presented in Section 5.4.1 – in relation to children's decisions to play rugby – that there was a detectable change in the practice of intergeneracy as children got older and progressed through rugby age groups with this shift connected both to reduction in age-related constraints and to the enabling influence of expertise.

In her work arguing for the construction of child athletes in terms of "the agentic child," Lang (2022, p. 52) encourages increased respect and fulfilment of children's participation rights in sport. She urges against employing what could be viewed as developmentalist constructions of childhood, particularly where children are viewed as progressing on a "linear trajectory from child to adult" (Lang, 2022, p. 44). The author explains that these can dominate sports development pathways and coaching practices, which can present children as "incomplete" and even "incapable", placing coaches in positions of unquestioned authority and risking the violation of children's rights (Lang, 2022, pp. 47-48). Coaches at The Club work within a framework of age grade rugby that involves progressive increase in complexity and contact of the game. While this presents as linear in some senses, coaches' actions show some resistance

to understanding children in their teams in the developmentalist terms Lang (2022) cautions against.

There is complexity to this, with coaches' practices reflecting the structure within which they are working, their own practice of intergeneracy, and, in relation to their co-coaches, intrageneracy. In the youngest age groups, Paulo (U15Bs) and Henry (U14Gs) retained more control over the training sessions than coaches of older teams and articulated the intentionality of their decision to do so. Paulo explained his view that it was more enjoyable for children if coaches took charge of planning sessions: "they want to come, do some exercise, and they want someone else to structure it for them, and play within that environment." While setting out this approach, Paulo highlighted that this allowed children to participate as they wished:

[W]e're not important to them, they're important to each other and we just give them the framework and they want the rules because without the rules you've just got chaos, so they want some rules, and they want to sort of exercise within that, when the rules get stringent and start cutting down their fun, then I think that's where the ... knack of coaching really comes in...

This was matched by sentiments expressed by children in the U15Bs group discussion, in which players said they thought coaches should be in control because they had the experience and had "done the courses". Discussants noted children could choose not to participate in activities, but that activities would be selected by the coaches. Paulo's responses and the views shared by his players emphasise that, for coaches *and* for children, choices are limited – and children's practices of agency constrained – by the rules of the game and by the structure of training presented to them. Paulo's approach also prioritised a framework of structure and safety within which players practice intrageneracy in their importance "to each other" and the experience of having "fun".

Several coaches took decisions to support their players' wellbeing (see Chapter 6) even where this meant going against structural expectations such as match scheduling. This included, for instance, cancelling matches due to weather, because the children were fatigued from school matches, or because there was a mismatch with the opposition. In this sense, coaches themselves practised agency in resisting and negotiating with structural mechanisms that are designed linearly, while seeking

to adjust to the needs and interests of their players. This is reflected in the change from technical instruction focusing on managed safety, to the overt introduction of choice, and, finally, to co-productive and collaborative training. For the most part, however, coaches worked within structures, to create a framework supporting children to play the sport. The presence of regulation and adult-led structure does not prevent children from practising generagency. Brus (2018), writing about children's practice of generagency within video gaming, presents the activity as heavily adult-regulated but notes that, despite this, "[y]oung people are able to make decisions of their own despite the asymmetric relationship to their parents" (p. 62). Thus, while coaches may work within, and indeed resist, frameworks, children may also continue to practise generagency within these.

At each age group, coaches appeared to have formed a view of the level of control required to meet the needs of their teams, including, but not solely, in relation to safety. Participants' responses and observational data suggest that at the younger age groups, there is a focus on technical tuition and building players' knowledge and expertise. As noted above, Henry, the U14Gs coach, explained that coaches took control within that age group because the players were "still learning" because of the "rules of the game for their age." He explained that he anticipated children would start expressing their views more openly in the near future because older age group coaches had told him this this would happen. Henry said he would welcome this: "I'd rather have a collective group that are able to speak up and confide in you. I might not like the outcome of it, but at least we've got that dialogue." As can be seen in Henry's response, when asking coaches relating to players' agency, much of the discussion data centred on communication, voice and what childhood and child rights scholars might consider children's 'participation' (Lang, 2022; Tisdall, 2016).

In the U16 age groups, where players are 14 to 16 years old, both coaching teams had established mechanisms and practices for participatory input from players. Phil and his fellow coaches in the U16Gs team had created and distributed a survey to their players after the previous season. Based on the results of this survey, the coaches developed codes of conduct specific to their team, signed by themselves, children and parents. Further, they made several changes to rugby practice, including introducing clubhouse-based learning sessions, grounding the team within the "home" and recalling Morgan's (1996) 'regularity'. They had also arranged social occasions

outside of the rugby club grounds. Again, this reflects a key difference in the composition of boys' and girls' rugby teams, which sees girls being drawn together from further afield. While boys' teams may be able to socialise and strengthen their connections at school (it was common for those on boys' teams to attend the same school) girls' teams were forced to work hard to create such opportunities as supplementary to their rugby-session experience. Of particular relevance to 'family practices' is that children asked for and received more social events, to support their team dynamics and camaraderie. Much like an outcome from a family meeting, the survey identified that children wished to forge stronger connections outside of The Club to strengthen their family-like connections, which led to team days, akin to family outings, where the team had met for social activities (e.g., Morgan, 2011b).

Stefan and his U16Bs coaching team had a system of asking each player for feedback after the sessions and had developed a practice of having injured players plan and co-run training sessions. Indeed, in my observation of the U16Bs training session, it took me some time to understand why my 'count' of coaches and players seems to change and not quite tally – a 'player' was acting as a 'coach'. Child and parent participants in these triads, and within the group discussions, reported having a "voice" and feeling as though they could, and indeed would, go to the coaches with feedback, suggestions or requests. The coaches' intentionally collaborative nature sought to strike a balance between encouraging discussion and children's participation while leading sessions.

Finally, data from the U18 age groups indicated an increase in children's choice and practice of agency in planning and executing training sessions, with coaches' responses pointing to a sense of preparation for children leaving The Club, almost as parents watching children leaving the family home. Both U18s coaches were clear there was value in ensuring players had influence over training sessions. Charlie, coach to the U18Bs, explained the benefits of introducing a co-productive approach:

I think it's created more of a cohesive unit because they're making the decisions together and they're talking about it rather than being told what to do all the time by adults.

At The Club, many practices of intergeneracy by both coaches and children occur within this context of transition. One coach explained this in terms of his own child's rugby journey at The Club:

From a lack of agency to now he's got total agency ... he drives himself to training and I'm not involved in it anymore. So... if he'd had total agency when he was a little kid, he wouldn't be playing now, he would have just not done it.

The intergenerational dynamics around the decision to play rugby culminate in coaching practices that enable children to take charge of training choices at the oldest age groups. However, even where coaches are making decisions, this is set within the ongoing practice of intergeneracy. The children on their teams communicate their needs, whether that they are tired, annoyed with teammates, facing individual or group challenges outside of rugby or simply not quite in the right mindset on a particular evening. In this way, children find ways to influence their coaches to support their own wellbeing in sessions. Indeed, coaches made a series of decisions based on feedback from children on their teams, whether through direct or indirect communication. This is exemplified in Stefan's adaptation of training sessions if players came to the session and seemed unsettled. Stefan explained that he would try to greet every player at the start of each session, asking how they are and how their day had been. Then, he and his co-coaches would determine how to implement the session they had already planned, including whether and when to introduce contact or how intense the training should be, all in response to the players' moods and mindsets: "our planning and our structure and our ability to see what's happening on the session, that's what determines how good it is far more than the structure." Here, in communicating their feelings or experiences, players provide input to coaches, perhaps even in the form of resistance or disruption (e.g. Leonard, 2019), that the coaches then negotiate with in their own practice of intergeneracy in implementing their session plans.

This feedback, negotiation and practice of intergeneracy is also reflected in a clear example from the U18Bs team observation. On this occasion, the players and coach met by the car park and started walking to the relevant training pitch. Chatter focused on the lack of training due to frozen pitches, what the players and coach had done over the recent holiday season and nerves over recent 'mock' A-Level exams. I was not aware of any direct request to this end, but noticed that the play was light-hearted, less intense than other sessions, and that it was primarily child-led. Later, the coach explained that he had ensured the session was child-led to best deliver what was needed, and wanted, by the children. This captures the practice of intergeneracy from both sides of the intergenerational relationship.

As with the decision over whether to play rugby, research data relating to children's experiences and practice of agency in the intergenerational context of training sessions speak to shifting resources and power dynamics between children and the adults in their rugby lives. Children are seen by coaches, parents, and the children themselves as having increasing impact on coaching decisions and greater choice in relation to their own actions as they get older. This is a dynamic also crafted by coaches in their choices regarding coaching approach, as they adjust training based on their understandings and perceptions of children's needs at different age groups. This, again, reflects the complexity of age, experience and expertise as potentially both constraining and enabling of practices of children's agency within the intergenerational dynamic.

#### **5.4.3. Intrageneracy and children's choices to work hard during training**

*"The older ones will try and look out for the younger ones. They've all kind of like become a big friendship group because it is one big rugby family" (Girls' team player).*

Earlier in this chapter, children's agency relating to the choice to play rugby and choices in training was situated and analysed in relation to intergenerational relationships. Children's decisions over how hard to work during rugby training appear more closely connected to intragenerational relationships with their teammates. During group discussions, participants were asked to consider and discuss whether it is a child's choice how hard they work during training sessions, while the overall approach to training sessions and intensity of effort was discussed within individual interviews. While some groups discussed experiences and views of matches, the majority of the data focused on training sessions. These data are explored below.

The children at The Club are connected through their membership of The Club, the youth section and their respective age group teams, and many are at school together – particularly on the boys' teams. As noted earlier, these age groups generally have a cohort of two school-year age groups, such that an individual child will always be with their own school year<sup>10</sup> and with the younger and older school years in alternate years. This is true of all age groups in this study, other than the U15Bs and U16Bs which had a single year intake. While some child participants described their teams as 'family'

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<sup>10</sup> The small exception to this is any children who are educated 'out of year group', who are normally registered to teams in accordance with the school year they would otherwise have been in based on date of birth.

(see Section 5.2.2), it was more common for them to express close connection to each other in terms of teammates and belonging.

There were gender-connected differences in how children expressed connections to each other. Players on girls' teams often talked about how they enjoyed being part of a team that was not connected to their school and that provided a different perspective on their problems or challenges, while boys' team players spoke of enjoying being part of the team on the pitch and in the school playground, where they would meet and discuss tactics, training and so forth. Mike, a player in the U16s boys' team, explained:

I feel like we're a bit of a family, I'd say [team]... I think we all, like, like each other, like, a lot of us, or the bulk of the group, all go to [school]. So, we're all, most of us, like, at lunch, hang out with each other and things like that, and even if some of them don't, like, we'll always like, you know, talk and have a chat and say 'hello'. But I feel like we all we all strive for the same thing which is winning.

In the U14 girls' team discussion, a different story emerged, which largely matched the views held by the U16Gs, as follows:

Lauren: I think it's useful that we all kind of come from different bits as well because no one... no one from my school is in our team so if something's happened at school I can kind of like leave it and then...

Bobbie: Yeah, it's also like very different like, it's a good escape because...

...

Pippa: It feels a different type of friendship as well, I know I'm not as close with my school friends as I am to you lot.

Bobbie: Yeah. I'm way closer with my rugby friends.

While, throughout the research, data suggested more areas of similarity than difference in the experiences of those on boys' and girls' teams, this was one area in which gender categorisation appeared particularly salient. Indeed, the different approaches to and understandings of family possibly connected to the difference in the length of time for which the boys' and girls' teams are likely to have played together, and because it was more common for boys to attend the same school, while girls' teams included children from a wide range of schools and areas. Both boys' and girls'

teams seemed to identify virtue in the circumstances of their connections, working with these to interpret their links as a form of kinship and positive team relationship.

As will be addressed in Chapter 6 in relation to wellbeing, several participants commented on the importance of team relationships and their potential impact on wellbeing – both positive and negative. This reiterates the earlier recognition that families can be locations of alienation, isolation and marginalisation (e.g. Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017) and that they can be both disrupted and disruptive (Torche et al., 2024). Concern over team dynamics was particularly prominent in relation to the elite-level selection processes at age groups where some players had been selected to a talent pathway, while others had not. As noted in Chapter 4, this led some participants in group discussions to explain, after the discussion had ended, that even talking about ‘county’ was uncomfortable for them. Additionally, a number of children, both those within and outside of elite pathways, suggested that pressures and intensity increased at higher levels, and, as such, the selection process appeared a potential challenge to team dynamics and overall enjoyment of the ‘family’ camaraderie.

Another factor affecting intergenerational dynamics is that, as discussed earlier in this chapter, coaches at The Club are generally parents, meaning that children play on teams with their coaches’ children. Several coaches explained they would focus on not favouring their own children but some parents, coaches and children noted that other coaches (i.e., not theirs) might favour their own children for selection or position, which could upset the dynamic within the team. Thus, children reported the experience of family-like connections within their teams, located alongside these household parent-child relationships. The remainder of this section considers children’s practice of agency within these intragenerational relationships, focusing on the decision of how hard to work during training.

In general, child participants agreed that it was ultimately a child’s choice how hard they worked in training, on the basis that they could not be made’ to work hard if they did not want to, but that this would be influenced by coaches, parents and teammates. For example, children explained that coaches might give consequences for those not making enough effort or working hard enough. Autumn, a participant in the U14Gs group discussion, provided a typical response to this issue: “They make us run around the post [laughs].” For the older age groups, the introduction of physical consequences seemed important. In these cases, though, the threat of consequences was influential

because children would seek to avoid impact on teammates. Exemplifying this, Ruby and Zara from the U18Gs team described wanting to be sure to complete a 'plank' exercise that was set up by the coaches because otherwise teammates would have to do it for longer and would get annoyed with them. There is a complexity to this in that children practice their agency in relation to *both* adults and children in their lives – complying with adult requirements to meet their teammates' needs and expectations. Discussing family practices, as noted earlier, Morgan (2019) focuses on the *doing* rather than the *being* of family: "[e]very time that someone does something – offers care or advice, sends a text, cooks a meal – for someone else who is identified as being related in family terms, then we see that particular family configuration being reconstructed and reaffirmed" (p. 2231). Applying these concepts to the 'rugby family', it can be observed that when children *choose* to participate and to train *hard* in sessions, they are *doing* family – in line with senses of the everyday and the active – thus reinforcing and practising agency within these family connections (Morgan, 2011a, 2011b). Further, each team engenders separate and specific practices, something Morgan (2011b) acknowledges within the sense of the 'regular': "they may be shared by a large section of any particular population (the school-run, for example) or they may be peculiar to members of a particular household or set of family members ('family' jokes, rituals, etc)" (p. 7). For example, despite training on the same night, teams work to variations in practice or routines, which help define and distinguish them, reiterating the sense of family within the teams. These team-connected actions remain linked to and draw from the rugby family, as demonstrated by Henry, coach to the U14Gs, who spoke of "taking them through the typical traditions of being part of a team, being in a rugby club" to enable the players to "take ownership of that and empower them to really look out for each other". As such, team connections reflect Morgan's (2011b) 'family practices', including in the 'active' and 'regular' practice of familyhood and connect to Bell's (1999) performative belonging of agreed and reinforced behaviours.

Observational activities were a crucial component of my understanding and subsequent analysis of children's practice of intrageneracy in training sessions. Throughout my field notes, I made notations that players were working hard, once commenting that they were "throwing themselves around", were listening intently, and that there was little obvious dissent, with players seeming to enjoy the sessions.

Children's practice of agency in working hard on a rugby pitch recalls Bordonaro and Payne's (2012) 'ambiguous agency' in that it involves children doing something with a known potential for injury and, in the case of exertion and contact, the expectation of pain (e.g., West et al., 2023). As discussed in Chapter 3, scholars have challenged the simplicity of the statement 'children have agency', particularly where it relates to the actions of children who behave against social expectations (e.g., Gallagher, 2019; Tisdall, 2016). Sport, and rugby, is slightly different to this. As presented in Chapter 2, children are actively encouraged to participate in sport as it is perceived to have numerous health and developmental benefits. The protection of children from harm, including from future harm as a result of injury, has been addressed by many sports and child protection researchers and the RFU (Anderson et al., 2023; Freitag et al., 2015; Rugby Football Union, 2023c). That children within rugby are practising agency in their continued engagement in a sport that causes them and others pain and potential harm is itself a practice of 'ambiguous agency.' The impact of exercising this agency on wellbeing and in relation to consent is discussed below in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively.

Within the context of the child-to-child connections and the practice of intrageneracy at The Club, intergenerational relationships continue to play a role in both enabling and restricting children's practices of intrageneracy. For example, the U16Bs coaching group provided multiple difficulty levels of exercises, allowing players to make their own choices about which exercise level to complete and removing a possible source of tension within the team, something that the players noted gave them choices:

So, if you're like doing a fitness drill, the coaches will set up like different difficulties and you go and select where you want to put yourself. You go for your own difficulty...So you can either push yourself to the maximum, or, say you're not feeling great one day, you can go for the easier one. (Dan, U16Bs discussion)

This reduces the extent to which a child would be resisting an activity if they could not complete it to the same level as another player and enables their practice of agency in deciding how hard to work. This, then, raises the question as to how significant a resistance it would be for a child not to work hard. It appears that where children work

hard in respect of intragenerational relationships, they do so with an experience of choice, which is different to the sense of parents potentially forcing children to play. Participants explained that children 'cannot be made to work hard' by parents and coaches, yet explained that they would, in fact, work hard even if they did not want to, for the benefit of their teammates. Fred from the U16Bs team explained this:

Fred: I feel like you've given the choice on everything, it's just whether you act on it. Like you might not want to do a contact drill cause like your shoulder's hurting, or something, but maybe your mates will give you stick if you don't do it so you just tank through it instead of doing what you want to do.

Ruth: Okay, that's really interesting. Is that okay, that you're pushed into doing it or what do you think?

Fred: I think it's good in some aspects, like, if you're not really feeling motivated, but, like, some negative reinforcement can work sometimes... that makes you do it and it wasn't that bad to do it.

For the children in the study, the intragenerational dynamics seemed persuasively felt. Participants' responses suggest that it is the connections to other children that led them to work harder, and, potentially, to put themselves in situations and experience pain that they may otherwise not wish to do. It is also these connections that cause them to ask this of others, and to contribute to the co-constructed expectations around exertion. The complexity of intergenerational relationships as both potentially restrictive and enabling adds a new complexion to the context of 'sport ethic', which Hughes and Coakley (1991) present as a social norm co-constructed and upheld primarily by coaches, trainers and the media (see, also, Malcom, 2006; Stafford et al., 2013a). Participants' responses in the present study suggest that the drive to work hard comes more from an intragenerational ethic towards each other. These are also the dynamics that appear to give children the greatest happiness – children were most likely to refer to their teams as a family because of their teammates, rather than because of their coaches. Children who reported experiencing a greater degree of influence over training also seemed to feel they had more choice over how hard to work. It seems that children make these efforts within the framework of intergenerationally presented opportunities, executing these choices on the basis of intragenerational dynamics.

The data suggest that children will exert themselves in the physical actions involved in rugby, in support of their own wellbeing, as will be discussed in Chapter 6, but also as in the practice of intrageneracy, to the benefit of the 'rugby family' and practices as they experience them, and to stay on good terms with their teammates, with potential repercussions on intragenerational relationships if this is subverted. Where adults in their lives, including parents and coaches, provide a framework that encourages the development of technical skills, decision making and enjoyment of the sport, this facilitates children's 'thickening' of agency over time.

## **5.5. Conclusions**

This chapter has sought to address part of the research question "how do children, parents and coaches view and understand children's agency in competitive sport" by considering the construction and experiences of the 'rugby family' and children's practices of agency at The Club. First, the chapter introduced various constructions of the 'rugby family' as a motif with meaning and impact on the experiences of children, parents and coaches at The Club, recognising 'families' as locations of potential support and nurture, but also potential harm and challenge. Following this, the chapter explored children's practice of agency at The Club in relation to adults (intergeneracy) and other children (intrageneracy), reflecting on the complex generational interplay of enabling and restrictive influences on children's practices of agency including, for example, age, experience, expertise, access to resources and communicated enjoyment of the sport. Within this, the chapter considered how team gender categorisation, and restrictive or enabling factors relating thereto, led to differences in the establishment and enactment of 'family' within girls' and boys' teams, and the potential impact of these on children's practices of agency.

The chapter's analysis focused on the practice of agency in relation to the decision to play and to continue to play rugby, the choices and influence over training sessions and how hard children work during training. While approaching consideration of children's agency using Leonard's (2016) insights relating to generacy, this chapter also drew upon other approaches from childhood studies scholars to facilitate the exploration of children's agency. For example, recognising shifts in children's practices of inter- and intrageneracy over time, the chapter considered how children's increasing expertise and experience in rugby may 'thicken' the practice of agency,

such that their influence increases with age in connection to more than just how many years old they are (e.g., Klocker, 2007). Further, acknowledging the physicality of rugby, including the injury risk involved, the chapter drew from considerations of 'ambiguous agency' to acknowledge complexity to children's practice of agency in participating in rugby (e.g., Bordonaro & Payne, 2012).

Children's practice of agency in rugby reflects negotiations, motivations and resistance of actions situated within the context of inter- and intragenerational relationships. While children, parents and coaches share a sense that there is a balance of influence and power between and within themselves, at some stage this is perceived to tip firmly in favour of children, in having more say over the decision to play rugby, in their influence over training and in their choice over how hard to work. The chapter identified that this transitional moment appeared to coincide with changes in experiences and expectations outside of rugby, particularly for those aged 16 to 17 years old. While pointing to shared decision-making and influence by parents, and by coaches, children expressed continued and overt resistance to adults forcing them to play rugby, emphasising the importance of their practice of agency within this choice.

The chapter also identified that children exert themselves in the physicality of rugby in the practice of intrageneracy. This has added to existing discussions around the "sport ethic" (Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Malcom, 2006) by connecting children's participation within this context of ambiguity (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012) to intragenerational relationships. Further, the chapter has highlighted that as children progress through age groups, their greater practice or 'thickening' of agency exists within strengthened intragenerational relationships, which, facilitated by intergenerational relationships, become the major influence on their actions.

In identifying and exploring the construction of 'rugby family' and 'family practices' within rugby and at The Club, this chapter's findings have emphasised that children, coaches and parents all practice generacy within their sport. This practice reflects communication, negotiation and resistance, interacting with the structures of the sport and with generational dynamics. Both the performativity and the endurance of the 'rugby family' suggest it is something meaningful to participants. However, while families can bring joy, belonging and wellbeing, they are also complex, often housing tensions, disagreements, and potentially even harm. Over the following chapters, this dissertation explores the interconnectedness of the parents, coaches and players in

the context of the rugby family as relates to wellbeing and harm (Chapter 6) and experiences of consent (Chapter 7).

## **Chapter 6 – Children’s wellbeing and the co-construction of “safe spaces”**

The encouragement of children’s participation in competitive sport is often justified in connection with promises of improved wellbeing. This includes ideas about physical and mental health benefits, a sense of personal and social development and the perception that playing sport is something fun and enjoyable. Research and commentary presented within Chapters 2 and 3 highlighted actions taken to promote sports participation and evidence relating to its potential benefits, but it also set these against concerns over harm within children’s sport. In Chapter 5, children’s practice of relational agency in sport was discussed, including in relation to resistance to and criticism of being ‘forced’ to play and their potentially ‘ambiguous agency’ in participating in sports that involved risk of exertion, pain or injury.

Rugby is known to be a physically demanding sport, not just because of its fast pace, but because it involves contact with teammates, opposition and the ground. The previous chapter explored children’s practices of agency in participating in rugby, and in their choices while playing. The potential for physical injury in this sport and evidence of non-physical harm within prevalence studies of sport in general (e.g., Alexander et al., 2011; Hartill et al., 2023) invites exploration of children’s experiences of playing rugby, including in relation to wellbeing promises and potential harms.

This chapter now explores views, understandings and constructions of children’s wellbeing in rugby as shared by children, parents and coaches in relation to their experiences at The Club. This addresses the study’s first research question:

1. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children’s wellbeing, including ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ harm, in competitive sport?

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of children’s wellbeing, recalling the conceptualisations highlighted in the literature review in Chapter 3 and providing a foundation for analysis relating to experiences of wellbeing at The Club. Section 6.2 then explores and analyses participants’ views and understandings of wellbeing in rugby – in relation to the perceived nature of rugby and what the experience of playing the sport offers, and what it acts as an outlet from. Section 6.3 considers constructions and understandings of harm, including harm that is constructed and understood as acceptable – or not. Next, Section 6.4 discusses the co-construction of safe spaces

for wellbeing in rugby, before the chapter's conclusion in Section 6.5. Throughout, this chapter builds on the previous chapter's findings relating to participants' experiences of the 'rugby family' and the practice of generagency at The Club, noting the inter- and intragenerational relationships in which experiences of wellbeing are situated.

The discussion in this chapter is based on analysis of data generated through interviews with children, parents, coaches and officials and in group discussions with children. Observations and document review also contribute to the analysis. In interviews, participants were asked whether they thought rugby was good for children's wellbeing, with follow-up questions leading to discussions on how it was or was not so. Children in group discussions were provided with vignette examples (see Chapters 4 and 5), which presented stories designed to encourage discussions of wellbeing. Discussants were asked what, if anything, they considered to be harmful from these stories. Participants in interviews and group discussions were also asked what harm they would consider acceptable or unacceptable, and how they 'knew' what they would and would not accept.

### **6.1. A conceptual foundation for exploring children's wellbeing**

The literature review in Chapter 3 discussed the multitude of ways in which children's wellbeing has been understood and explored in existing research, including in relation to children's sport. In this chapter, the analysis relating to views and understandings of children's wellbeing utilises Ben-Arieh and colleagues' (2014) definition of wellbeing as "a desirable state of being, healthy, or prosperous" (p. 1), while focusing on subjective wellbeing experiences, alongside discussion of objective considerations. As introduced in Chapter 3, Axford and colleagues (2014) distinguish between objective and subjective wellbeing, characterising the former as connected to "outcomes and risk and protective factors" and the latter as "how children and young people assess their lives" (p. 2700). Though subjective wellbeing is influenced by an individual's appraisal of all factors, including those measured objectively, objective wellbeing is not determinative of subjective wellbeing. Disagreement between low-measured objective wellbeing and high subjective wellbeing, or "objective-subjective disjunction", is not uncommon (Axford et al., 2014, p. 2704). Research question 1 recognises the potential for this 'disjunction', particularly in relation to subjective wellbeing during sporting experiences that could be considered counter to objective wellbeing, for

example injury or pain. However, the question (and this section) focuses on exploring and understanding subjective wellbeing experiences.

Discussions of subjective wellbeing take account of the multifaceted nature of wellbeing by encouraging an 'overall' picture of satisfaction or happiness (Axford et al., 2014). Scholars who have explored children's experiences and understandings of wellbeing have sought to identify domains within this. The literature review in Chapter 3 shared some domains previous research has produced, including Fattore and colleagues' (2017) "safety and security", "agency and autonomy" and "self and identity" (p. 46). The following analysis utilises these alongside participants' data. By exploring children's views and experiences of their own wellbeing, this research positions children as key informants about their lives (Camfield et al., 2009; Ben-Arieh, 2004). However, the following analysis also explores others' views and understandings of children's wellbeing in rugby. It has been proposed that the use of "third-party" inputs to appraise children's wellbeing on their behalf can present an incomplete, or inaccurate, picture that fails to reflect children's views (Axford et al., 2014, p. 2708). However, this research examines adults' understandings of children's wellbeing to add perspectives, rather than to speak on children's behalf. Indeed, the analysis below often compares 'subject' (i.e., children's) and 'third-party' (i.e., parents' and coaches') perspectives of children's wellbeing, exploring overlap or divergence.

## **6.2. Views and understandings of children's wellbeing in rugby**

Field data strongly suggested that the vast majority of study participants held a highly positive view of the connection between rugby and children's wellbeing, with participants expressing enthusiasm as to the wellbeing benefits of the sport. During interviews, participants were asked whether they thought that rugby was good or bad for children's wellbeing, or perhaps somewhere in between. Almost all responded in relation to their own personal experiences, but the question was designed to allow more general answers for those who did not want to speak about themselves or their children (see Chapter 4 for further discussion). Participants were also asked to think about 'the best' and 'not so good' training sessions during the season, and what had made these sessions good – or not. Such questions encouraged conversations relating to participants' express understandings and constructions of wellbeing in rugby, whilst supporting analysis of factors contributing to their enjoyment of or

unhappiness with the sport. Crucially, these questions and this discussion generated data relating not just to what participants liked or did not like about rugby, but what they considered to be good for their – or their children’s – wellbeing.

With regards to wellbeing, two sub-themes emerged: ‘wellbeing through the nature of rugby’ and ‘wellbeing through escape’. The first captures those factors that draw children to rugby, from which children experience benefits to their wellbeing because of the nature of the sport. The second captures the ways in which participants considered rugby to be positive for children’s wellbeing because of what it acts as an outlet, escape or alternative from and to. These groupings are explored below. While factors that participants viewed as having a negative impact on children’s wellbeing are included within this analysis, co-constructions and understandings of harm are discussed in greater detail in Section 6.3.

### **6.2.1. Physicality and the nature of rugby**

*“I do like rugby. I like, cause, I quite like a little bit of rough and tumble and that. So, I quite like it, I like having a laugh around my friends as well, so, it’s good.” (Boys’ team player)*

As noted above, research data suggested high levels of enjoyment of rugby as positive for children’s wellbeing due to the nature of the sport. For many, this was prominently connected to its *physicality*. Here, ‘physicality’ relates both to the exercise involved in playing rugby and the fact it is a sport involving physical contact with opponents, teammates and the ground across tackles, scrums, rucks, mauls, lineouts and general play. This physicality was widely viewed to have a positive impact on wellbeing, including for physical and non-physical benefits. Child participants frequently noted the positive impact of physicality on wellbeing. To note, analysis of data in line with gender categorisation with teams identified no discernible variation in experiences between girls’ and boys’ teams players in this regard. In a response that was typical of this, Saskia, a girls’ team player, shared her view that rugby was good for wellbeing because: “rugby’s obviously a physical sport so if you have any, like, built up stress or anger, it helps sort of release that.” Saskia continued: “it’s quite good with your fitness as well.” The understanding of wellbeing in rugby as connected to physicality, which, in turn, is connected to non-physical wellbeing, was also exemplified by Dan, a boys’ team player. First, in a discussion about consent, Dan described liking the physical

aspects of rugby: “I enjoy tackling people, running into people, getting battered, that kind of stuff. That’s just, it’s just, it’s just good fun.” Later, when asked about children’s wellbeing and rugby, Dan responded: “I think that physical health is really important for mental health, for mental ... for mental wellbeing as well.” Ommundsen and colleagues (2014) have previously identified connections between sport and wellbeing on the basis of physiological responses that lead to psychological benefit. It is this physicality for non-physical wellbeing benefits that Dan, Saskia, and several other participants recognised as a primary wellbeing benefit of playing rugby.

Participants’ connection of physical activity with wellbeing also aligns with studies that have linked ‘happiness’ and physical activity among children and adolescents (e.g. Eime et al., 2013; van Woudenberg et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2022). Van Woudenberg and colleagues (2020) explored such connections in research with 1,484 adolescents in the Netherlands. The authors found that physical activity and happiness (which can indicate and contribute to wellbeing (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014)) were positively related with a reciprocal relationship such that physical activity can lead to happiness, which then leads to increased physical activity over a short time period (van Woudenberg et al., 2020). Study participants’ experiences that the physical aspect of rugby makes them feel good or has a positive wellbeing boost are in line with van Woudenberg and colleagues’ (2020) findings but also further suggest that the highly physical, contact element is particularly pertinent to this experience.

Previous studies have also found that children can enjoy psychological and social wellbeing benefits associated with sporting achievement and success (Eime et al., 2013; Ommundsen et al., 2014). Participants’ responses centring on children’s enjoyment of the technical aspects of rugby and their perceived mastery of these align with this. Four of the eight child triad participants commented explicitly about their own enjoyment of team or individual success and achievement within the sport. For two of these, in particular, competence and achievement-based factors appeared to foster a love of the sport (see also, Wilson et al., 2022). Thor, a player in the U16Bs team, associated rugby *itself* with positive wellbeing: “I like the physicality but ... like, not the physicality side where you’re, like, malicious intent ... I like the fair, clean technical side. I like, like, different players’ talent and skill, not just size... I just really love rugby.” Isla, from the U18Gs team, shared a similar love for the sport, stating: “I feel good at something with rugby. I like having the physical outlet, but one that I know I am actually

good at.” In addition, these responses reflect a type of recognition of success and achievement that Fattore and colleagues (2017) conceptualise as the “experience of competence” (p.177), which they connect to a positive sense of self and recognition by others, under their domain of self and identity. For Thor and Isla in particular, it seems the experience of competence is connected to the specific technicalities and requirements of the sport of rugby.

### **Children’s understandings of contact and wellbeing**

In addition to general discussions of rugby’s physicality, technical aspects and the level of exercise and/or exertion required, many child participants, from all teams, were clear that the contact *itself* was important to their experiences of positive wellbeing in rugby. Delilah from the U16Gs team had a response that exemplified this: “it’s good anger management basically... That’s how I get my anger out and that’s why I still play rugby because it’s a good way to get everything out. Especially if there’s things happening at home or at school.” This was similar to Delilah’s teammate Marnie’s observation that “[i]t’s a good way to outlet your anger because it’s, like, sometimes you just want to outlet, like, physically let out your anger, but obviously you can’t do that, because you can’t go around beating people up.” James, with the U15Bs team, shared another typical appraisal of using contact for release:

James: I think it’s good [for wellbeing] to an extent, because, like I said earlier, it, like, helps relieve stress if you’re, like, mad at something so, like, because people have their own ways of dealing with stress and that and rugby is definitely one of mine.

Ruth: Okay... does it matter how much contact you have as to how stress relieving it is?

James: Not really, I would say, but you know, one hit is good, is enough, but getting a few in is good.

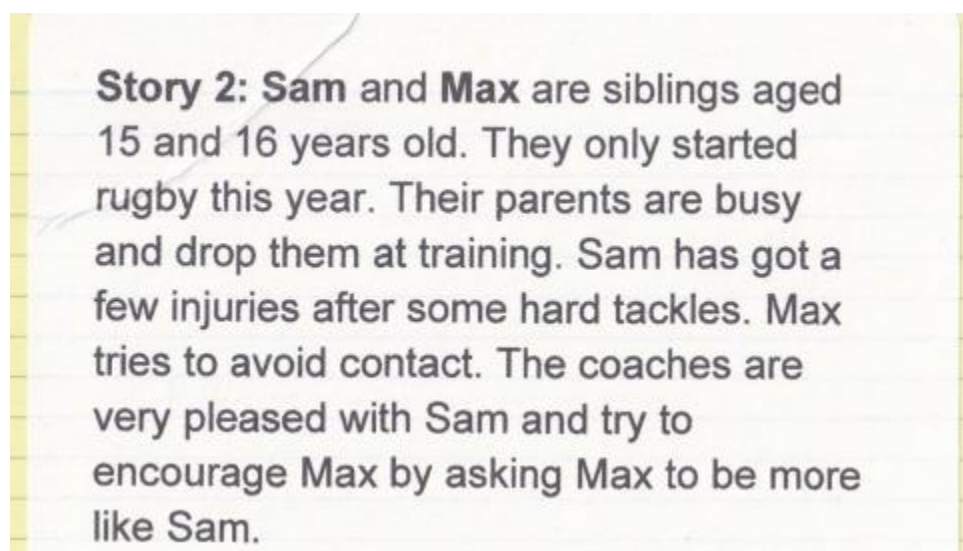
These inputs are similar to those from other child interviews and discussions that present children’s experiences of physical contact as positive for psychological wellbeing as a means of release. This might be expected based on research mentioned earlier (Eime et al., 2013; van Woudenberg et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2022), but this analysis further highlights children’s enjoyment of physical contact as

meeting specific personal, emotional needs, consistent with understandings of subjective wellbeing (e.g., Axford et al., 2014; Jordan & Rees, 2020). The responses from Delilah, Marnie and James all speak to enjoying physicality of contact as a means of releasing stress or negative wellbeing experiences. This contact could be considered problematic in other contexts, but is part of the sport of rugby, and something participants perceive themselves and others to enjoy, as exemplified by Zara, from the U18Gs: “I found a sport that kind of allowed me to do that, not in a hostile way, but in a way that was fun and everyone was consenting.” Existing literature links physical activity to increased happiness (e.g., van Woudenberg et al., 2020) and has reported a link between sports participation, particularly team sports participation (e.g., Khan et al., 2023), and lower incidence of depression and other mental health concerns (e.g. Biddle et al., 2019; Hoffmann et al., 2022; Wilson et al., 2022). This present analysis reinforces such connections, while suggesting that the contact element of rugby is a means to address factors associated with negative mental health wellbeing. The extent to which this reflects an escape or outlet from external stressors is explored below, in Section 6.2.3.

Children’s experiences of contact and the impact upon wellbeing were also discussed during group discussions of the second vignette, shown in Figure 23.

### **Figure 23**

#### *Vignette Story 2 Card for Group Participants*



**Story 2: Sam and Max** are siblings aged 15 and 16 years old. They only started rugby this year. Their parents are busy and drop them at training. Sam has got a few injuries after some hard tackles. Max tries to avoid contact. The coaches are very pleased with Sam and try to encourage Max by asking Max to be more like Sam.

The story of Sam and Max was designed to give participants the opportunity to discuss the physicality of rugby, and the contact element in particular. Nearly all participants expressed sympathy with Max and ‘his’<sup>11</sup> reluctance to be involved in contact, with most simultaneously noting that contact was an integral part of the sport. Indeed, all discussions across and within all age groups reflected awareness that contact could be painful, frightening and could lead to injury, with many participants suggesting it was understandable children might not enjoy it. Representing this, Maya, from the U18Gs discussion explained:

Whenever I’m on the pitch and I’ve got someone twice the size of me trucking towards me, I’m thinking ‘I don’t want to tackle them’ because I know I’m gonna end up, you know, on my bum, hurt, because I’m, like, ‘cause it’s happened before... I’ve had concussions, I’ve had, I’ve been winded, I’ve been bashed and bounced on other people and all that and it’s, it’s quite terrifying. So, I can understand why he’s avoiding it. But then I can see from the other perspective, which is you’ve got to get back up and keep going because most times what you do, you get hit you just get back up and keep going.

In the U18Bs group, there was further sympathy for Max’s reluctance to get involved, with Moe explaining it was important he should not be forced to play, and with Homer agreeing:

If you’re not prepared to be tackled, to try contact, which is fine, rugby’s not for everyone, you have to be pretty strong, strong willed, and strong-ish body as well, to play the game, then maybe it isn’t for you. But there’s no harm in that. There’s no harm in a sport not being for you.

Moving ‘down’ the age groups, in the U16Bs’ discussion, participants engaged in an extended discussion of the vignette that also considered the fundamental importance of engaging in – and enjoying – contact when playing rugby. This group noted that perhaps Max did not want to get injured, but, as Younis said, “I feel like it’s a contact sport so you can’t really avoid it unless you don’t play, really.” Dan agreed: “Yeah, you either have that hunger for contact or you don’t. So, he obviously doesn’t, which means, like, I mean, he’s probably in the wrong sport.” Together, these responses

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<sup>11</sup> As discussed earlier, all participants universally and unilaterally assigned he/him/his pronouns to the children in these vignettes.

reflect that many child participants perceived they would expect to enjoy contact or participate in a different sport. That rugby requires both acceptance and a level of enjoyment of contact was repeated in all age groups. In the U15Bs, one participant said: “all in all, he’s coming in to do contact, and, again, it’s a contact sport, it’s beneficial for you to do contact in a contact sport.” The U14Gs group extended this, sharing understanding in Max not enjoying contact and suggesting that perhaps he could play touch rugby – a form of rugby with reduced contact – instead. While illuminating participants’ understandings of contact and wellbeing, these discussions also recall findings from Section 5.4.1, in which children expressed determination that they practice genergency in the decision to play the game.

Though contact may have an impact on physical health (e.g., West et al., 2023), the extent to which participants experienced it as contributing to wellbeing appears focused on emotional or non-physical wellbeing. Even though participants were concerned about wellbeing within the Sam/Max vignette, this concern seemed to be for Max’s enjoyment of the sport rather than the physical impact described in relation to Sam’s injuries following ‘hard tackles’. Bringing this together with analysis from earlier in this section, these responses present a clear picture that this is a sport children know to involve contact and expect to contribute to wellbeing on the basis of this, though the extent to which participants enjoy or tolerate the contact could, of course, vary. A finding of enjoying physical contact, physicality and the sport of rugby comports with existing research about child wellbeing and sport (e.g., Ommundsen et al., 2014). To the extent this physicality involves potential for harm, the enjoyment of it and associated understandings of harm are explored below.

### **Adults’ perspectives on physicality, contact and child wellbeing**

Parents and coaches at The Club appeared to share children’s perceptions of rugby’s physicality as potentially positive for children’s wellbeing – or as experienced by their children as positive for their wellbeing. However, they consistently qualified this in relation to both physical and emotional safety, suggesting a balance between physical and non-physical wellbeing. Exemplifying this, Marnie’s mother explained that “because it’s very physical... you know, you hit the tackle bag and it’s like, it’s just a release” before explaining that this physicality took place in a “very supportive” team environment within which it was important for the game to be played safely and “refereed well”. Consideration that rugby’s physicality is positive *if* the sport is played

within a safe environment was shared by other adults, including Thor's father, who explained: "boys seem to, like, enjoy it without it being out of hand it's controlled, it's controlled, it's in the right manner. If it was in the wrong manner, I'd be alarmed, but it really isn't." In another response suggesting conditionality, Delilah's mother commented:

it is a very, very physical sport.... I suppose the thing is ... to be a coach, you have to know about training, you can't just be, they have to know how to teach children how to play. So, accidents do happen, but there's support for it not to happen.

These inputs reflect a predominating sense that parents understood contact to be experienced as positive for children's wellbeing when *controlled*. This suggests negotiation between concerns over physical harm and parents' understandings, and valuation of, children's subjective wellbeing.

As presented in Chapter 3, research has considered parental conceptualisation and understanding of risk of injury in rugby. Anderson and colleagues (2022), for example, suggest that parents use cognitive strategies for "minimalizing" the risks of injury in their perceptions, and that they prioritise the perceived social and benefits to their child of rugby over risk concerns and in comparison to other sports (p. 9). Findings from the present research suggest that parents had developed approaches to and views regarding the risk of physical harm to their children in the sport. As noted above, nearly all parents shared that they felt nervous about serious injuries – more so than child participants – with several explaining that they preferred not to think about it. The three triad families who were relatively newer to the game explained they had overcome initial fears over time, often as their children had become more familiar with and experienced in the sport. Other responses from more rugby-experienced parents shed further light on this. One mother noted: "I try not to think about it as a parent, 'cause I think you could over worry" and shared:

if your child has gone through the system from like five or six, the safety of the training itself... it's really hard that if someone walks into it at like the under 12s, they haven't got that technique that they've learnt from a really young age.

Not thinking about injury was an approach shared by another father, who noted: "Concussion is obviously a concern. ...I think it's one of those I'd rather not think about

it.” These responses suggest parents may adjust to a risk beyond their initial comfort level, perhaps reassured by ‘control’ and in the understanding that their children obtain wellbeing benefits from the sport. To some degree, these responses also suggest the use of parental strategies to minimise the perceived risk of harm, though, adding to Anderson and colleagues’ (2022) findings, the data suggest such strategies are social negotiations of trust between parents, children and coaches.

The parental experience of risk of injuries, injuries and constructions of harm is discussed further in Section 6.3, while parental consent decisions in relation to this are discussed in Chapter 7. However, for the purposes of the present discussion, the data suggest that parents recognise their child’s subjective wellbeing from physicality in rugby as connected to their communicated happiness in the experience of this. Ben-Arieh and colleagues (2014), discussing children’s wellbeing, note tensions “between the moment and possible future consequences” and explain that “this is even more complex in relation to children; well-being encompasses both children’s lives in the present and how the present influences their future and their development” (p. 3). In the context of parental awareness of both short- and long-term physical risks, parent participants appeared to focus on what they perceived to be wellbeing benefits that their children experienced and enjoyed. Further, many parents appeared to factor their children’s subjective wellbeing above their own comfort levels, as Thor’s mother rather light-heartedly reflected: “You know, I can be standing there thinking is that [Thor] that’s gone down, is he okay, so, for my wellbeing [laughs] but for his, absolutely, you know, he doesn’t over think it at all.” Adult perceptions of their children’s wellbeing appear central to views, understandings and assessment of risk.

Within their discussions about wellbeing, coaches and officials universally explained that they felt rugby was positive for children’s wellbeing, but all also reflected upon the importance of engaging in contact with attention to and bounded by rules and safety measures. As one official, Simon, noted:

It’s an odd situation to have, isn’t it? When you’re on this bit of grass in between these white lines, you’re allowed to knock that guy over...other side of that white line, walking down the street, if you did that, some of the police are probably going to come and talk to you.

Several coaches commented upon the importance of such boundaries, including in relation to self-discipline and control, with one boys' coach identifying a gender-related aspect to this:

Rugby is brutal. It is physical. It is everything that goes on in a teenage high testosterone level teenage boys' mind, but if you don't have manners, and you don't have respect, you're not going to make it and so to be able to have that aggression, but with control is just the best lesson for anybody.

A shared understanding of boundaries appears cultivated through coaches' and officials' actions. Coaches explained they were required to take relevant courses to design and deliver training sessions safely, combining the importance of establishing boundaries with tools to prevent injury and harm. The way in which coaches co-construct safe spaces within rugby, in support of positive wellbeing, is discussed at greater length in Section 6.3, below. Additionally, the discussion of the transformative nature of consent in relation to boundaries, as introduced in Chapter 3, is explored further in Chapter 7, below.

### **6.2.2. Team dynamics and wellbeing**

*"It's probably the team building because you can get the fitness anywhere. ...you can run and you can do weights and all that stuff, but it's just the ability to communicate and the ability to... work with people you don't normally work with and build relationships, that's really important."* (Boys' team player)

Data from all participants suggested that being part of a team, and the dynamics within that team, were an important factor for children's wellbeing. Team dynamics were presented as predominantly positive, supportive and encouraging, but potentially negative if they were critical and/or competitive. Support, encouragement, criticism or competition all had an impact upon children's wellbeing. This appears linked to perceptions of rugby teams as a 'family', with meaning and influence – potentially both positive and negative – upon the experiences of children, parents and coaches at The Club (see Chapter 5). Within all discussions and interviews, child participants described the importance of belonging to a team to children's wellbeing in rugby. Participants universally commented upon the value they placed in their team, with responses recalling 'family practices' (e.g., Morgan, 2011b) and calling upon concepts of "friendship", being like "family", teammates being "the pack" or close connections to

teammates. This is in line with research into children's experiences of wellbeing within and outside of sporting contexts. Fattore and colleagues (2017), for example, explore the importance of friendships as 'bonded' in strong individual connections, and "belonging", meaning as part of groups such as team (pp. 132-134). Experiences of wellbeing as connected to 'team' also align with sports research showing a positive impact of belonging to team (e.g., Khan et al., 2023; Ommundsen et al., 2014).

The potential positive impact of team dynamics presented by participants is also in line with findings from Fry and Gano-Overway's (2010) research relating to the wellbeing benefits of 'caring' sporting environments, though this, in itself, recalls the note of caution over when 'family' is not 'caring'. This study, which was based in the United States and involved 184 youth soccer players aged 10-17, found that children who experienced a 'caring climate' in relation to their teammates and coaches reported greater enjoyment of the sport (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010). Team-associated wellbeing benefits are also in line with those discussed in research relating to sports and psychosocial wellbeing among children in Australia, which found team sports participation offers more psychosocial wellbeing benefits than individual sports (Khan et al., 2023). In this research, Khan and colleagues (2023) highlighted that "[p]eer acceptance during team sports may contribute to adolescents' enjoyment of physical activity, which may further promote their sports participation and improve wellbeing" (p. 1122). The association of 'acceptance' with the benefits of team support hints to the possibility of the type of exclusion and alienation that participants discussed as making team or 'family' dynamics challenging (e.g. Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017). This also draws on the concept of sport as a "social convoy" with social benefits that Ommundsen and colleagues (2014) explain as both potentially preventing participation in detrimental activities and providing the opportunity for positive influence on wellbeing: "provided constructive social relationships and a proper structure within specific sport contexts as well as in the general environment, children may take advantage of sport to develop psychological and social well-being" (p. 924).

Following on from discussions in Chapter 5, it is possible to understand children's enjoyment of team dynamics in rugby as positive for wellbeing in the context of a potentially caring, social environment of 'family practices' or the 'rugby family' (e.g., Morgan, 2011b). However, and as suggested above, the literary discussion relating to

'caring' factors (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010) and 'constructive social relationships' (Ommundsen et al., 2014), as well as participants' notes of caution relating to potential exclusion or poor treatment, highlights the importance that 'family practices' are positive, recognising that they have the potential not to be so. Indeed, several child participants highlighted vulnerabilities associated with them. One player shared that as new members had joined the team, "our dynamics are a bit weird at the moment because we're not quite sure where everyone goes", which was making things slightly challenging. This comment highlights the role coaches play in ensuring teams are positive for wellbeing. This player's coach was aware of this, noting the importance of a positive team dynamic: "that's why we're so big on all this team building stuff we do and getting them to bond."

The vast majority of adult participants pointed to the fact that rugby is a team sport as an important factor when discussing its potential positive impact on children's wellbeing. Several parents, coaches and officials noted that rugby teams provide for and require a range of forms of athleticism, characterising this as inclusive and positive for children's wellbeing – and opposing it to other circumstances in children's lives that may be less inclusive. Marnie's mother's response exemplified this and was reflective of many parents' views:

I think you get the support network within, you know, within training and within games, and everything else, but I think, in the right environment, I think you build friendships outside of that and you build support outside of that.

This response is particularly pertinent in connecting children's experiences of wellbeing and the need for the 'right environment' for the team and that 'right' team dynamics can lead to support and friendships 'outside' training and matches (e.g., Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010).

Even though all players presented the experience of being in a team to be largely positive, their responses suggested balance in how team dynamics could affect wellbeing. For example, one player noted the experience of "stress" in defensive positions because such players can feel responsible for conceding tries, while another commented on the pressure involved in "letting everyone down". Others commented on team difficulties relating to selection of some players for elite pathways while others had not been chosen. These responses demonstrated close connections to the team,

with benefits to wellbeing such as fulfilling a sense of self and identity, belonging and competence, but, equally, wellbeing threats where belonging or self-competence are challenged (see, e.g., Fattore et al., 2017).

### **6.2.3. An outlet or escape from external pressures**

*“It just gives me like an outlet if I’m not feeling great, like if there’s been issues at school or something, it just helps me to bring my spirits up even if I’m not feeling great.”*  
(Girls’ team player)

As alluded to earlier, in addition to being positive for wellbeing because of what it offers children directly, rugby was also commonly understood as positive as an escape or outlet from external difficulties. Exploring these challenges provides an insight into wellbeing difficulties children may experience in their lives. It also contributes to discussions surrounding children’s practices of agency in participating in a sport that involves physical risk and harm. Universally, research participants explained that rugby could support wellbeing by providing escape from outside difficulties, *both* through the physicality and the team connections discussed above.

In interviews, several parents explained they felt that rugby had helped their children to overcome challenges, including family traumas, mental health difficulties, a lack of self-confidence and other factors parents considered to have negatively affected their wellbeing.<sup>12</sup> Coaches, too, particularly of those age groups that were engaging in England’s national school examinations, seemed acutely aware of the challenges children may face outside of rugby, noting that players in their teams had faced bullying, exam pressures, family problems and various other issues over the years, including during the COVID-19 pandemic, when rugby was subject to restrictions.

Ommundsen and colleagues (2014) explored literature relating to sport as positive for wellbeing in that it “takes young people away from stressful parts of their lives” (p. 925; see also, Penedo & Dahn, 2005). The authors note findings that sport may support strengthening of children’s wellbeing in relation to social aspects, including by building self-esteem and social relations (Ommundsen et al., 2014). Aligned with this, one noticeable factor in child participants’ discussions of ‘escape’ was the gender categorisation of their teams, highlighting potential social relational elements and experiences in their lives outside of rugby. On the ‘girls’ teams, where players were

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<sup>12</sup> Direct sources withheld for privacy reasons.

often from different schools, children described enjoying rugby as something outside of their usual friendship groups – Lauren from the U16Gs described this as “a good escape”. On the ‘boys’ teams, however, where players were more likely to be from the same school, rugby was seen as an outlet from *other* pressures, including exam stress. One U16Bs team discussant explained: “At home we’re revising, at school we’re getting told we have to go to our GCSEs. So, it’s an escape where you can feel like free and not have to worry about all that stuff.” Thus, children appear to seek and find within rugby an outlet from difficulties in their lives (e.g., Ommundsen et al., 2014).

The team-based ‘rugby family’ can support this, while also reflecting the impact of gender on the experience of this ‘family’. As explored earlier, in two of the three girls’ team discussions, participants described positive wellbeing from rugby because it allowed them to escape problems at school through the “safe space” (U14Gs), “second family” (U14Gs) or a “different type of friendship” (U16Gs). In the final group, the U18Gs, discussants explained that older players look after younger players – reinforcing this sense of a caring environment (e.g., Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010) and affirming the wellbeing value in ‘family practices’ (e.g., Morgan, 2011b). Coaches on the girls’ teams appeared to understand and respond to participants’ wellbeing needs in relation to this escape and how particularly how crucial it was for a team to provide a caring environment to support it. Phil, a girls’ team coach, explained: “I think it is good for some of those girls to have a sport that, two things, one is physical... and to be part of a team.” He noted that his player may not always have large friendship group at school.

This matches ‘girls’ team players’ reflections about seeking support from the team as an alternative to friendships at school. It also reflects gender-based challenges relating to inclusivity, which were exemplified by Sam, the U18Gs coach:

I want them to, to feel that they can be a part of a ‘thing’ and I think that’s especially important for the players who don’t feel like they’re part of a ‘thing’ in their outside lives. So, you know, slightly outsiders at school or, you know, you know, or don’t feel, or like the school sports, you know, that their school doesn’t see them as a sporty person because they do, they don’t perhaps do mainstream sports or fit into the main the mainstream stereotype of what a sporty girl should look like. I, I want them to feel included as part of a thing. I want them to feel proud that they do a difficult thing.

In comparison, but equally in a reflection of the needs of players, Stefan, the U16Bs' team coach, presented a different picture of an 'outlet' for his players: "I want them to feel happy to come to rugby, feel like it's an escape from the from the GCSE shit that's kind of going on with them, or the pressure to get into this school or that school." Agreement across the full dataset, including from all cohorts and the vast majority of participants, suggests the experience of rugby as positive for wellbeing because it is responsive to and reduces aspects of what can lead to negative wellbeing, including factors in relation to gender. Such factors have previously been characterised as 'protective' (e.g., Lippman et al., 2014). Indeed, the overall analysis in Section 6.2 suggests that participants experience rugby as both positive and protective for children's wellbeing. The interplays remain, however, between children's subjective wellbeing and the risk of physical injury or damage, and between positive, protective and negative factors. When, and to what extent, this may be considered harm, and, critically, whether and to what extent this disrupts children's experiences of wellbeing is discussed in Section 6.3 below.

### **6.3. Exploring constructions and understandings of harm**

A key aspect of research question 1, and of the overall aim of this research study, was the exploration of participants' constructions of harm, and what they understood to be acceptable or not. This section analyses participants' understandings of harm, exploring these by utilising definitions of harm set out in the literature. As noted in Chapter 3, Alexander and colleagues (2011) use the term 'harm' to explore maltreatment and negative experiences in sport settings. The authors describe different forms of 'abuse' that fall under an umbrella categorisation of 'harm' that they use to assess maltreatment or negative experiences. In doing so, they develop an 'informal index' of categories and types of harm represented by behaviours:

- Emotional harm including teasing, bullying and humiliating treatment
- Self-harm
- Sexual harm including sexual harassment, sexual abuse and organised abuse
- Physical harm including training while injured or exhausted and aggressive and violent behaviour. (Alexander et al., 2011, p. 21)

The following analysis takes these broad categories as a starting point and focuses on emotional and physical harm as the two main types of harm identified and

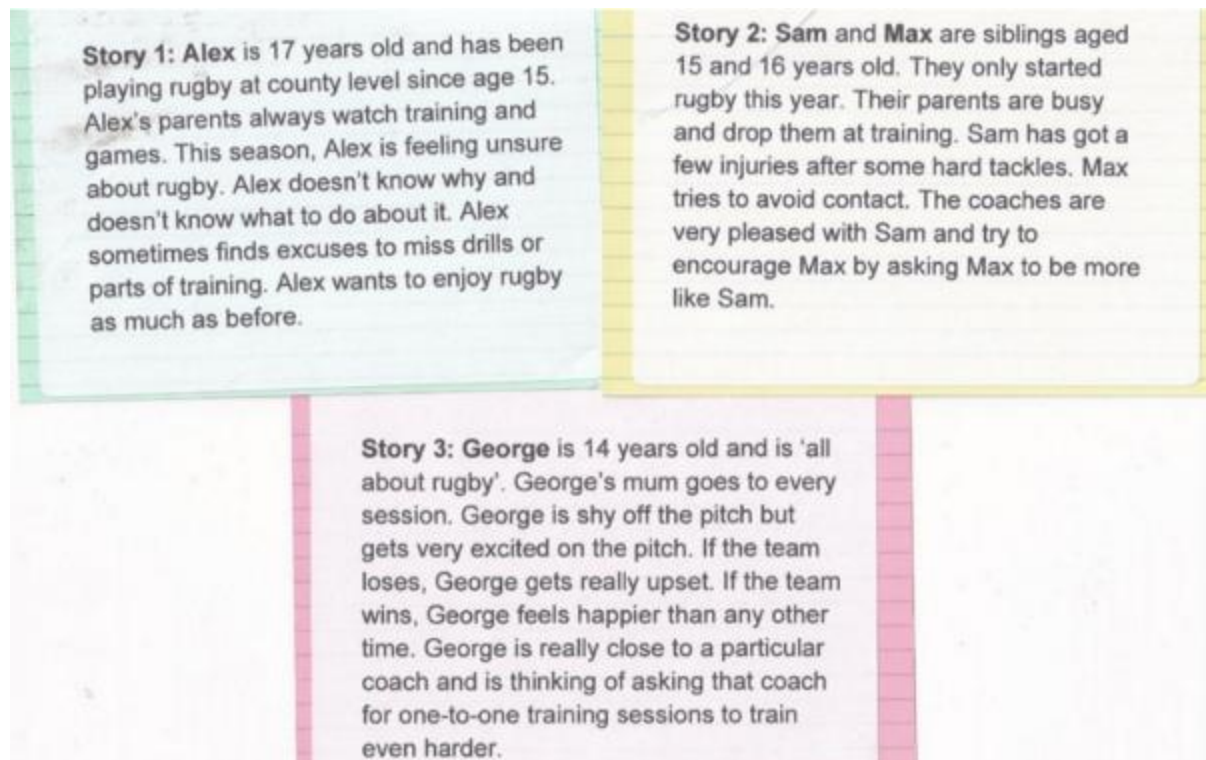
addressed by participants during the research. In this regard, there did not appear to be variance in identification of harm as associated with gender categorisation of the teams. Participants were asked whether and how they knew what level of injury, pain or harm was acceptable for children to experience in rugby. They were not provided with a definition of harm but were asked for their views and perceptions in this regard. Discussion groups were asked to think about harm in the context of the vignettes they had discussed: “did anyone notice anything that you would think of as being harmful in any of these stories?” I noted in a reflexive account that many conversations around harm, and my direct questions around boundaries, tended to focus on contact and injury, though other forms of harm were discussed indirectly. In this account, I queried whether this may have occurred due to ongoing discussions about physical harm in rugby (e.g., Griffin et al., 2020; RFU, 2023c) and therefore linked to participants’ assumptions about research on harm and their experiences of injury risk. I also considered that the direction of conversations may have connected to stark differences between my experiences of a non-contact, individual sport compared to rugby (see Chapter 1).

### **Focus group discussion vignettes**

As described in Chapter 4, participants in group discussions were presented with three vignette stories to encourage conversation on issues relating to wellbeing and harm. These were presented on cards and handed to participants in sub-groups, as depicted in Figure 24 (complete with leftover mud from the pitch in one case).

## Figure 24

### *Vignette Story Cards Presented to Participants in Group Discussions*



Participants were first asked to discuss the stories in relation to the wellbeing of the child or children involved, which led to conversations about wellbeing more broadly, including specific anecdotes or examples. Groups were then asked whether there were aspects of these stories they considered to represent or indicate 'harm'. Responses in which participants identified harm, either in response to the direct request to identify it, or elsewhere within conversation, were as follows:

**Story 1:** Participants across all groups were concerned about Alex's unhappiness in rugby but only one, Moe, from the U18Bs, was sufficiently concerned to consider this experience 'harmful', noting: "In story one it's like, saying that he does, he skips the trainings and the drills and I feel like, if he doesn't, and he's missing work and school then it could be really stressful for him."

**Story 2:** This was, by far, the most discussed story in relation to harm. Several participants across all groups were concerned about the comparison between players and between siblings. Even within the one group where a participant was adamant there was no harm in any story – leading many others to agree – a participant insisted that "the comparison" was harmful. In all other groups, participants described the

comparison as damaging, as potentially “turning them on each other” or otherwise being harmful, with Zara from the U18Gs explaining: “it’s quite dehumanising because it’s not recognising that individual for their talents, it’s just you wanting to turn them into a different player.”

Further, participants expressed concerned that the lack of parental interest could be ‘harmful’. Sasha, from the U14Gs, commented on “parents leaving them and not staying to support them”, while Lauren from the U16Gs said: “their parents are kind of like ignoring them because they’re busy, you know, just leaving them there.” This was challenged by Bobbie, a co-discussant who noted: “they are the age where they can be left a bit.” Parental presence was also a concern for the U16Bs group, where participants suggested their parents were not “100% all the way with them” and noted the importance of parental presence in relation to injury: “If you get, like, injured and your parents aren’t [there]... so like...you’ve got no support.”

Finally, a participant from the U16Bs team, Fred, noted that Max could be harmed if he tries to avoid contact. This was the *only* comment across all discussions in which participants identified a risk of *physical* harm within the vignettes.

**Story 3:** Two participants, one from the U16Bs team and one from the U18Bs team, identified harm within Story 3. The former identified harm in relation to the intensity of feelings about winning and losing: “that can lead to effects in school and with friendships outside of rugby, just for a couple of hours that you played a sport for?” The latter was most concerned, however, about the safeguarding risk: “Because of George’s age and the fact that one-on-one could be very vague, it could be within the training session, within eyeshot of everyone or could not be.”

The following sub-section discusses and compares data relating to these stories.

### **6.3.1. Constructions and understandings of emotional harm**

*“If you get compared to like other players, then you look up to those players, but you want to be more like them. Then you set standards for you so you constantly compare yourself to them. If you’re not at their level, then that can really damage your, like, mental health and everything.” (Boys’ team player)*

As noted above, data relating to children’s constructions and understandings of emotional harm were generated through interviews and group discussions. And, as set out briefly above, it was clear from all group discussions that the greatest level of

concern over harm related to *emotional* harm, specifically in the case of the vignettes, in the form of comparison and lack of parental support.

In relation to the vignette stories, child participants were especially concerned about the comparison between Sam and Max. In interview discussions, children's responses also suggested that comparisons or competition within the team, including in team selections, could lead to emotional distress. It follows that children would experience challenges to dynamics as harmful given the benefits they received from positive dynamics. This perhaps reflects concerns over preferential treatment of one 'sibling' over others within the 'rugby family', as introduced earlier in relation to family exclusion, alienation and marginalisation or other potentially harmful family dynamics (Frieze, et al., 2020; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017). There was one particularly clear example of this. One player<sup>13</sup> shared that they had nearly given up rugby, a sport this player now "loved", because a previous coach had separated the squad into teams with different monikers that had seemingly been based on ability. This player later noted that the team dynamic was now generally good but players could "complain and get a bit naggy with each other" before reconciling and trying to "lift ourselves up". This child's experience emphasises the emotional impact of comparison on children's wellbeing, in line with group discussion responses and research conducted by Diel and colleagues (2021) with students at an elite sporting university in Germany. Here, the authors found that athletes experienced shame and decreased happiness when compared "upward" (Diel et al., 2021, p. 7). The experiences of participants in the present study, too, suggest the experience – and recognition of – emotional harm associated with comparison.

One practical way in which the RFU (2019) appears to address competition, and particularly exclusion from teams, is through the introduction of the 'half game' rule in age grade rugby. This rule requires that all players who are named on the match day squad play for "at least half the game time available" (RFU, 2019). The RFU explains it introduced this because: "[t]he clearest message from young players is that they want to play alongside their friends as part of the team. Players, parents and coaches also tell us that being equitable and inclusive with all players is important to them" (RFU, 2019). This seems in alignment with messages from players at The Club in

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<sup>13</sup> For privacy reasons, this player remains unidentified.

relation to their experiences of wellbeing, particularly in relation to team dynamics, with the caveat that it applies only to those named on match day squads.

Child participants' responses relating to comparison also highlight the impact of coaching *practices* on emotional wellbeing. This emphasises the importance of appropriate coaching to prevent harm, but also the potential for coaches to perpetrate emotional harm intentionally. Scholars have noted that participants in previous studies may not have used the term 'emotional abuse' but would describe experiences of 'distress' linked to coaching practices (Stafford et al., 2013b; Stirling & Kerr, 2008). Stafford and colleagues (2013b), for example, set out the forms of 'distress' most commonly reported as: "feeling stupid, worthless, upset, angry, guilty, depressed, humiliated, fearful, hurt, inferior and lacking in self-confidence" (p. 123). The authors, drawing from the same dataset as Alexander and colleagues (2011), found that 75 per cent of child athletes had experienced at least one incidence of emotional harm while playing organised sport (Stafford et al., 2013b). In the present study, most participants identified belonging to a team and enjoyment of a positive team dynamic as positive for wellbeing. That participants considered coaching practices affecting this dynamic – i.e., comparison or belittling – to be *harmful* highlights the impact of such actions. However, research participants shared very limited evidence of any such coaching harms within the study, with only one or two mentions of past experiences or challenges throughout, all of which were in connection with past coaches or coaching environments outside of The Club.

### **Parental engagement**

The second main form of emotional distress and potential harm children identified during group discussions related to parental engagement. Parental presence pitchside was a 'topical' issue at The Club. Guidance from both The Club and the RFU strongly encouraged parents to stay on site when children are playing, with The Club noting in its Parent Code of Conduct that parents should remain pitchside during training and matches or inform the coach if another parent is looking after their child. Several adult participants commented on this. Coaches and officials expressed concern about the difficulties of looking after children who were injured without parents present. Others explained the importance of parental presence to parents developing awareness and understanding of the sport. At the same time, coaches (and parents) acknowledged that participation in children's sport involves something of a juggle for parents, who

may have more than one child and might be travelling some distance to The Club. This was also a concern for the girls' teams, where players are drawn from a wider area, which could make it more difficult for parents of children on girls' teams to attend regularly and made it more likely for parents to arrange for lift-share arrangements. In practice, this had resulted in considerable compromise and a 'handful' of parents present at each training session.

As noted earlier in relation to Story 2, some children identified that the lack of parental interest or support could be considered a form of 'harm'. This recalls the finding from research by Harris and colleagues (2023) that children participating in high-demand and specialised sports enjoy and seek out parental pride and encouragement. That said, in the present research, which focused on competitive-level sport, the extent to which children valued parental presence declined with age and older players did not seem to connect a lack of parental presence to harm or distress. Still, and in line with Harris and colleagues' (2023) findings over children's valuation of parental support, for older age groups, parental presence at games was reported to boost confidence. Homer, on the U18Bs team, explained: "it gives you a rush, always gives you a boost of energy. I always appreciate parents that are there" and Moe agreed that his father would "come down most matches, just because he realised it means that much to me". This shows the continued importance of parental support and engagement to wellbeing throughout the age groups, and the challenges that disparate experiences or access opportunities could pose.

Parental engagement in sport and connections with emotional harm has been explored in relation to harm perpetrated by coaches and by parents. In the case of the former, research has discussed how parents of child survivors of abuse can become "silent bystanders" to coaching harm (Kerr & Stirling, 2012, p. 201). For the latter, studies have included exploration of parental pressure. Dorsch and colleagues (2021) identified through a literature review that "pressuring behaviours" were linked to negative outcomes for children in sports, including in relation to "lower satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness" (p. 545). In this regard, it is useful to recall findings from Chapter 5 in which players of all age groups reacted negatively to any sense a parent was forcing – or pressuring – a child into playing rugby.

In relation to child wellbeing more generally, Fattore and colleagues (2017) propose that families are "sites of dialogue" (p. 126). They highlight the importance of caring

adults and families as a foundation for wellbeing and explain that, for children, “identity claims against caring adults are based in an ongoing negotiation of recognition changes in self-identity, as children’s embodied needs and competencies, and their own sense of self, change over time as part of childhood” (Fattore et al., 2021, p. 127). Applying this to the present research, and the ‘rugby family’, it appears that where parents or coaches interact with children in a way that is comparative, disengaged or pressuring, it can destabilise this ‘dialogue’ and sense of family (see Chapter 5), or contribute to negative dialogue or family experiences, disrupting the self and identity and negatively affecting children’s wellbeing.

### **6.3.2. Constructions and understandings of physical harm**

*“Well, you can obviously get hurt but it is part of the game that you’re playing.” (Boys’ team player)*

As noted at the start of this section, Alexander and colleagues’ (2011) informal index of harms in sport describes physical harm as “including training while injured or exhausted and aggressive and violent behaviour” (p. 21). This provides a useful framework for understanding when a child’s experience of pain through exertion or injury would be considered ‘harmful’ and unacceptable. Added to this is the importance of line-drawing relating to pain/injury and exertion/exhaustion, perhaps indicated by the conjunction ‘or’ between injured and exhausted and ‘and’ next to aggressive and violent – injured and exhausted are presented as somewhat connected. This boundary-setting is the focus of the following analysis, which seeks to explore how participants co-construct and understand physical injury and harm.

As set out in Chapters 2 and 3, the risk of physical injury in rugby is a matter of concern and consideration within sports literature and for the RFU. Anderson and colleagues (2023) have presented extensively regarding the short and longer term consequences of brain injury in rugby. West and colleagues (2023) have also looked at the incidence of injury in rugby, finding that injuries mainly resulted from tackles, and characterising injury and concussion rates as “high” (p. 1376). Further studies have considered the rate and impact of concussion within youth and senior rugby (Kirkwood et al., 2015; Raftery et al., 2021). New tackle height rules were introduced into grassroots rugby the season after the fieldwork for this research was completed, with a view to reducing head injuries (Rugby Football Union, 2023c).

The possibility of physical injury was of concern to participants within interviews and discussions, though, as noted previously, participants did not respond to questions or discussion prompts by identifying it as ‘harm’. All participants – from across all age groups and genders – discussed injury and pain with varying awareness and worry over short- and long-term health. Though not necessarily identifying it as ‘harmful’, participants shared a sense of when they would consider pain or injury to be (un)acceptable. Many participants relied on the rules of the game to determine acceptability of actions leading to injury or pain. As discussed in Chapter 2, the RFU has set out rules and guidelines relating to contact in different age groups to protect players from physical harm and reduce the risk of injury. This includes regulations relating to player conduct, coaching training requirements and concussion protocols and new regulations relating to tackle height (RFU, 2023c). Knowledge of these rules and guidelines appeared particularly important to children in shaping their experiences and boundaries of acceptability of physical injury or harm. Exemplifying this, Fred, from the U16Bs team explained:

If you get smashed in a game, it’s gonna hurt but you shouldn’t be going off because that’s part of the game. But let’s say, like, you get your ankle get stamped on or something and it’s swelling up, it’s not part of the rules so it’s not normal so you should probably get some help.

The importance of rules was reinforced by Thor, from the same team:

Ruth: How do you know what is okay and what isn’t okay when it comes to things like contact or just...

Thor: Sort of like the rules, hitting high, making no effort to drop your height, things like because you’re allowed defending the face but, like, if someone’s running into you, you intentionally, like pushing your shoulder right onto someone or like, when you’re on the floor, they’re, like, not grappling with you because sometimes you have to do that to jackal [meaning steal the ball] but, there’s like a, when you’re completely out of the play, and someone’s giving you, d’ya know what I’m saying, crap, that’s when it becomes more like, malicious, in a way.

Rules and guidance can also shape participants’ expectations of risk. As noted by Moe, an U18Bs team player, who suggested:

If you think about it, like, I don't know, how many people are playing rugby but if they're letting about, I don't know, millions of children play rugby. It's got to be somewhat safe and they're not just putting them all in there to get brain damage or something.

This was the only participant to suggest that the sport must be safe because children are allowed to play on an institutional level, though others suggested their parents would not let them play if it was not safe – something discussed in relation to parental consent in Chapter 7.

Acceptance of injury as part of the sport – including actual injury, not just the potential for injury – was evident in participants' responses. The constant presence and possibility of injury was apparent from observations. During these, it was common for a player to step away from the area of play in apparent discomfort to 'walk off' a bump or twist. Always, a coach or first aid trained volunteer would come to speak with the player, and, depending on the nature of the incident of injury, protocols around concussion and injury would be followed and the first aid kit (brought to each session by a coach) might be used. Child discussion participants frequently, and often light-heartedly, discussed quite serious injuries, including concussion, ligament tears and broken bones. One example of such conversations, which was similar to inputs from interviews, took place in the U14Gs team. This part of the discussion happened shortly after participants had described the team as a "second family" and "safe space", and had noted that rugby and being part of the team was good for their wellbeing:

Winter: My nose was bleeding and I got sent off and I was desperate to go back on like the second I came off.

Ruth: OK, this is during training?

Winter: Nope, during a match.

Ruth: Do you, are you kind of, um, do you just kind of expect that you'll get hurt?

Participants: Oh yes, yep [laughter and excited/unclear conversation].

Sasha: I get hurt every week

[Unclear]: But you've just got to accept it

Ruth: Is it Okay?

Participants: Yeah

Summer: Yeah, I wouldn't really, like, if you go into rugby, thinking you're not gonna get hurt...I think it's like rugby is a contact sport so you've got to expect it, especially for contact. Even if it's not contact, still expect it.

These responses, and especially these responses in such close proximity to comments relating to positive wellbeing factors and *safety*, suggest that some degree of pain and injury are expected – and perhaps accepted – by children, even if potentially negative for some aspects of wellbeing.

That children did not identify any physical 'harm' in the vignettes despite the constant presence and possibility of pain and injury suggests that these risks to wellbeing are factored into their understandings and declarations that rugby is good for wellbeing. For example, several children showed an interest in playing through injuries, though not necessarily in playing through pain, and noted that not being able to play could be negative to emotional wellbeing. As one player on a girls' team explained: "injury was such, like, a depressive period because I was so lonely and I wasn't able to do the things I enjoyed, so I think if I kept getting injured, that would be negatively impacting my wellbeing."

Training while injured is one aspect of physical harm as defined by Alexander and colleagues (2011). As discussed earlier, in Chapter 3, Hughes and Coakley (1991) use the term 'sport ethic' to describe an ethos within sport that encourages children to handle injuries by "accepting risks" and "playing through pain" such that pain becomes normalised and even desirable (p. 309). Considering child participants' constructions of harm in light of concerns over training while injured and the 'sport ethic' presents a complex picture. The discussion so far has identified that children enjoy highly physical aspects of rugby – including those which could lead to physical injury – but participants did not share that they were willing to play through pain. This could reflect and contribute to a 'sports ethic', but also indicates a practice of agency. The literature review in Chapter 3 and discussions in Chapter 5 highlighted the potential for 'ambiguous agency' – that children practice agency in engaging in activities that may be contrary to expectations of behaviour or perceptions of the child's best interests (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012). Therefore, while children may be influenced by the normalisation of contact, injury and pain in rugby, and may play through these, their

identification of experienced enjoyment, and perceived wellbeing benefits may reflect a practice of 'ambiguous agency' in their pursuit of these experiences.

Several parents gave reasons for their comfort with the level of risk of serious injury.<sup>14</sup> Two acknowledged concerns over brain injuries, but both had continued to support their children to play rugby. One parent explained "we've got to live for the day, we can't live for 'what if?'" , while another noted that concussion happens in other sports as well and serious injuries are rare in their experiences at The Club. This second response seems in line with one of Anderson and colleagues' (2022) 'cognitive approaches' to minimise the risk of rugby as compared to other sports. The appraisal of risks outside of rugby as a justification of accepting risk within rugby was utilised by two additional parents who also both commented that the presence of trained coaches and rules helped them feel more comfortable. Despite the variation in the ways parents handled their understandings of the potential for harm in the sport (and the presence of 'rugby families') their responses were similar to what Boneau and colleagues (2020) described as the "safety-first" families (p. 34). Even though parents at The Club took a variety of approaches, it seemed all had a strong understanding and connection with the potential physical harm and, core within Boneau's (2020) typology, discussions and decisions were *shared* between parents and children.

Coaches and officials also showed considerable awareness and concern about injuries and physical harm. All coaches explained they had received specific training relating to warmups, training sessions, head injuries and concussions, and officials set out the mechanisms that they had in place at The Club to provide paramedic and first aid support. All coaches also noted that serious injuries could happen and explained they worked to prevent them through training, coaching and supervision. Phil, the U16Gs coach, described the challenges involved in this: "all you can do is give them as much knowledge and practice not to be susceptible to injury. So do I think it's acceptable. No? Is it going to happen? Yes." This highlights the difference between acceptability and acceptance, while Sam, coach to the U18Gs, further explained that coaches do their best to prevent injury: "we take as much control as we can about those modifiable risk factors for injury in the context of the game and we very seriously try and minimise that risk because we think the benefits outweigh those risks."

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<sup>14</sup> Recognising this to be a potentially controversial component of the research study and results, I have removed pseudonyms from this reporting.

Exemplifying this further, Stefan (U16Bs coach) commented upon his son's experience in the sport, explaining that he (Stefan) would find contact, injury or pain unacceptable where a child is no longer smiling but that he had seen his son's enjoyment of tackles – and had noticed when this was not so. Interestingly, when speaking about injury, coaches often referred back to their own children. This may reflect coaches' primary role as parents or could result from their greater knowledge or comfort in sharing information about their own children. Actions coaches take to create a safe environment are noted in Section 6.4, below.

### **6.3.3. Other forms of harm**

As noted above, child participants rarely commented upon forms of abuse other than physical or emotional harm, with almost no comment relating to self-harm or sexual abuse. Both participants who mentioned the term 'safeguarding' were in U18 teams, with Homer expressing concern over 'George's' one-to-one training, and a girls' team player discussing trust and confidence in the coaches, and comfort in raising any safeguarding concerns with them. This is despite the fact that the vignettes provided an opportunity to discuss risks associated with one-to-one training, and the potential for self-harm by children who were unhappy in the sport. Several factors could account for this direction of discussion. For instance, it could be that participants were expecting to address some forms of harm but not others based on their perceptions of the nature of my research. Alternatively, participants may have stronger social awareness of, or could be more concerned about, some forms compared to others. Further, it is possible that older players had more experience in discussing safeguarding and risk in other contexts. As a final consideration, it is possible that participants may not have wished to raise concerns – even hypothetical concerns – about safeguarding and coaches in a group setting, and especially in a group setting that may have included a coach's child.

As discussed throughout this thesis, the study design allows for exploration of differential experiences in relation to gender categorisation of teams. Gender-related challenges, including in relation to potential gender-based discrimination, were apparent through much of the dataset, though this was not explicitly identified as 'harm'. For example, one official connected with the girls' section noted that girls' team matches routinely take place after boys' team matches. As these take place on

Sundays, it is common that players and parents then need to rush off to family meals ('Sunday lunch' being an English tradition), or to get ready for the week. This meant girls' teams tended to disperse quickly, rather than staying around for a communal meal as many boys' teams would, which can affect camaraderie. Parents and children on girls' teams also shared concerns about the lack of uniform/kit designed for girls, the fight for hygiene supplies, which had recently been won, perceived different treatment at club celebrations and the feeling of being a "second thought". One player, whose pseudonym I have withheld to help ensure anonymity, shared predominantly positive appreciation of The Club but noted:

It's how the club treats us as a whole. So, the clubhouse doesn't open until the other team shows up ... until the men get here or the ladies' or the boys' teams. So, we end up, we're basically treated not as, not as equally, but in the actual team, there's a lot of sense of like equal ground.

This unequal treatment was also described by a parent (again, the pseudonym of the connected child is withheld), who explained:

Girls' teams still struggle. I think there's a lot of 'second thought', I suppose, from clubs for girls' teams. Girls do tend to feel a little bit left out... you know, we pay our subs the same as the boys do, you don't, girls always feel like we're a bit of a second thought... That's I think throughout a lot of the clubs, that's not, you know I'm not just saying that because of [The Club]. You speak to clubs and they're all the same, like, yeah, just a second thought, you know.

These experiences may disrupt the factors that players from girls' teams noted as contributing to positive wellbeing, including feelings of belonging and competence, providing a striking sense of the potential harm discriminatory treatment could cause to subjective wellbeing (see, e.g., Schailée et al., 2021; Senne, 2016).

#### **6.4. Co-construction of safe spaces in rugby**

*"We're at the stage now where it's, we're really, really good in terms of safeguarding and mental health, and physical health... but that took work." (Official with safeguarding duties)*

Ommundsen and colleagues (2014) propose that “[t]he question is whether sport activity effects on well-being outcomes can be attributed to the activity per se or to some environmental conditions of the activity” (p. 924). They suggest it is most likely a combination of all factors, including physiological mechanisms, psychological constructs and sociological factors (Ommundsen et al., 2014). The analysis in Sections 6.2 and 6.3 explored children’s experiences of wellbeing in rugby as connected to physicality, team belonging and as an outlet from external pressures. It also examined how participants identified and understood emotional and physical harm in relation to their playing rugby, and, particularly in the context of physical harm, how they identified and distinguished between acceptable and unacceptable harm. Together, this analysis contributes to the combined picture, per Ommundsen and colleagues (2014), of physical, non-physical and social factors in rugby that support children’s wellbeing. The following discussion brings these factors together, characterising this combination as ‘safe spaces’.

Drawing on discussions from Chapter 5, the co-construction of such ‘safe spaces’ connects to ‘rugby family’, and the wellbeing benefits and potential challenges associated with this. Children, parents and coaches consistently reflected upon the wellbeing benefits of being part of a team, and of the wellbeing assurances provided by compliance with rules and guidelines. From analysis of participants’ responses, and from the observations, it was clear that coaches were seen as holding considerable responsibility for the creation of a safe environment in which children play rugby. In response to this, coaches take courses, engage in planning meetings, design training sessions and are alert to difficulties or concerns on, and often off, the pitch. Parents and players were generally reassured by this training and by coaches’ efforts to promote safe play. However, one father, who was particularly experienced in rugby and had coaching experience, set out a perspective that was unique among parents: “number one, it is a sport run by amateurs, by volunteers.” This caution about the responsibility placed on coaches can be distinguished from those ‘football first’ families within Boneau and colleagues’ (2020) study who disregarded risks as a result of their experience within the sport. In this case, this father’s experience seems to have encouraged additional awareness and management of the risk in recognition of the fact that coaches were acting in a voluntary capacity. Still, in general, parents and

children entrusted coaches with the creation of a safe environment to play rugby, in line with boundaries, as a result of their training and perceived expertise.

The co-creation of safe spaces by coaches involves safety in relation to both physical and emotional wellbeing. Coaches responded to their teams' wellbeing needs in a multiplicity of ways, including in establishing and reinforcing boundaries. For example, the observations took place over a series of extremely cold evenings in December to February. Some training sessions were cancelled because of frozen pitches. This meant that the U18Bs training session I observed took place after a break of several weeks and during many players' A-Level mock exams (see Chapter 5). The coach explained the session would be more relaxed at this stressful time and would have minimal contact to ease players back into training. This shows responsiveness to wellbeing needs on and off the pitch, and the creation of an environment that seeks to support children's wellbeing, including the experience of rugby as an outlet from external challenges. Overall, coaches' areas of focus in creating a positive environment for their players appeared to reflect their age groups' needs, from 'play' for the very youngest teams to developing expertise in 'safety' and safe contact at the youngest contact ages, before providing an 'outlet' for the middle age group who were mired in school and exam stress, and, finally, emphasising a perceived 'transition' to adulthood for the oldest children, whether within or outside of rugby.

In individual interviews, several coaches described adjusting the training sessions to children's needs. In a typical example of this, Stefan, the U16Bs coach, explained he and other coaches would assess the group at the start of each session and decide whether, when and how to introduce contact:

If they're not switched on, that's the first sign for us to say, let's just think, hold off on the contact, either get them switched on and go into contact or we go it's not going to happen today lads.... and they hate it, they love the contact. The other thing is, is that if they're [agitated] with each other, so if something's going on in school... if you put them on opposite teams and go into contact, you're basically giving them a way to get that anger out which is not what we want because when you make a tackle, you want to be concerned for the person you're tackling not want to hurt them.

In this excerpt, the coach acknowledged participants' enjoyment of physical contact and showed awareness of the potential wellbeing risks introducing it could have involved. This include challenging team dynamics in being agitated with each other, perhaps exacerbated by the frequent contact boys' team players may have in school, and the risk of physical harm – “you are going to get hurt”. Reflecting such efforts to tailor sessions, Sam, coach to the U18Gs team, described developing awareness of individual players' responses to pain and potential injury: “It really depends on you kind of knowing the person to know how they react”. This knowledge and connection with players is likely facilitated by the length of time many coaches have coached the same players, in line with their children's progress through the age groups, which again highlights challenges that may come in relation to the safety of 'new' players. It also reflects the communication and co-construction of team and individual boundaries in relation to children's experiences within the sport.

Coaches' roles in protecting physical safety included taking decisions over match-play and schedules. Both the U15Bs and U18Gs coaches discussed being careful when arranging games with a potential misalignment of team abilities and therefore a risk of injury or where players had been competing for school rugby and the coach was concerned about physical wellbeing. While the RFU encourages communication between different rugby settings, and with parents (RFU, 2023a), team coaches were conscious that lack of communication between school and club rugby could put players at risk and coaches had cancelled some matches to protect wellbeing.

As discussed in Chapter 5, rugby teams can be understood and are perceived by many participants as 'family'. This was presented and frequently experienced by participants as positive but can also be a location of challenge. Team dynamics were shown earlier to contribute to emotional wellbeing but also, potentially, to pose risks to wellbeing. The co-creation of safe spaces in rugby includes fostering and supporting generational bonds. Coaches' responses reflected efforts to support emotional, non-physical wellbeing, which would seem crucial given the non-physical benefits children had identified. In a typical account of experiences outside of rugby, and the benefits of inclusivity within it, one coach to a girls' team explained that some of the players may be bullied or lack confidence at school, but “there's none of that in our rugby team, and so they do have a platform where they can come twice a week, feel safe, feel comfortable, you know, not be in a place where they feel threatened.” This directly

addresses feelings of external pressure through friendship or school dynamics that children noted in relation to wellbeing.

Parents also contributed to the co-construction of safe spaces for wellbeing. First and foremost, their approaches to their child's participation in rugby, including not pressuring and being supportive, have been shown by the present research and other studies to have an impact on children's experiences in sport (Dorsch et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2023). Another way parents support the co-constructions of safe spaces in rugby is through their presence and engagement, either pitchside or through their actions in volunteering as coaches, first aiders or committee members. Children's responses suggest that, especially within younger groups, children derive confidence from parental presence, while many coaches and committee members insisted on the importance of parental presence pitchside. This was seen to be valuable to increase awareness of the game, and the risks involved, and to reduce challenges in the event of injuries, should a responsible adult need make urgent medical decisions for a child. Despite this, there were challenges in securing parental presence and older children's parents were frequently not pitchside.

With regards to a culture of safeguarding, The Club had taken considerable efforts to increase safeguarding and the safeguarding officer was a frequent, known and identifiable presence during training sessions and on match days. The safeguarding officer had also arranged for brief feedback sessions with children about their experiences at The Club and had made efforts to increase awareness of, for example, local mental health services and safeguarding measures. Coaches explained they would go to the safeguarding officer if they had a concern over safeguarding or for guidance. Further, parents had volunteered to provide wellbeing and mental health support, and to advocate for girls' teams, targeting areas of safeguarding and wellbeing that were considered to warrant attention – and that have been reflected in participants' inputs throughout this chapter.

Of course, children themselves play a crucial role in the co-construction of safe spaces. They contribute towards the safety of other child players through their intragenerational relationships and interactions, and by reinforcing and replicating those factors they identify as supporting wellbeing in rugby, including positive team dynamics and contact within the rules (e.g., Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010). Moreover, it

is essential they are ensured opportunities to communicate their experiences, including in relation to wellbeing and harm, to the parents, coaches and officials around them. This forms part of a crucial feedback loop establishing and reinforcing boundaries of rugby as a co-constructed safe space.

## **6.5. Conclusions**

This chapter has focused on addressing the research question “how do children, parents and coaches view and understand children’s wellbeing, including acceptable and unacceptable harm, in competitive sport?” by considering concepts relating to subjective wellbeing (e.g., Axford et al., 2014) and research relating to children’s experiences of wellbeing and harm within sport (e.g., Alexander et al., 2011; Ommundsen et al., 2014). The discussion first analysed children’s experiences of positive wellbeing as connected to the physicality and nature of the game, and the outlet or escape it provided from other stresses and challenges in their lives. Participants highlighted the physicality of the sport as positive for children’s wellbeing on the basis of primarily non-physical, emotional benefits, but alongside physical factors. The physicality of the sport thus contributes wellbeing benefits to many child participants for whom emotional benefits appear to come in connection with – not in spite of – the contact involved. These experiences of wellbeing connected to the dimensions and domains of wellbeing as linked to feelings of safety, sense of self and relationship satisfaction, as identified within the Chapter 3 literature review. Parents, too, appeared attuned to their children’s emotional wellbeing and enjoyment of the sport, frequently understanding these as the primary benefits experienced by their children. Cognisant of risks of physical and emotional harm, parents placed trust in coaches and children to co-create a safe environment in which to play the sport.

Child participants shared positive experiences of playing rugby, presenting feelings of competence and excellence, of release and escape, of team belonging and of the love for the game itself as factors contributing to their wellbeing. In some cases, these experiences were connected to gender, for example with girls’ teams experiencing belonging as an alternative to school and boys’ teams feeling belonging in connection with their schoolmates being on their teams. The harm that disrupted or threatened this wellbeing was presented as primarily emotional, with very minimal association of physical injury with the word ‘harm’. Concern over emotional harm is consistent with

existing research relating to violence in sports which has identified emotional harm to be most prevalent (Hartill et al., 2023). Potential for such harm was identified when interactions with or behaviours by other children, parents or coaches challenged children's sense of belonging (i.e., in team dynamics), their identity (i.e., through coaching comparison) or their agency (i.e., through parental pressure).

Children, parents and coaches in this study appeared to expect a level of physical injury within rugby. Moreover, some degree of physical injury appeared accepted by research participants as part of the sport, with the physicality that could lead to injury, experienced as positive, for reasons set out above. This is evidenced not just by the continued engagement in the sport, but also because physical injury was very minimally associated with the word 'harm' by children engaging in the group discussion vignette exercises. Participants frequently aligned understandings of acceptability and unacceptability of physical injury with regulations relating to physical contact, though the protective elements of this have been questioned (e.g., Anderson et al., 2023). Emotional interactions are less tightly controlled – though codes of conduct and safeguarding materials can encourage appropriate actions. This study's findings relating to emotional wellbeing indicate the importance of developing clear expectations and guidance about emotional harm to foster a shared understanding of acceptability.

The co-constructions of a safe, caring environment involve a web of negotiations between children, parents and coaches. Children rely upon their coaches to provide an environment in which physicality takes place in accordance with rules and guidelines, upon their parents to support them and listen to their decisions regarding play (see Chapters 5 and 7) and upon each other to play as safely as possible. Parents look to their children for assurance and communication that they derive a wellbeing benefit from playing rugby and look to coaches to support rugby to take place in as safe and caring a setting as possible. Coaches bear considerable responsibility for supporting the safe environment and rely upon each other, and the child and parent members of The Club (and opposition clubs) to support efforts in this regard. Much of this framework of negotiation appears related to the practice of agency – and the experience of practising agency – by children, parents and coaches (Chapter 5). It is also connected to consent decisions by both children and parents, which are explored in Chapter 7, next.

## **Chapter 7 – Experiences of children’s and parental consent**

Children playing competitive sport – including children playing rugby at The Club – do so with the support, encouragement and facilitative actions of their parents. In Chapter 5, parental engagement in children’s sport was discussed in connection with children’s practices of intergeneracy in the decision to play rugby, noting children’s strong resistance to being ‘forced’ into playing. In Chapter 6, discussions addressed children’s, parents’ (and coaches’) views of wellbeing in the sport. This highlighted complex negotiations and understandings about both positive and negative impacts of rugby on children’s wellbeing – including in relation to physical and emotional harm. The findings chapters so far have thus reinforced the close connections between children’s participation in sport and children’s relationships with their parents, relationships that exist both within and outside of sporting contexts.

The context setting information, literature and findings shared earlier in this thesis have also highlighted that children who participate in sport face risks of harm to wellbeing. This includes physical and emotional harm taking place in close connection to normalised expectations of sport, for example, excessive exertion or pushing through injury, or harmful coaching practices. In such contexts, boundaries between what is or is not acceptable may be difficult to discern. The apparent inseparability of parental ‘presence’ (physical or otherwise) and children’s sport suggests that children’s participation cannot take place without a level of parental agreement, or consent. This, then, raises questions over how intergenerational decision-making, reassurances derived from parental presence and views of parental consent may shape understandings of wellbeing boundaries and affect children’s practices of agency in their participation in sport.

This chapter focusses on experiences of children’s and parental consent. It addresses the latter half of the study’s second research question, relating to children’s consent, and the study’s final research question. These are:

2. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children’s agency and consent in competitive sport?
3. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand parental consent in competitive sport and how does this affect children’s perceptions of their own wellbeing and harm, agency and consent?

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the frameworks and meanings of consent in children's lives, as introduced in Chapter 3, setting a foundation for the analysis to follow. It then discusses findings relating to participants' views and understandings of children's consent (Section 7.2), before considering these views and understandings of parental consent (Section 7.3). Next, the chapter explores connections between children's and parental consent. In this regard, the chapter brings together findings and discussions from Chapters 5 and 6 about agency and wellbeing, in order to explore the impact of children's, parents' and coaches' understandings of parental consent on children's wellbeing, agency and consent. Within the following analysis, it should be noted that the data and related thematic analysis did not, for the most part, suggest differences in experiences based on gender categorisation of the teams, unless otherwise noted within the text. The chapter ends with a conclusion.

### **7.1. Frameworks and meanings of consent in children's lives**

The various frameworks and circumstances in which consent is a part of children's lives were discussed in detail in Chapter 3. The following section presents these again in brief, providing context for the subsequent discussion of findings. As outlined in the literature review, consent is often understood as agreement to a specific act (Greenblatt & Valens, 2018) that can have a 'transformative' function, for example making improper action acceptable (Guerrero, 2021). Furthering this, Guerrero (2021) offers three "uncontroversial" properties of consent: 1) it is always attached to an agent; 2) there is always an object of consent; and 3) it is morally transformative (p. 352). Within this, the author suggests that "there is always *something* that someone is consenting *to*, even if that something has imprecise or underspecified boundaries" (Guerrero, 2021, p. 352, emphasis in original). While these boundaries are crucial to the understanding and experience of consent, as Guerrero (2021) notes, it can be hard to know and define these boundaries. The consideration of such boundaries is core to the following discussion and links directly with findings from earlier chapters, particularly in relation to children's views of the importance of not being 'forced' to play rugby, boundary-setting regarding harm and the co-creation of safe spaces for play.

Channon and Matthews (2021) situated their discussion of communication of consent in sport in the context of full-contact combat sports involving adults. This provides a foundation for consideration of consent-based transformation and boundary-setting in

a context in which the sporting action would otherwise be potentially illegal and where there is a heightened risk of injury (Channon & Matthews, 2021). Youth rugby shares some similarities with this in that the physical contact involved could, depending on context, be unlawful, and could lead to injury (e.g., West et al., 2023). The transformative nature of consent to the actions involved in the sport and boundaries of this consent are, therefore, explored below.

Key elements to the provision of valid consent include access to information, freedom and capacity to consent (Moore & Reynolds, 2018). In several circumstances, it is presumed that children lack the 'capacity' to provide consent, and that, instead, consent decisions must be made by their parents, or by the child and parents together. In practice, as discussed in Chapter 3, this 'capacity' is often connected to age thresholds. This includes, for example, medical contexts in the UK (e.g., GMC, 2018), which have the age-related threshold that above the age of 16 years old, a child's *age* is almost always determinative – aside from capacity considerations that apply at any age – but below the age of 16 years old children's *capacity* is most important. In research contexts, discussions about whether parental consent and/or awareness is required for a child to participate contemplates several possibilities. These include a spectrum from 'active' or opt-in parental consent to 'passive' or opt-out parental permission (e.g., Liu et al., 2017) and the consideration of children's consent versus assent (Coyne, 2010; Roth-Cline & Nelson, 2013). Again, such decisions often include consideration of a child's age, alongside other factors, including the research context. For example, the NSPCC suggests that it may be possible to conduct research with children aged 16-17 without parental permission, depending on circumstances of the research and potential impact on the children involved (NSPCC, n.d.).

Age thresholds are also relevant in several other matters relating to children in England, with the age of 16 years old often particularly pertinent (see discussion in Chapters 2 and 3). As set out in Chapter 4, the sampling criteria and planning for participants and age groups in the research took this potentially critical age of 16 into account, allowing for exploration of the experience and meaning of this age threshold, below.

In many of the frameworks noted above, consent performs a role in legal terms by functioning to make an act or behaviour – Guerrero's (2021) object of consent –

acceptable and compliant while also insulating other parties from legal recriminations (McLean, 2010). In sporting contexts, clubs may seek consent from parents in relation to registration, consent to photo- or videography and acceptance of terms and conditions (Child Protection in Sport Unit, 2022). These 'formal' consent processes are one component of parental consent in sport. Researchers have considered parental reasoning while making decisions about their child's participation in sport. This has taken into account motivations (Boneau et al., 2020), socioeconomic status and sports-related experience (Kim & Connaughton, 2021) and cognitive strategies that 'minimalize' risks that may be associated with the sports (Anderson et al., 2022, p. 9).

As Channon and Matthews (2021) highlight, consent decisions, including those in sport, take place on an ongoing basis. In rugby and at The Club, while there is the parent/child's initial decision(s) to register and participate, there are then a series of ongoing agreements to attend and play, with consent decisions made on and within each occasion. Children's freedom and capacity to consent to sport on an ongoing basis has been questioned in previous research relating to children's negative experiences in sport. As noted earlier, Hughes and Coakley (1991) define the 'sport ethic' in connection with athletes' determination and actions towards being "an athlete" and note that it can lead to athletes incurring injury and sacrifices in order to meet expectations around athletic excellence (pp. 309-310). Malcom (2006) considered this 'sport ethic' within children's sports, in this case recreational softball in the United States, which encourages children to continue participating in sport through injuries and despite experiencing pain, or, as Malcom calls it "shaking them off" and "toughing them out" (p. 496). This questions whether children are providing valid consent to continued play if a normalised 'sport ethic' reduces their freedom to withdraw. Channon and Matthews (2021) raise similar questions over athletes' ability to give, or withhold, consent "on an ongoing and reflexive basis" (p. 914), reflecting their concerns over the lack of overt opportunities to withdraw consent.

Discussions in Chapter 5 explored children's practices of agency in rugby and at The Club, especially in relation to the co-constructed 'rugby family' motif and associated inter- and intragenerational connections. The analysis in Chapter 6 considered children's, parents' and coaches' experiences and perceptions of children's wellbeing in rugby, including views and understandings of harm and the possibility of

experiencing harm while playing the sport. The following sections incorporate these earlier explorations into the analysis of participants' experiences and understandings of children's and parental consent.

## **7.2. Experiences of children's consent**

A key consideration of research question 2 is how children, parents and coaches understand and view *children's* consent to playing competitive sport. To explore this, participants were asked about children's consent, most commonly in the form of an interview question about whether they, their child or the children on their team consented to playing rugby, and how they (the research participant) knew this. The following section explores responses to this part of the semi-structured interviews, as well as relevant data from group discussions.

### **7.2.1. Children's experiences and understandings of children's consent**

*"Yeah, I make the choice now." (Boys' team player)*

Children were asked whether they felt they consented to playing rugby, and how they knew. Universally, children answered in the affirmative, that, yes, they consented to playing the sport. Some children even laughed when answering, as if almost incredulous that the question had been asked and perhaps demonstrating a keen sense of their agentic practice in making this consent decision: "yeah, definitely, of course, of course! [laughs]" (Thor, U16Bs team player). Analysis of discussions around this consistent 'yes' suggested that children experienced their consent as closely connected to their practices of agency. This included the intergeneracy of their consent as connected to and negotiated with parental consent (see Section 7.3) and the practices of agency in choosing and engaging with the sport of rugby itself.

Child participants explained that they knew they had consented to play rugby because they *choose* to play rugby. Here, there was the implication – and in some cases explicit commentary – that they were not *forced* to play and could stop, or withdraw consent, if they wished. Language of 'force' recalls the discussions in Chapter 5, suggesting that children feel they are not being forced by their parents to play but recognising that they could be, or could have been in the past. For example, one player explained: "Yeah, I make the choice now," implying they may not always have made the choice in the past, or that their current circumstances, including, perhaps their intergenerational relationships, meant they felt rugby is now their choice. Along the

same lines, Marnie, from the U16Gs team, noted: “I feel like if I was ever not really in the right place, physically or mentally to play rugby. I don’t think I’d be forced to do that.” Isla, too, used language of force to describe her consent to play rugby: “Yeah, I want to play, like, it’s not something I’m dragged along to do. Like, I want to be here [laughs].” Thus, for many children in the triads, consent involved the absence of being coerced by parents. This connects with research findings that have identified negative impact of parental pressure on children within sport (e.g., Dorsch et al., 2016; Dorsch et al., 2021).

Three of the eight children who were interviewed for triad research said that they knew they consented to rugby because they enjoyed playing the game and agreed to what the game involved. James’s (U15Bs) response exemplifies this: “I’m willing to, like, let them tackle me or let them, people, coach me or whatever,” while Dan (U18Bs) shared a similar experience: “I play rugby because I enjoy like the physical aspects of it. I enjoy, I enjoy tackling people, running into people, getting battered, that kind of stuff. That’s just, it’s just good fun.” Thor’s (U16Bs) response, noted earlier, was to positively confirm consent and was set within a broader discussion around his love for the sport. These responses suggest that, in addition to those experiencing their own consent as the absence of parental coercion, many children experience it as actively choosing something they enjoy. Zara, a participant in the U18Gs group discussion, reflected on this in a rather charming way. She noted that ‘older people’ – asking me not to take offence at this – did not have as many social outlets as children, so, for children, rugby was not their only option: “there’s other things you can do to be social.”

The data presented above suggest that for children at The Club consent was understood and experienced as ongoing rather than a one-time formal decision, with the choice to play in the first place rarely raised by participants in connection with their consent, as compared to the choice to continue to play (see, e.g., Channon & Matthews, 2021). Children appeared to know they consented because they continued to play without being forced to do so – specifically, by their parents. As noted above, this recalls findings from Chapters 5 and 6 in which it was clear children felt most concerned and resistant about parents forcing children to play rugby.

### **7.2.2. Parents' experiences and understandings of children's consent**

*"I can't actually, I can't say that I've ever had to drag him here. I don't think I have once had to do it." (Mother of boys' team player)*

In agreement with their children's experiences, parents at The Club appeared to understand their children's consent to playing rugby as closely related to their *choice* to play the sport. This, again, forefronts children's practices of agency within intergenerational relationships in two ways. First, it highlights the importance that the parental perception of children's choice is an accurate understanding, and, second, that children's choice itself is practised within a context of 'thick' agency (e.g., Klocker, 2007; Leonard, 2016). The overwhelming majority of parents reported that they knew their children consented because their children continued to attend rugby and demonstrated that they wanted to do so through intergenerational interactions that take place outside of The Club, for example in household discussions prior to training. The quote above reflects this – that parents understand a child to consent because they are not 'dragging' the child, perhaps indicating that this could happen (see, also, Section 7.2.1 for Isla's reflection of not being "dragged" to rugby). Saskia's mother's comment below also exemplified this, in that she viewed Saskia as wanting to play even when she (her mother) did not really want to take her:

[O]n a Sunday morning, we'll wake up and it's pouring down with rain and it's like minus three or whatever and I'm thinking 'I don't really wanna go' and [Saskia's] going 'no I've got to go' you know, 'we've got a game today', so there's the keenness and the motivation from her own side.

That parents placed value in their child's desire to attend rugby as indicating consent suggests they felt their children could not attend – that they could withhold or withdraw consent – if they wished (e.g., Channon & Matthews, 2021). This again reflects the sense of not pushing their children to play – similar to children's experiences of 'non-force'. When explaining their understandings that children had made this choice, parents frequently commented upon their children's ages, giving the impression that they understood children to have a greater choice, and that parents had more confidence in this choice, because of their age. For example, Delilah's mother noted: "she consents every time she goes out the door and says 'I'm off to training' or 'I'm going to rugby' because, at her age, if she didn't want to go, you'd know about it." In

Section 5.4.1, it was suggested that children's influence over the decision to play rugby developed and 'shifted' over time, in line with age and expertise. Data relating to consent recall and reinforce these findings.

Continuing to draw on the intergenerational practice of agency, parents' responses appeared to recognise the influence of parent-child relationships on children's consent. Dan's father illustrated this in acknowledging that, previously, Dan might have been influenced by "father pressure" and sometimes "playing because Dad wants me to play" but that he now had confidence his son was in charge of these decisions as Dan sometimes decided not to attend matches. Further, as reported earlier, a coach, who was interviewed as a coach but commented in relation to his child, captured a similar experience, describing how his child, as an older child, was fully in control of his consent decision, having initially been guided into the sport.

Overall, parent participants' responses regarding their child's consent suggest increasing confidence therein as children gain age and experience, suggesting, perhaps, an appraisal of 'capacity' (e.g., Moore & Reynolds, 2018) accompanying this 'shift' in intergenerational dynamics (see Section 5.4.1).

### **7.2.3. Coaches' experiences and understandings of children's consent**

*"At this age group, everyone is, yeah, has definitely consented to be there." (Girls' team coach)*

For coaches, consideration of whether children on their teams consented to rugby appeared connected to their confidence that children understood what rugby involves and practised agency in making the consent decision to play, and to continue to attend. Coaches were clear that this consent was essential. Henry and Paulo, coaches to the youngest age groups, connected confidence in children's consent to continued attendance, with Henry noting, in the alternative, that some players had "dropped out" and Paulo explaining: "I don't think there's one player we've got who doesn't want to be there." These statements imply that coaches are confident children are choosing – and exercising agency in the choice over – whether to attend and to participate and therefore reflect Channon and Matthews' (2021) 'assumed consent'. At the older age groups, U16s and U18s coaches agreed and emphasised that it was important they, as coaches, were assured of children's consent because of the nature of rugby as a physically demanding sport that entails potential injury risk. Such views take account

of the 'transformative' effect of consent (e.g., Guerrero, 2021) in this contact sport. As Phil (U16Gs) explained:

The players definitely have to consent, they have to, and it has to be their choice because you cannot make someone go and do what they want to do, what we want them to do, on a Sunday without them consenting to it.

Further, coaches highlighted the importance that children are not forced or coerced in this choice. Sam (U18Gs) also noted: "they know what that involves and so they, yes, they have consented to being in that situation." Charlie (U18Bs) also emphasised this, saying players came of their "own free will", while explaining that coaches retain responsibility not to ask children to act beyond what is acceptable, such as playing through injuries: "The kid might say 'I'm okay with it' but they can't consent to something that they don't fully appreciate, or don't know all the background to."

These comments capture the consent boundary of children as having consented to their participation in rugby, subject to the rules of the game and expectations garnered over time. Coaches appeared to draw confidence in children's consent in relation to their increased knowledge of the sport, their thickened agency associated with age and their capacity to give or withdraw consent as important elements to this consent (e.g., Moore & Reynolds, 2018). Indeed, drawing on findings from Chapter 6 and understanding that it can be challenging for children to set and enact boundaries in sport (see, e.g., Guerrero, 2021; Hughes & Coakley, 1991), the comments also illustrate the importance that this confidence reflects children's realities. One coach advocated for seeking a complete picture of consent. They described a situation in which one parent and child had agreed to that child taking on a particular position that sees high levels of contact but the child's other parent had requested a change to this plan, to which the coach had agreed. This coach explained their view that it was important to consider children's consent carefully:

When you get consent for things, you've got to join the dots all together and you've got to work out are they giving consent because they really are happy to do so or are they giving consent because they feel obliged to do so or don't want to let you down, or, or, or, or...

In presenting the possibility that children's provision of consent may be affected by external influences, including parental and coaching influences, the coach highlighted that children practice intergeneracy when making consent decisions. Section 5.4 explored children's practices of intergeneracy within the 'rugby family' established within teams, including in relation to coaches. Within this section, it was suggested that children may exert themselves beyond a point at which they might otherwise stop in support of close intragenerational connections on their teams, extending and in some ways reframing understandings of the 'sport ethic', while also hinting to the potential for challenging dynamics within 'families'. Coaches' perspectives of children's consent may add yet another dimension to this by proposing awareness that children may extend their consent boundaries on the basis of generational dynamics.

### **7.3. Experiences of parental consent**

The first part of the final research question focuses on how children, parents and coaches view and understand parental consent. This was designed to consider all participants' views and experiences of parental consent, to facilitate exploration of co-construction or disparity in meanings. Participants were asked to share their views about parental consent in different ways. Children were asked whether they felt their parents had given consent for them to play rugby, and how they knew this to be (or not to be) the case. Parental consent was also discussed more broadly within group discussions, including through the vignette and 'agree/disagree' exercises. In their interviews, parents were asked whether they felt they had given consent for their children to play rugby, and how they knew that they had (or had not). Coaches were asked whether they felt that parents of the children on their teams had provided consent to their child(ren)'s participation. A similar question was asked of officials. The following discussion considers the experiences of each of these groups in turn.

#### ***7.3.1. Children's experiences and understandings of parental consent***

*"I don't think my mum would let me do anything if it wasn't safe. Same with my dad."  
(Girls' team player)*

Universally, the children who were interviewed as part of the triads understood their parent(s) as having consented to their participation in rugby. However, their responses to questions about parental consent included only minimal reference to formal consent processes. Not one child offered formal consent – for example, forms or registration –

as evidence of their parent(s)' consent in the first instance, although all but one said they were aware of registration practices when asked. This suggests that formal practices of parental consent do not inform the basis of children's understandings of the same. Instead, when explaining parental consent, it was common for participants to refer to their experiences of parental support and engagement in their rugby. James, on the U15Bs team, exemplified this. He explained that his parents had consented, and, elaborating on this initial response, said: "my mum and dad really like watching me play. They enjoy it as much as I do, so...." Similarly, Dan, from the U18Bs team, answered in the affirmative before following up with "my dad's really, really into it... mum will bring me to train – training – and she'll come to my games, so they are both very supportive". This furthers many of the discussions in Chapter 6 regarding children's experiences of parental support and engagement in rugby as a beneficial to wellbeing (e.g., Harris et al., 2023), suggesting this may also provide confidence and/or reassurance to children that their parents agree to their playing the sport.

Indeed, data from The Club strongly suggest that, to children, the experience of parental engagement indicates that their parents have consented to their participation in sport. This is similar to what Channon and Matthews (2021) term 'assumed' consent through performance whereby consent is communicated through presence and participation and involves "inferences and normative expectations" (p. 910). Channon and Matthews (2021) use the example of combat athletes "turning up" (or not failing to turn up) to sporting activities to exemplify this typology of the consent communication (p. 910). This resonates with children's experiences with respect to their understanding of parental consent as demonstrated by their parents bringing them to play. By interpreting this as consent, it appears that children believe their parents could choose not to do so if they wished, touching upon the consent component of 'freedom' to provide or withhold consent (e.g., Moore & Reynolds, 2018).

In views recalling children's understandings of their own consent, and discussions from Chapter 5 about 'rugby family', several children made direct reference to family rugby connections when explaining their parents' consent to them playing rugby. The possibility that belonging to a sports 'family' could be constraining of children's agency to consent or withhold consent is contemplated within existing literature, and was noted by some participants who suggested that, for example, parental connection to

rugby could lead younger children to feel pressure to play (see, e.g., Section 5.4.1). However, for the children who alluded to 'rugby family' in relation to parental consent, this was presented as if to explain their parents' consent and seemed to offer children assurance that this meant rugby was something their parents wanted to consent to. Isla provided a typical example of this: "They're for it. My dad played rugby when he was younger. I think my mum, like, is all for me playing as well." In her response, Isla did not answer in the affirmative regarding consent, but simply implied the answer 'yes' and evidenced this by asserting that her parents were positive about the sport (see, also, James and Dan's responses, above). Isla's response is made particularly interesting by the fact that her mother was relatively new to the sport, and Isla was the only sibling to play. Here, children appear to experience the 'rugby family' as explanatory of and giving confidence in parental consent. This may, perhaps, reflect children's perceptions of 'thick' parental agency to resist such influences, though this was not explored during the research.

Children's responses also suggested the experience and understanding of parental consent as permission for them to participate in something they wanted to do. This was most clearly expressed by Thor, who responded to being asked whether he felt that his parents had consented to him playing rugby by saying:

Yeah, I mean, they, they will just support, I'd say, my parents ... not saying they don't care but it's saying a fact that as long as I'm happy, they're happy in a way, do you know what I'm saying... they would care and they're concerned for my like health and safety of course... as long as I'm happy, and I'm doing well and I've got no concerns or anything like that it's like, d'ya know what I mean, play on [laughs].

Marnie and Mike also both answered in ways suggesting that their parents' consent gave them permission to play the sport they wanted to. At the same time, both suggested there would be conditions under which such permission/consent would be withheld or withdrawn. Marnie, for example, described her parents' consent by saying: "Mm-hmm. Definitely. I don't think my mum would let me do anything if it wasn't safe. Same with my dad." Marnie's use of the word 'let' encapsulates the experience of permission that allows her to play, while the remainder of her comment suggests the experience of safe boundaries to this. Mike shared a similar presentation of parental

consent in his response: “um, I guess so. I think if my mum didn’t want me to play, I think she’d say.” These children’s inputs thus appear to recognise parental consent as something that *allows* them to play rugby, but that is somehow conditional. This is somewhat reminiscent of, but can be distinguished from, Channon and Matthews’ (2021) deferred consent, in which sports participants effectively allow others (mainly coaches) to take consent decisions for them, and then act in accordance with the presumption this consent has been given. Channon and Matthews (2021) note the potential harms associated with deferring consent on the basis of coaching or organisational approval as: “clear loss of autonomy in a context where others cannot always be trusted to act decisively and in one’s best interests” (p. 913).

Data from children at The Club also reinforce the relationality connecting children’s and parental consent decisions. Even where children experience their interest in playing rugby as driving the consent-giving process, they recognise parental consent as permission to play, and as potentially preventing this. This, in turn, links to children’s views that parents would withhold consent if they felt the sport was not safe. In a sense, this reflects the role of parental consent or permission in other frameworks in children’s lives, for example, parents will frequently provide permission for children to attend school trips, or to engage in extra-curricular activities. This also reinforces that parental consent retains a gatekeeping function, preventing children from participation without it. Given the data around parental presence, and the absence of many parents pitchside, this is potentially complicated. If children interpret parental consent as evidenced by parents ‘showing up’ and allowing them to play and are reassured by an understanding that parents would withhold consent in certain circumstances, this presumes parents have sufficient knowledge and opportunity to determine whether to ‘show up’, ‘let play’ or ‘withhold/withdraw consent’. This is discussed further below.

### ***7.3.2. Parents’ experiences and understandings of parental consent***

*“You have to sign her up, get her insured, and I suppose that turning up every week makes it sound like you consent.” (Mother of girls’ team player)*

Parents were asked whether they felt they consented to their children’s participation in rugby. In contrast to children’s responses, several parents referenced formal processes, though their overall focus remained on more informal aspects of the consent communication and experience. Marnie’s and Delilah’s mothers both

mentioned that they had signed a form or registered with The Club when answering the interview question about consent. Similarly, when asked whether he consented and how he knew this, James's father described a less formal 'opting-in' to the sport by noting that he accepted each game on a scheduling app that allows parents to view and agree to training and matches. These responses confirm the relevance of practices of formal consent and opting-in to some parents. On the other hand, several parents did not introduce formal registration processes at all, though they did agree they had registered their children when asked directly about this. At least one parent noted they do not look closely at the forms, on the basis of having been members of The Club for a while: "I just signed, I probably shouldn't have... I do kind of roughly read it... [laughs]" while another shared: "I just automatically renew now to be honest, I don't read the terms and conditions, we just sign up each year and off we go." Despite registration forms being required for a child's participation in each rugby season, it appears that to some parents they were practised almost as a form of 'opt-out' consent – that they are signed as standard or refused as the exception to signal withdrawal. In this sense, it appears some parents experience their consent as having been negotiated, made and communicated to The Club already, such that re-registration is meaningful as non-withdrawal but does not require close attention.

As with children's understandings of parental consent, parents understood their own consent as provided on the basis of or to actualise their children's consent. In other words, and as discussed earlier, many parents were in synergy with children's views that they provided consent to allow their children to do something they wanted to do. The parental presentation of consent in this way suggests that a key aspect of parental consent decision-making relates to a child's desire to play, often tied to perceptions of children's experiences of wellbeing as set out in Chapter 6. Thor's parents' responses exemplify this. His mother explained: "I'm not really gonna turn around and say he can't do something that he loved," while his father elaborated:

We let our children make their choices. That's... that's how we look at it. But obviously there is that kind of – it's not blind – we do, obviously, there's a duty of care that we have, we want to make sure that the structure was right of course.

In these comments, Thor's parents capture the predominant experience of parental consent as permission for children to do something they enjoy. However, Thor's father

also captures the relationality in this – that a parent may ‘let’ their children act in accordance with their own choices, but this is qualified by a parental ‘duty of care’.

In line with children’s expectations that parents would withhold or withdraw consent if they felt something was not safe, parents also appeared to understand their own consent as extending into considerations of wellbeing and safety. These were both discussed in Chapter 6, with the wellbeing aspect incorporating children’s enjoyment of the sport and its benefits and the safety element connected to the potential for harm and co-construction of safe spaces. In relation to the latter, parental decisions at The Club show some similarities to, but can be distinguished from, sense-making typologies previously identified by Boneau and colleagues (2020) to explore the parental decision to allow children at middle school (aged 11-13) to play tackle (American) football. These typologies were: 1) football-first families, who had a “family football narrative” emphasising the benefits of playing over risk and often deciding their child would play without the child’s input; 2) safety-first families, who were highly concerned about risks but rationalised concerns to support their children to play; and 3) laissez-faire families who did not give much thought to the decision to play, frequently leaving the decision to their children (Boneau et al., 2020, p. 34). Parents at The Club appeared distinctly different to the ‘football-first families’ typology, because the ‘rugby family’ identity (explored in Chapter 5) did not lead parents to overrule children’s input, or disregard the risks of doing so (Boneau et al., 2020). Moreover, parents at The Club, in showing concern over risk while actualising their children’s wishes to play rugby, seem to fall outside of, and perhaps between, the ‘safety-first’ and ‘laissez-faire’ typologies (Boneau et al., 2020). They were neither ‘severely’ concerned about risk (safety-first), nor did they ignore risk concerns to allow their children to play (laissez-faire) (Boneau et al., 2020). Instead, the decision to play appeared to be an expression of trust by parents in relation to children and coaches, connected to the ‘safe spaces’ outlined in Section 6.4.

As introduced above, parents’ decisions to consent to their child’s rugby appeared to be heavily informed by understandings and reassurances of children’s wellbeing. These reassurances may come from rules, coaches, children or from the parents themselves. As discussed earlier, Anderson and colleagues (2022) argue that parents engage in two main cognitive strategies as part of the appraisal of risk to their children in relation to rugby: considering the risk as equal to other sports and considering the

benefits as greater than those of other sports. Parental experiences of consent at The Club appear connected to these 'strategies' in some ways. Several parents commented about risks in other sporting environments, or in daily life, as one parent of a girls' team player explained: "there is the risk of them being hurt, but there's the risk of them being hurt anywhere." Additionally, parents appeared to look for wellbeing reassurance as shaped by their children's individual needs – highlighting the benefits to their child. Alongside these similarities to Anderson and colleagues' (2022) 'cognitive strategies', however, data from The Club suggest that parental consent decisions are also closely connected to perceptions of children's agency in choosing a sport from which they derive wellbeing benefits. Parents understood children to have increasing expertise in the sport over time, which creates (and reflects) a shift in the intergenerational dynamic, and which leads parents to look to their children for reassurance in their consent to play. This may be especially true of those with less rugby knowledge. For example, Thor's mother commented that he "reassures me" by sharing feedback on how he is feeling, while Isla's mother noted that "if she's accepted it, I feel that I have to accept it too". Reassurance that children choose and enjoy the sport also contributed to parental perceptions that children's wellbeing would not be unacceptably harmed when playing the sport. As such, it is not that parents necessarily believe they completely understand all wellbeing considerations associated with the sport, but that they develop a level of trust in their children's decisions to play (and in coaches' actions to secure safe spaces to do so).

### **7.3.3. Coaches' experiences and understandings of parental consent**

*"I would say at this point in the season, yes, the parents have consented to the coaching on the grounds that our newest player has been with us for about a year."*  
(Boys' team coach)

Coaches were also asked whether they felt parents consented to their children playing rugby at The Club, and specifically within their team. In the younger age groups that were involved in this research – the U14Gs and the U15Bs – coaches suggested they were confident that parental consent had been given because of players' continued presence. Henry, U14Gs coach, explained: "it's not so much 'do the parents give consent', it's more can they just fit it all in," meaning they had numerous extra-curricular activities to organise and rugby was optional, but chosen. Paulo, the U15Bs coach, responded with a similar rationale – that parents had "100 per cent" consented

– “I don’t think there’s one child I’ve ever met where their parent does not want them to play otherwise they wouldn’t be here.” This reflects a perception of parental consent as communicated through the physical act of bringing a child to rugby, in line with Channon and Matthews’ (2021) ‘assumed’ consent.

As noted earlier in relation to methodology and data analysis (Chapter 4), coaches were asked to consider ‘parents’ in relation to parents of children on their team, and, to a lesser degree, parenting in rugby more generally. In practice, coaches frequently referred to parents as if in relation to a parental ‘unit’ from each family, whether that unit comprised single or multiple parents. However, one girls’ team coach provided a candid response connected to parents’ genders (and connected to the team’s gender categorisation): “we’ve definitely got parents that the mum in particular doesn’t want to see their daughter playing rugby,” explaining that although many “embrace it” there would be some who were concerned in relation to the physicality. This coach championed girls’ participation in the sport and offered that this gender difference may reflect the experience of ‘sexism’. This highlights the possibility of differential experiences of consent within families and reinforces that such decisions take place away from The Club before being communicated in the ways discussed within this chapter.

This recalls the scenario (mentioned in Section 7.3.2), in which a coach had confirmed with a child and a parent, who was present at training, that the child was to try a new position. Though both had agreed, the parent later contacted the coach to explain the child’s other parent was not comfortable with this. The coach had changed plans. That coach was not alone in having adapted plans on the basis of parents expressing concerns with impact on consent. Another coach, for example, described a situation in which they had mixed children’s positions during a warm-up for a game and had temporarily repositioned a player to a new position before a parent had challenged this, though the coach noted this was the first time that had happened:

Coach: Just before the game, we were doing our kind of warm up routine and I put [a player] in [position]. Because, for me, it was more important that I wanted all the [players] to know how to play all the positions even though they’ve probably got their preferable one. Just so that we can react to the game, improvise and step in. Anyway, one of the parents kind of caught my attention said, “um my [child] cannot do [position]”...

Ruth: Okay

Coach: ... [the parent was] really concerned about [child] getting too close contact... So, I reassured [them], look, I'm not gonna play [the child] in that position in the game.

In the middle and older age groups, confidence in parental consent was experienced somewhat differently to that within the U14Gs and U15Bs. For Stefan and Sam, coaches to the U16Bs and U18Gs respectively, their understanding of parental consent was closely connected to parental *understanding* of the sport and *connection* to the team. Both coaches noted that their comfort and confidence in parental consent was linked to the length of time for which children had been playing rugby, and the level of awareness they felt parents had in what the sport entails. Sam, for example, explained: "in most of the cases, I'll say yes, because they are people that I've known and coached for a number of years, and I've seen their parents at the sidelines as they were younger." Stefan's response agreed with this, while questioning whether overt forms of consent are sufficient to capture this:

I would say, assuming I don't have anybody new coming into our group, I would say at this point in the season, yes, the parents have consented to the coaching on the grounds that our newest player has been with us for about a year. Okay? So, the coaches, the parents, have seen what we do and how we act and how we operate for a year now and have consented. I personally do not think a consent form gives consent for what goes on in, I don't think a parent who's not played rugby or been involved in rugby can even begin to imagine what the game of rugby is actually like.

Sam also mentioned that parental consent is obtained through the registration process but explained that continued engagement and participation is "sometimes clearer to me that it is a positive consent than a sort of, yeah, checkbox consent." For both Stefan and Sam, the communication of consent through a form appeared less meaningful (and reassuring) than the communication of ongoing consent. That they were reassured by the length of time children and parents were connected to the sport and actively engaged with the team may reflect the understanding of gathering knowledge and awareness (e.g., Moore & Reynolds, 2018), though Stefan's comment suggests

even that may not offer full reassurance and may imply challenges to parental consent prior to gaining such knowledge and awareness.

As a final note in this regard, Charlie, coach to the U18Bs team, offered a differing perspective, noting that the registration process involved agreeing to the full range of conduct and rules, and that coaches stood “in loco parentis” if parents were absent. The CPSU (2020) identifies that sports organisations, and sports coaches, have a “duty of care” to children participating in sport with them, which includes acting to a standard in line with “that of a reasonably prudent parent.” The CPSU (2020) explains this is also known as acting “in loco parentis”. Sports organisations are advised to follow safeguarding standards to meet this duty (CPSU, 2020). Charlie is therefore correct that coaches act ‘in loco parentis’ while coaching teams. This perhaps articulates to the importance some coaches may place in parental presence at pitchside, or overall parental engagement in their child’s rugby participation as where parents are present this would limit the coaches’ obligations to act in loco parentis. This has been discussed at several points in this thesis, including in connection with parental engagement and children’s wellbeing (Section 6.3) and in relation to challenges parents may face in attending all training sessions. Sam and Stefan’s responses noted earlier suggest the importance of accumulation of knowledge as relevant to the transformative impact of parental consent. Charlie’s comments regarding transfer of parental responsibilities further highlight the potential benefits of parental interaction with the sport, something children at The Club and in other research relating to parenting and sport have also emphasised (Dorsch et al., 2021; Harris et al., 2023). Together, these coaches’ perspectives emphasise the value in parental engagement and awareness as strengthening the foundation for their consent and the trust-based negotiations with children and coaches in relation to the same.

#### **7.4. Connecting children’s and parental consent**

*“Yes, I have consented, but I do feel [name] kind of consented herself, if that makes sense.” (Mother, girls’ team player)*

As noted above, data from The Club reinforce the context of relationality in which children and parents provide, withhold or withdraw consent to children’s participation in sport. The following section seeks to explore connections between children’s and parental consent to rugby, drawing out considerations of generagency in particular.

Based on the literature presented in Chapters 2 and 3, and as set out in relation to methodology in Chapter 4, the age of 16 years old was identified as a potentially meaningful threshold to explore within this research study. As noted within these reviews, in England, reaching the age of 16 years old brings with it the presumed capacity to engage in a range of behaviours and to consent to acts that are either prohibited or require parental consent at an earlier age. This includes, for example, the ability to join the armed forces, change a legal name, consent to sexual activity with those over the age of 16 and apply for a passport (Coram Children's Legal Centre, n.d.). At The Club, two of the team age groups, the U14Gs and U15Bs, and their respective triads comprised players who were all aged below 16 years old. The U16Gs team and its two triads had players aged 14 to 16 years old, while the U16Bs had players aged 15 or 16 years old. The final two age groups, the U18Gs and U18Bs, had players who were 16 to 18 years old. Participants from across these groups therefore provided views from before, during and after this potentially transitional age.

In practice, data from research participants at The Club suggested that there was no particular age seen as a threshold for the shifting balance between parental and children's influence over consent decisions. Instead, participants offered a range of reflections on the changing dynamic, connected to a variety of contexts, influences and experiences. For instance, Paulo, U15Bs coach, shared his view that the transition to youth rugby involved "a big change", inferring that after this point children were more likely to be making an affirmative decision to play. In contrast, participants in the U16Bs group discussion related a shift in the balance of consent to progression towards adulthood. Younis, for example, said: "I feel like until you become sort of 16, 17, 18, when it sort of becomes your own choices and you sort of become an adult. So, your parents might not force you at that point because you are older." while his teammate, Fred, explained: "as you get older, you got people looking at [rugby]... as a genuine professional career, so that can, that's their choice to take that path." Therefore, for the purposes of consent by parents and children to participation in rugby, and as reflected elsewhere in this study's findings, 16 years old was a meaningful age only to the extent it coincided with changing dynamics within the practices of rugby, intergenerational relationships and children's lives more generally.

Child and adult research participants at The Club perceived that children had greater influence over the decision to play rugby as linked with capacity, whether connected to knowledge of the sport, confidence and voice, maturity or age. The U14Gs team discussion participants connected the change to a shift in “confidence” that occurs between the U12 and U14 age groups, while, for one official who also had coaching responsibilities, this was connected to children’s increasing voice:

They’re very happy to tell you what they think. Less so maybe the 11 year olds, 10 year olds, 11 year olds, because they’re still coming out of their shell, but anyone age 13... they’ll quite happily tell you what they think.

Isla’s mother perhaps best captured the overriding view of all participants when she disagreed that any change in influence between parents and children was age-related: “it’s more of a mindset.” Connecting this, then, to generagency, participants’ responses suggested the experience of children’s increasing practice of agency as coinciding with age but not caused by it. Instead, it is relational and connected to maturity and acquisition or accumulation of knowledge and experience and changing intergenerational relationships.

Another key element of the connection between parental and children’s consent to the participation in rugby is the apparent experience of trust. Cook and colleagues (2005) present ‘trust’ as relational, explaining: “Trust exists when one party to the relation believes the other party has incentive to act in his or her interest or to take his or her interest to heart” (p. 2, see also Cook & Santana, 2020). This resonates with participants’ experiences of children’s and parental consent. Cook and Santana (2020) draw on Hardin’s (2002) “encapsulated interest” account of trust to explain it relationally as: “A *trusts* B with respect to x when A believes that her interests are included in B’s utility function, so that B values what A desires *because* B wants to maintain good relations with A” (Cook & Santana, 2020, p. 191, emphasis in original). By applying this to parental and children’s consent, it is possible to understand each party (parents and children) trusting the other with respect to their choice to play. To this end, a child trusts that their parent is providing consent to their playing rugby as something that is safe and appropriate. Equally, a parent trusts that their child is providing their own consent to play rugby as something that contributes to their wellbeing, and that they wish to play. Rounding out this equation, both parents and

children appeared to trust coaches to co-construct a safe environment in which to play, and in the rules of the game, to keep them safe. This highlights the importance of trust in other parties to feel confident in respective consent decisions.

### **7.5. Understandings of the impact and meaning of parental consent**

*“If there’s something that’s genuinely dangerous, I don’t think they’ve consented to that, I think they’ve consented to allowing the coaches to train us and if we’re not comfortable with that, then we can make our own decision.” (Girls’ team player)*

The second part of research question 3 asks how perceptions of parental consent affect children’s wellbeing, agency and consent. This targets the considerations raised within the literature review relating to how children experience their parents’ consent and how this interacts with children’s understandings of boundaries of their own consent. In part, this relates to concerns about parental proximity to abusive behaviours against children in sport – that this closeness may provide false assurances to children regarding whether behaviours are safe or appropriate. For example, as introduced earlier, a US-based gymnast speaking about abuse in the film *Athlete A* described experiencing abuse as a child while in the presence of a parent, who subsequently revealed they were entirely unaware that abuse was taking place (Cohen & Shenk, 2020, 45:51). Later, the Whyte Review (2022) into UK gymnastics found that, having watched this documentary, “some gymnasts and parents began to realise that what they had assumed was normal and what they had been conditioned to believe was necessary, was neither appropriate nor necessary” (p. 295). In these examples, it seems that parental presence was interpreted in a way that inadvertently reassured children with the effect of guiding them to boundaries that failed to offer protection, or understandings of others’ inappropriate behaviour as somehow appropriate to the sporting environment.

On the other side of this, parents, too, may not understand the extent or existence of harm in sport. Kerr and Stirling (2012) suggested parents may become “silent bystanders” (p. 201) to emotional harm in sport. Further, Anderson and colleagues (2023) argue that parental consent to participation in rugby is invalid because the nature of potential brain injury is a form of abuse. This previous research raises questions over whether a child’s perception that parental consent has been given could affect the child’s understandings of wellbeing and harm, and their agency to give

or withhold consent. Based on discussions within this and previous chapters, this appears closely connected to boundaries – to consent and the experiences and behaviours that are consented to. To support consideration of this, interview participants were asked a question in line with the following: “I’m going to suggest something and see what you think – if a parent agrees to their child playing rugby, does that mean they agree to everything that happens?” The following section presents findings based on analysis of these answers.

### ***7.5.1. Negotiating and understanding boundaries to parental consent***

One of the strongest points of connection between all triad participants was the experience that there were limitations to parental consent. This is a crucial finding because it suggests opportunities for parental consent to offer protection from harm, should boundaries be set and communicated effectively. However, data and literature discussed throughout this thesis have highlighted the challenges in determining and enforcing boundaries to parental consent and the potential negative impact of these difficulties on children’s wellbeing in sport. Triad data relating to co-construction and understanding of boundaries, their monitoring and enforcement revealed a range of interconnected perspectives. The following analysis presents findings in this regard. As a final note in this regard, and as explained in Section 4.8 in relation to ethical considerations, triad research activities were designed in such a way that coaches were asked to speak about their experiences of coaching, parents and child players within their team, rather than in relation to the specific children and families in the triads. This was intended to limit coaches’ knowledge of which child/parent(s) had participated in the research.

#### **Expectations and rules of the game as boundaries to parental consent**

As introduced above, most children in the triads understood there to be limitations to parental consent. Indeed, even where children answered that, to them, parental consent meant their parents had agreed to ‘everything that happens’, these assertions were swiftly followed by descriptions setting out the nature of the sport. For example, James and Thor each explained that rugby was a physical, contact-filled sport and that it was important to expect to get hurt, with James answering “yeah, cause... like, rugby is all about getting a little hurt, rough and tumble, and all that...”. Dan, on the other hand explained that “yeah, definitely” his parents had consented to him playing

rugby, which meant that 'everything was OK', but added "there's the expectation, obviously, you control yourself, you don't go too overboard." Despite not explicitly identifying boundaries to parental consent, these responses suggested implied limitations to parental consent that were connected to the nature of rugby, including norms around physicality. This highlights the (potentially) protective role of norms and the rules that support and reinforce these norms, and the assurances they provide to children. To note, all three participants had earlier commented on their enjoyment of the physical aspects of the sport.

As also introduced above, parents were unanimous in their views that they had provided consent that was limited and that, therefore, it was not the case that anything that happened would be 'OK' under the terms of their consent. The nature of such boundaries differed among participants, but it was clear that all parents had limits in mind when considering their consent to their children playing rugby. For several parents, this involved limitations connected with rules and expectations of rugby. In synergy with their children, the parents of James, Thor and Dan all described boundaries relating to rugby's norms, especially in connection with expectations of behaviour and physical contact. Thor's parents, for example, made it clear that if things happened outside of these expectations, they would be unhappy and potentially change clubs, with his father explaining: "if I've seen things that were out of order, in terms of rugby, I would sit there and think that this club isn't for us." To the extent that parents view limitations on their consent as linked to rugby rules and guidance, this is consistent with Channon and Matthews' (2021) observation that "the institutional parameters of sport – its rules, designated spaces, time limits and so on – are taken to provide a clear referential framework for understanding the limits of what others had consented to" (p. 910). Further, to the extent that James, Thor and Dan did not explicitly understand parental consent to be limited by the rules, yet explained their experience of consent in a way that heavily implied rules were bounding, their responses highlight the importance that rules are effective in protecting children's wellbeing.

Figure 25 exemplifies the views and understandings of parental consent as connected to rules. In this triad, James, appeared to connect the question to collective understanding of rugby's physicality and the potential consequences of this: "Yeah,

‘cause if you’re not gonna, like, rugby is all about getting a little hurt, rough, and tumble and all that.” James’s father’s response aligned with this, and he explained he would “probably speak up” if he was unhappy about children being asked to act outside of the rules of the game or even “bending the rules.”

## Figure 25

### Triad Example: James

**Interviewer:** If a parent agrees to their child playing rugby, does that mean they agree to everything that happens? (or similar question in line with semi-structured approach).

**Boys’ team player:** Yeah, ‘cause...like, rugby is all about getting a little hurt, rough, and tumble and all that. So, I guess if you don't really give consent then you're either gonna play the sport and get hurt cause you're not, like, fully committed into it, or there's just no point playing it.

**Parent:** I would say generally, yes. If I felt that they were being asked to do something that was outside the laws of the game or was bending the rules, I think I would, I would probably speak up. I've, I've not, on a rugby field I've not seen that. You know, I think you know generally it's always played in a pretty good way between the teams.



**Coach:** The answer is, I think, no, because they don't, unless they've previously played the game... not every parent will completely understand it. Unless you've played rugby you don't understand that ...it hurts, but what they really don't understand is the kind of guys who play rugby enjoy that. They enjoy the pain of training and they enjoy the contact.

The shared understanding between James and his father may also articulate to the rules of the sport co-constructing and reinforcing the game’s ethos (see Chapter 5 for discussion of ‘rugby family’ and rugby TREDs ethos). James’s coach added a further perspective, discussed below, when noting that parents may not always fully understand the experience of playing rugby, while highlighting the wellbeing benefits (see Chapter 6 in relation to children’s enjoyment of the physicality of the sport).

Within Dan’s triad, the value of rules appeared central to the communication of boundaries of parental consent. As Dan himself had noted, he felt a responsibility to act within the confines and expectations of the sport. Dan’s coach’s response resonated with this: “if you do the thing you shouldn’t be doing, you’re almost, aren’t you, I suppose, breaching the consent because you’re doing something that’s out with the normal confines of safe rugby.” Dan’s father’s response, on the other hand, recognised the importance of rules, while also suggesting that it was incumbent upon parents, particularly those with expertise, to intervene to uphold these rules: “It is a

sport run by amateurs, by volunteers.... If, as a parent, if something kicked off on the pitch that to me, put the boys at risk, I would intervene.”

### **Intergenerational negotiation of boundaries to parental consent**

While many participants’ views and understandings of the boundaries of parental consent were connected to rules of the sport, responses from within some triads highlighted that boundaries can also be established relationally, as a negotiation between parents and children. In the first instance, it is important to recall that many parents saw their provision of consent as being something allowing children to play a sport that they love (see Section 7.3.2). Further, as identified within Chapter 6, parents often considered that rugby offered numerous wellbeing benefits to their children. Many of these benefits were specific to their child’s individual needs. This, in itself, indicates (and requires) communication of children’s experiences of wellbeing and their desire to play to parents, who may use this information to help inform consent decisions.

Several of the triads demonstrated how parental consent boundaries that are not connected to rugby rules might be negotiated between parents and children and how children might experience these based on their practices of intergeneracy in choosing to play rugby. Marnie’s triad (see Figure 26) exemplifies that a child might experience parental limitations to consent based on discussions that take place within the intergenerational parent-child relationship. This triad also highlights the nuanced role of parental consent in supporting children to practice this agency.

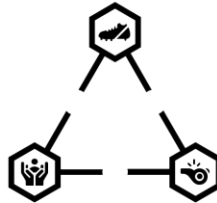
## Figure 26

### Triad Example: Marnie

**Interviewer:** If a parent agrees to their child playing rugby, does that mean they agree to everything that happens? (or similar question in line with semi-structured approach).

**Girls' team player:** If there's something that's genuinely dangerous, I don't think they've consented to that. I think they've consented to allowing the coaches to train us and if we're not comfortable with that, then we can make our own decision.

**Parent:** If I wasn't happy with something that was going on during training, I would approach the coaches. If there was a level of if that was, unsafe, physically, or mentally, I would say something.



**Coach:** If you consent to your daughter playing rugby, she needs to do everything that I tell her to do. And that's not just for the team, that's for her own wellbeing as well... So, I'm going to tell you not to do those things and you need to do it. I want the parent to give us the control over to say yes, 'I agree to what you're saying' Parent's point of view. If they're not from a rugby background, find themselves sitting in A and E [accident and emergency], do they think that's what they signed up for? Probably not.

In this example, Marnie explained that she felt parental consent had not been given in relation to “something that’s genuinely dangerous”, which was in agreement with her mother’s view that she would “say something” if anything was “unsafe, physically or mentally.” However, Marnie also explained that if there was something she was not comfortable with, she would make her “own decision” to address this. This implies generation of confidence through knowledge of parental consent as bounded by safety concerns. Marnie, perhaps reflecting a feeling of assurance that her parents had not consented to anything “dangerous”, demonstrated confidence to make her own choices, in line with her subjective wellbeing. That Marnie identified as responsible for and able to protect her own ‘comfort’ is made challenging by research, mentioned extensively in Chapter 6 and earlier in this chapter, which has shown how difficult it can be for children in sport to know where boundaries lie (e.g., Gervis et al., 2016; Hughes & Coakley, 1991; Kerr & Stirling, 2012). However, Marnie’s use of the word ‘comfortable’ suggests confidence in her ability to assess and act in relation to her subjective wellbeing. It seems, perhaps, that this shared confidence in parental boundaries may have ‘thickened’ her agency to consent. It is also perhaps reassuring that Marnie’s mother’s experience of consent boundaries extended to unsafety in several contexts, including physical- and mental-health related. Nonetheless, the negotiation and shared understanding between Marnie and her mother takes places

within a team environment in which the coach, Phil, has expressed concerns over parental understanding of the sport, suggesting that parental reassurances of safety may only go so far.

Delillah’s triad, shown in Figure 27, also presented a nuanced exploration of the importance and implications of the intergenerational practice of agency as connected to consent and boundaries in rugby.

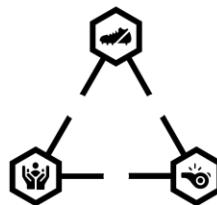
**Figure 27**

*Triad Example: Delilah*

**Interviewer:** If a parent agrees to their child playing rugby, does that mean they agree to everything that happens? (or similar question in line with semi-structured approach).

**Girls’ team player:** It depends on what you’re talking about. If somebody gets like lightly injured, like a bruise or something, but it’s more the child that would have signed up to that for playing rugby, but if they end up with like, okay, I guess it just depends on what the kid feels like if the kid wanted to do it. I’d say more the consequence is on them. But if they were forced to by parents, that’s the parent’s fault.

**Parent:** There is, I suppose there is a limit, but it’s knowing where that line is...I suppose you don’t, you don’t consent to bad decisions.



**Coach:** If you consent to your daughter playing rugby, she needs to do everything that I tell her to do. And that’s not just for the team, that’s for her own wellbeing as well... So, I’m going to tell you not to do those things and you need to do it. I want the parent to give us the control over to say yes, ‘I agree to what you’re saying’ Parent’s point of view. If they’re not from a rugby background, find themselves sitting in A and E [accident and emergency], do they think that’s what they signed up for? Probably not.

While criticising the act of pressuring a child to play (as per findings from Chapters 5 and 6), Delillah also suggested that where a child is practising agency in *choosing* to play, their decision encapsulates awareness of risks, while if the child is being *forced* to play, any harm is “the parent’s fault”. This assertion that where children have provided consent then “the consequence is on them” recalls discussions of ‘ambiguous agency’ (e.g., Bordonaro & Payne, 2012) as explored in Chapter 5 by suggesting that children have accepted consequences of playing the sport that it is their choice to play.

In an earlier sub-section, the discussion focused on findings relating to boundaries to parental consent relating to rules and guidelines of rugby. However, many parents connected boundaries to less well defined expectations or experiences of ‘happiness’

or satisfaction with the sport. As Delilah's mother commented, "it's knowing where that line is," suggesting that establishing and monitoring boundaries was not simple. This aligns with concerns raised earlier in relation to parental perceptions of boundaries, and children's reliance upon these (e.g., Anderson et al., 2023; Kerr & Stirling, 2012; Whyte, 2022). Where parental boundaries reflect more than protection of physical wellbeing based on rules around contact and play, this appears a negotiated communication between parents and children – highlighting the importance of such conversations within family relationships.

For example, Isla suggested that if her parents were frustrated with coaching practices "they will, like, send a message on the chat and say, like, you shouldn't be speaking to the kids like that, that's unacceptable", clarifying this had not happened in rugby but had happened in other settings. This was made complicated by the fact that, like many parents of older players, Isla's parents rarely attended training but suggests the communication of expectations and of experiences between Isla and her parents, to enable them to complain if necessary. That children may base some aspect of their participation in rugby on the perception of parental boundaries (e.g., Marnie's "genuinely dangerous") emphasises the importance of maintaining open channels of communication about children's experiences in the sport. This, of course connects to different child-parent relationships outside of rugby, which can be connected to a range of issues and parenting approaches (see also, Dorsch et al., 2016; Dorsch et al., 2021) and family dynamics.

### **Parental engagement and parental consent**

Findings and data from The Club presented throughout this thesis have suggested the importance of parental engagement in children's experiences of wellbeing in rugby. In Chapter 6, this related to wellbeing benefits of feeling supported by parents and wellbeing concerns over parents not being engaged in their children's rugby. At the same time, the challenges of parental presence pitchside have been stressed by participants, and it appears unfeasible for all children to have a parent present at all times. This is particularly true of players who come from further away (and is therefore a particular constraint and consideration for those on girls' teams), who have many siblings to whom parents also need to attend, or whose parents' circumstances make it hard for them to be there (see, e.g., Mirehie et al., 2019). Nonetheless, data relating

to perceptions of parental consent and the impact of these perceptions suggest that parental engagement is instrumental to parents establishing, communicating and enforcing these boundaries.

As noted earlier, three of the six triad coaches suggested that it was difficult for parents to fully understand what they had agreed to unless they had played the sport themselves. Others connected consent with awareness of the sport – either relating to the duration of regular attendance (Sam, U18Gs coach) or because parents were present at pitchside (Henry, U14Gs coach). There is inherent challenge to this. Given that all parents considered their consent to be given with boundaries, how might they obtain sufficient insight to establish these boundaries? Moreover, given that there are known difficulties relating to parental attendance, how might parents ensure they are sufficiently present to monitor and to enforce boundaries once set? Stefan, coach to the U16Bs team, captured this challenge when he explained:

They need to have a parent on the sideline, because not only if something happens or goes wrong, or they get hurt, but also because that parent has to watch what we're doing and has to watch what their player's doing. And if they bring them back, that is consent.

Indeed, within one of Stefan's triads, Thor's father agreed it was important for him to be present to watch Thor's practice, noting: "certainly, you know, where it comes to contact, we have to be available, we have to be there." See Figure 28, below.

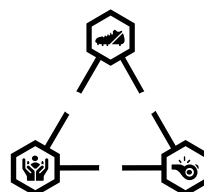
## Figure 28

### *Triad Example: Thor*

**Interviewer:** If a parent agrees to their child playing rugby, does that mean they agree to everything that happens?  
(or similar question in line with semi-structured approach)

**Boys' team player:** I don't know because I don't actually see the whole slip... I don't see the terms and conditions but I just think, actually, like rugby is a game where you know it's physical, you can't expect to go into it not getting hurt in a way, so you kind of just have to expect that.

**Parent:** Personally, we come to all the training sessions. We're asked to. I think, certainly, you know, where it comes to contact, we have to be available, we have to be there...and ...they do an awful lot of touch type rugby and skills training...If I've seen things that were out of order, in terms of rugby, I would sit there and think that this club isn't for us.



**Coach:** No, no, it can't do because unless you've played rugby yourself, you really have no idea what happens... They need to have a parent on the sideline, because not only if something happens or goes wrong.. But, also, because that parent has to watch what we're doing and has to watch what their player's doing. And if they bring them back, that is consent.

As noted in Chapter 6, The Club and RFU strongly encouraged parents to remain on site when their children are playing rugby. In the triad example above, Thor's father noted that they attend training as asked, portraying this as important in relation to 'contact' in particular. Both of Thor's parents established that this presence allowed them to monitor the circumstances in which Thor was playing. For his father, this was captured in the hypothetical experience of being at The Club – "sit there" – and considering future steps if actions were "out of order". Thor's mother's comment also highlighted the value in being present in order to be aware of the training environment: "I think if I turned up and it was a bit of a free for all, I don't think I would be quite so happy." In this example, physical parental presence pitchside acted as a key mechanism in monitoring and enforcement of consent boundaries.

Several parents across the triads commented that they would 'intervene' or 'speak out' if they were concerned about an aspect of their child's experience in rugby. Saskia's mother, for example, who also reflected upon the value of learning safe practices over time, referred to safety as paramount, focusing on adherence to rules and saying she would act if concerned: "I would pull [Saskia] out...as a parent, my daughter's safety is the most important and if I don't think she's safe, I will pull her out." Though Saskia's mother explained she had not done this yet, there had been times when she had encouraged Saskia to share concerns with coaches and referees. Further, Saskia's mother made clear she would support her child in withdrawing consent if she wished, as she had told Saskia: "If those people in authority don't do anything about it, then you go 'well, I'm sorry, I'm not participating in this anymore', I said, 'and then you just walk off' 'cause I will back her, you know, I know her judgment." Aligned with this, Henry, Saskia's coach, derived confidence in parental consent from parental presence and his perception that parents would act if they needed to support their children, particularly in relation to injuries: "parents are on the sidelines... they'll step in and intervene if they need to."

In addition to physical acts of withdrawing from The Club or removing a child from play, several parents explained they would 'speak up' if actions exceeded the boundaries of their consent. Mike, a player on Stefan's U16Bs team, shared his experience of that he understood his parent would potentially exercise such limits on consent through 'speaking up', as shown in Figure 29, below.

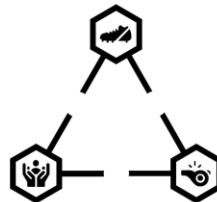
## Figure 29

### Triad Example: Mike

**Interviewer:** If a parent agrees to their child playing rugby, does that mean they agree to everything that happens? (or similar question in line with semi-structured approach).

**Boys' team player:** I guess so. I think if my mum didn't want me to play, I think she'd say. I don't think she's, like, my mum's not the type of person that would be like... she would say it straight.

**Parent:** Yeeah... but I think they are approachable. I think you could say 'oh, I'm not happy' that yeah, they would listen to you. I have a voice.



**Coach:** No, no, it can't do because unless you've played rugby yourself, you really have no idea what happens...

They need to have a parent on the sideline, because not only if something happens or goes wrong.. But, also, because that parent has to watch what we're doing and has to watch what their player's doing. And if they bring them back, that is consent.

In this example, both Mike and his mother noted that she (his mother) would vocalise concerns, with Mike's mother explaining: "I have a voice." Despite Mike's coach, Stefan, raising concerns about parents' ability to fully understand the experience of playing rugby, in welcoming their presence pitchside he appeared to have established a sense of opportunity among parents to speak up and voice concerns. This triad therefore encapsulates a delicate communication of trust: by Mike in his mother to say if she was unhappy; by Mike's mother in consenting to him playing but trusting that she can speak out if necessary; and in Mike's coach in holding responsibility for creating a safe playing environment.

This triad also represents trust in coaches to act in accordance with what parents consider to be acceptable, and the responsibility of parents to question what is not. Taken alongside the note that "unless you've played rugby yourself, you really have no idea what happens", this highlights that parents are giving consent at least in part in an exercise of trust in coaches. Separately, but reflecting this, Phil, coach to the U16Gs team, explained his view that it was essential for parents to hand control to the coaches to instruct children on their teams, so they could coach effectively and protect children's wellbeing.

The findings above suggest that parental consent is understood to be limited to that within which children's wellbeing is protected. For some families, this was experienced as adherence to rules – that wellbeing and safety could be assured through rugby's

guidelines and compliant behaviours. For others, the boundaries were negotiated more relationally between parents and children, developing understandings of individual experiences within the sport. This recalls, in particular, that all parents considered rugby to be beneficial to their child's wellbeing (Chapter 6). Many children and parents indicated confidence that parents (and some children) would respond to boundaries being exceeded by speaking to coaches, intervening on the pitch or withdrawing their child from The Club. Parental intervention requires information, opportunity and capacity to act. The 'opportunity' element requires that parental voice would be welcomed as it was, for example, in the case of the coaches' responsiveness to parental unease with positions as presented in two examples above. Parental presence pitchside may support this by increasing awareness and providing the opportunity to intervene but it also can communicate to others (children and coaches) that knowledge is being accrued and potentially acted upon. This includes knowledge and understanding about individual children's experiences of sport and particularly the individual wellbeing benefits to them of their participation.

## **7.6. Conclusions**

This chapter has addressed research questions 2 and 3 in relation to children's, parent's and coaches' views and understandings of children's and parental consent in competitive sport. The chapter first explored considerations of children's consent, then parental consent and the interactions between the two. Next, it examined the implications of views and understandings of parental consent while discussing the impact of these on children's wellbeing, agency and consent.

The findings suggest that children's and parental consent are closely connected. This chapter has added to analysis from Chapters 5 and 6 relating to the impact and importance of generational relationships by reinforcing that the provision of or withholding of consent by children and parents occurs in the context of intergenerational dynamics. Children, for example, experienced their own consent as choosing to play a sport they enjoy and as the absence of being forced. Children then experience parental consent as allowing them to fulfil this choice, again, without force, but with boundaries that protect them from harm. Parents, for their part, rely on the perception that their children are consenting to the sport, and that it is beneficial to their wellbeing when making the decision to provide, withdraw or withhold consent.

This emphasises the importance of shared and co-constructed understandings of wellbeing as crucial to consent decisions and the importance of ongoing monitoring and communication to support the consent boundaries parents and children set.

The intergenerational nature of parental consent and children's consent is also evident in the perceived increase in children's influence over these negotiated consent decisions in line with their greater age and level of experience. Over time, as children accrue knowledge and expertise and as intergenerational dynamics shift, parents cede influence over the decision to play, and increasingly provide 'permission' to do so. Though the age of 16 may act as a threshold in other contexts, it did not appear of particular salience in relation to the experience of consent to play rugby.

While most participants were aware of 'formal' expressions of parental consent or permission through annual registration processes, ongoing presence was suggested to be a far stronger indication and communication of consent. Further, this ongoing presence was found to give coaches greater confidence that consent decisions were made with requisite knowledge and understanding. Alongside this, ongoing parental presence was identified to support parents to develop awareness of the sport and of their children's experiences within the sport. The importance of parental *engagement* has been a recurring finding throughout this and previous chapters. This chapter's findings suggest physical *presence* pitchside is also effective in supporting children's wellbeing. The chapter has identified that parental presence is not only about assumed communication of consent per Channon and Matthews' (2021) typologies, it is about communicating to children, coaches and others that parents are gathering the knowledge to be able to consent, ensuring that they understand whether their child is, indeed, consenting themselves and being able to step in in order to withdraw consent.

While parental knowledge and understanding of the sport was something several coaches reflected upon as a potential challenge, this chapter has introduced the value of trust in consent decisions made by children and by parents in relation to rugby (e.g., Cook et al., 2005; Cook & Santana, 2020). Within households outside of rugby, parents and children may share conversations about the sport that help to generate a sense of trust that the other is providing consent within a framework that supports wellbeing. Recalling concerns raised in Chapter 6 about the potential for harm in sport, this chapter has highlighted that parents seek to establish and understand consent boundaries in relation to harm. Some of these – especially but not solely those

connected to physical harm – are informed by the rules and guidance of the game. This highlights the importance of ensuring protection of wellbeing institutionally, of ensuring that these rules do indeed protect wellbeing. Further, expectations and boundary setting relating to emotional harm appear less well articulated, though not necessarily less well understood by parents as they are, instead, likely to be drawn from relationships and experiences outside of the sport. Still, the disruption of emotional boundaries could come with harms that parents may not see or understand (Kerr & Stirling, 2012) and such boundaries are less likely to be integrated into rules and guidance of the game (see Chapter 6). As Delilah’s mother said: “it’s knowing where that line is.”

## **Chapter 8 – Conclusions**

The aim of this study was to examine the constructions of interactions between children's wellbeing and harm, agency and consent and parental consent in competitive sport. The impetus for the study derived from recent academic studies and public-facing literature that raised concerns over children's negative experiences within competitive sport (e.g., Fortier et al., 2020; Hartill et al., 2023) and that examined the role of adults in contributing to children's wellbeing and preventing harm (e.g., Dorsch et al., 2021; Knight et al., 2020). Recognising the importance of parents and coaches to children's experiences in sport, the research brought together views and perspectives from children, parents and coaches to answer questions in support of the research aim.

The research questions were:

1. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children's wellbeing and harm, including 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' harm, in competitive sport?
2. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children's agency and consent in competitive sport?
3. How do children, parents and coaches view and understand parental consent in competitive sport and how does this affect children's perceptions of their own wellbeing and harm, agency and consent?

This chapter summarises the key findings explored in this thesis, demonstrating how these findings answer each of the research questions and address the research aim. The chapter reports on each of these research questions in turn. It then identifies the study's contributions and implications for theory, literature, policy, practice and future research. The chapter closes with concluding reflections.

### **8.1. Summary of findings**

Data to address the research questions were gathered through a qualitative case study that took place within a youth section of a rugby club in England, 'The Club.' Child-parent-coach triads were embedded units of analysis within this single case study. As presented in Chapter 4, Yin (2018) proposes that analysis drawn from case

study research is useful for “analytic generalization” (p. 37). To this end, and in line with its design as an instrumental case seeking insights beyond the case (Stake, 1995), this study has resulted in “generalizable findings or lessons learned... that go beyond the setting for the specific case” (Yin, 2018, p. 38). The following ‘answers’ therefore draw from insights obtained through this case study research, applying findings from The Club to the broader context of children’s, parents’ and coaches’ experiences within competitive sport.

### **8.1.1. Research question 1**

*How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children’s wellbeing and harm, including ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ harm, in competitive sport?*

This research question focused on exploring children’s, parents’ and coaches’ views and understandings of wellbeing and harm within competitive sport. Situating the research within the context of a contact sport case study provided the opportunity to explore such understandings in a setting that incorporated heightened awareness and potential for physical injury, alongside the potential for other forms of harm associated with all sporting environments (e.g., Hartill et al., 2023; West et al., 2023). This allowed nuanced exploration of the interactions between wellbeing and harm, including harm that was ‘acceptable and ‘unacceptable’ through the views, understandings and experiences of research participants.

Answering this first research question, Chapter 6 presented the key finding that children, parents and coaches viewed and understood children’s wellbeing in sport primarily in connection with subjective wellbeing experiences, and mainly in relation to the non-physical, emotional benefits offered by the sport. For child research participants, this was demonstrated most prominently in the enjoyment of the nature and physicality of the sport as contributing to non-physical wellbeing benefits. These benefits were then closely connected to the opportunity the sport provided as an ‘outlet’ from other aspects of children’s lives that may threaten their wellbeing, for example, school-related stress or challenging peer relationships. The study thus adds to the understanding of wellbeing benefits of sport to children as previously explored in the literature (e.g., van Woudenberg et al., 2020; Wilson et al., 2022) by finding that children participating in a highly physical sport experience this physicality as bearing the greatest positive impact on their wellbeing because of the non-physical outcomes.

Additionally, the study facilitates reflection upon wellbeing-related matters affecting children outside of sport. As noted in Chapters 2 and 3 regarding the promotion of sports and physical activity for children (e.g., Department for Culture Media and Sport, 2023; Sport England, 2021), sport is seen as something that can help address wellbeing concerns. Attention to such concerns has been heightened since the recent COVID-19 pandemic and in relation to global considerations including conflicts and the climate crisis (DfE, 2023b). Supplementary to its findings relating to children's wellbeing in sport, this research thus offers additional insights into factors within children's lives that can lead them to seek 'escape' through sport. For research participants, these included challenges in connection with feelings of stress, education, relationships and feelings of exclusion.

Parents and coaches appeared attuned and sensitive to the wellbeing benefits experienced by the children in their families and on their teams. Parents recognised wellbeing benefits to their children on an individual basis and it was these benefits that they focused on when considering whether rugby continued to be beneficial to their child(ren) (and in consent decisions, as discussed within Section 8.1.3). The study found that parents' understandings of children's wellbeing were often closely aligned to children's own experiences. Similarly, coaches' responsiveness to external factors and their reflections on wellbeing in rugby matched many child participants' views and experiences, allowing coaches to adjust training approaches to their teams' specific needs. As such, it was important that parents and coaches continuously – and accurately – assessed the wellbeing benefit of the sport to their children. These findings highlight the importance of intergenerational relationships and effective communication within these to retain awareness of wellbeing benefits (and, indeed, harms). To the extent that parents and coaches held accurate understandings of children's wellbeing experiences with the sport, parents were able to encourage and support participation and coaches were able to adapt practices to support the wellbeing of children on their team. This contributed to the co-construction of safe spaces for children within the sport.

In answering the second part of this research question, this study contributed to the literature relating to expectations and experiences of 'harm' in sport by identifying the predominance of concerns over emotional harm within the case study sport. As noted earlier, expectations of physical injury and exertion due to the physicality of the case

study sport (e.g., West et al., 2023) and the potential that these be understood as 'harm' facilitated discussion around (un)acceptability of harm. These discussions have implications for competitive sport more generally. The study found that non-physical and emotional harms were something that children, parents and coaches were attuned to and readily identified as unacceptable, though there was minimal discussion of such harm in relation to practices at The Club. Concerns in this regard included the identification of coaching behaviours – for example comparison between children – as potentially harmful, and the criticism of favouritism, discrimination and parental pressure or 'force' to play the sport. At the same time, the research found that participants' constructions and views of physical harm were closely informed by rules and guidance, particularly relating to contact. Most strikingly, children themselves rarely identified injury that occurred within the rules of the game as potential 'harm', suggesting that they experienced a level of 'acceptability' to such injuries. In one sense, this can be connected to children's experiences of practising 'ambiguous agency' (e.g., Bordonaro & Payne, 2012) in playing a sport they knew and understood to be highly physical and from which they expected to derive wellbeing benefits connected to this physicality. These findings also raised questions around normalisation of potential physical injury – or harm – and the importance that rules and guidance are effective in protecting children from harm that results from practices falling within (and outside of) rules frameworks.

Gender was a cross-cutting consideration across all three findings chapters, with data gathered in relation to the gender categorisation of teams (see Chapter 4 for methodological discussion) contributing to answering all three research questions. Findings in this regard suggested the presence of numerous enabling or restricting factors relating to gender that could affect the experiences of children, parents and coaches in sport. With respect to research question 1, in relation to wellbeing and harm, while there were no discernible differences in children's understandings of rugby wellbeing as connected to the sport's physicality and the enjoyment of team dynamics, or in the identification of harm, gender appeared to influence the constituent or contributing elements to such positive wellbeing, including, in particular team dynamics. On the girls' teams, for example, children enjoyed forging social bonds with those outside of their school cohorts, while on the boys' teams, children mentioned the wellbeing boost from continued engagement from school to the rugby pitch. This may

reflect outside experiences and even challenges within schools, but, as noted within the relevant chapter analysis, also appeared to reflect the teams making and understanding virtue of one of the main differences between the gender categories – girls' teams are fewer and farther between so their players travel from further afield.

Together, children, parents and coaches contributed to what this research identified as the co-construction of safe spaces for children to play their sport. This involved the abovementioned attentiveness of trained coaches following the rules and the guidance of the sport, the engagement and non-force by parents attuned to their children's wellbeing needs and the support of teammates who complied with rules and met their teammates' needs in relation to their collective wellbeing. Children's experiences of wellbeing were enhanced by the 'rugby family' experience and the 'caring environment' this may encourage (Fry & Gano-Overway, 2010). Accordingly, the 'rugby family' motif led to strong connections and feelings of 'belonging' within teams, within the case study club and across the sport, supporting wellbeing and contributing to the co-construction of safe spaces. To the extent that these connections and the experience of 'belonging' or other 'family practices' were threatened, wellbeing was also challenged. Indeed, as noted throughout this thesis, families are not always supportive environments and can instead be locations of potential harm. The implication is that if children perceive themselves to be participating within the context of family, this needs to be enacted in a manner that supports wellbeing, without causing harm.

In answering research question 1, this study has thus contributed an extension of knowledge to the literature about how children, parents and coaches in sport can support an environment of safety for children's sport. Though the research findings reflected almost universally positive accounts of the case study sport, they highlight the importance that each cohort's contributions remain positive, supportive, inclusive and non-discriminatory and attuned to children's wellbeing and the potential of harm.

### **8.1.2. Research question 2**

*How do children, parents and coaches view and understand children's agency and consent in competitive sport?*

Both Chapters 5 and 7 contributed findings to answer research question 2. First, Chapter 5 focused on children's, parents' and coaches' views and understandings of

children's agency in competitive sport. This chapter drew on existing literature (e.g., Fletcher, 2020; Forsdike et al., 2019) to advance understanding relating to 'family practices' (Morgan, 2011b) within a sporting environment. In doing so, it highlighted the 'rugby family' motif as a prominent research finding within impact and meaning for children in sport. While the study found the construction of 'family' was predominantly presented and viewed as positive for children's wellbeing, it was noted within this thesis that 'families' can be potential locations of challenges to wellbeing, and can involve harm. The study found that children, parents and coaches shared awareness of 'family' in rugby generally, at The Club and within the individual age-group teams themselves, with several participants invoking the language of 'rugby family' in their research responses. Such experiences of 'family' drew from and complemented families that existed outside of rugby as well as within the rugby setting. It was salient, for example, that coaches were almost all parents to children on their respective age-group teams. In relation to these experiences and highlighting the sense of 'belonging' that was identified as a domain of wellbeing benefit, the study found that for children the experience of 'family' was predominantly located in their own teams, while for adults 'rugby family' applied to The Club and rugby in a broader sense. This helped to foster a sense of belonging, positive relationships and security.

In addition to their impact on wellbeing, experiences of 'family' and the 'rugby family' also created and reinforced inter- and intragenerational relationships within which children practised agency in their participation in the sport. Noting a gender-related element to this, findings suggested relevance, once again, of the composition of girls' teams as drafted from further afield and boys' teams from more local areas: the girls' teams sought out additional means to forge and strengthen 'family' like connections through extra-curricular activities, while challenges in scheduling that hampered time for socialising were viewed as constraining of this camaraderie. This research study contributed to the understanding of childhood agency generally and in sport by utilising relational agency and Leonard's (2016) 'generagency' as a means by which to examine children's practices of agency at The Club. Applying Leonard's (2016) *intergeneracy* to children's decisions to play sport, the study found that such decisions took place within existing parent-child relationships and identified that children strongly resisted and objected to any 'force' by parents that might 'thin' (Klocker, 2007) their practices of agency in this choice. Highlighting the role of

intergenerational relationships, and identifying enabling factors, the study found that children's practices of intergeneracy 'thickened' as children progressed through age groups and were perceived to have increasing expertise, especially to the extent that this expertise exceeded that of their parents. With this finding, the study contributes to existing literature relating to parental involvement and particularly parental pressure in sport (e.g., Dorsch et al., 2016; Knight, 2019) by suggesting that the experience of 'force' and its impact upon agency may contribute to children's negative wellbeing experiences. Further, the research highlighted children's practices of 'ambiguous agency' in participating in a sport that involves such physicality and contact.

Contemplating children's practices of agency in relation to their teammates, the study found that children exert themselves in the practice of *intrageneracy*. This adds a dimension to the 'sport ethic' (Alexander et al., 2011; Hughes & Coakley, 1991) by finding that children practised intrageneracy when 'pushing' themselves to work harder. Within this agentic act, children's exertion supported their own wellbeing and consolidated team relationships, 'belonging' and the experience of 'family' within the sport. While coaches were the ones most commonly responsible for organising training activities, children's levels of effort when carrying out these exercises were connected to their team-based intragenerational relationships. That children reported pushing beyond comfort limits in the support of such relationships recalls that these team connections and dynamics were seen as crucial to potential wellbeing – both positive and negative.

The second part of this research question considered children's, parents' and coaches' views and understandings of children's consent in sport. Findings in relation to this part of the question were presented in Chapter 7 and are closely connected to findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 about agency and wellbeing respectively. One of the foremost findings in this regard was that children understood their own consent in their sport as choosing to play a sport that they enjoyed playing and as the absence of being forced into this (see earlier reflection on ambiguous agency, Bordonaro & Payne, 2012). This experience of consent therefore combines with views and understandings of both wellbeing and agency. Parents and coaches were adamant that it was essential for children to consent to their participation in rugby and understood this to be communicated to them through continued presence and the perception that children

enjoyed their continued participation. To this end, parents and coaches relied on the implication that consent could be withheld or withdrawn. This aligns with Channon and Matthews' (2021) findings relating to the predominance of non-overt communication of consent and fits with the positioning of children as not providing formal consent to participation (though they may agree to codes of conduct in relation to that participation).

In this study, consideration was given to the age of 16 years old as a threshold age for several legal and consent frameworks in children's lives (e.g., GMC, 2018; NHS Health Research Authority, 2024; NSPCC, 2023). This led to the methodological approach and attendant query as to the potential relevance of this transitional age to children's consent in sport. The study findings suggest that no particular age was seen as a threshold for the shifting influence between parental and children's consent in the case study sport. Instead, participants offered a range of reflections on the changing balance that existed within child-parent consent negotiations. This balance was connected to reduction in constraints and increase in enabling contexts and influences including educational, recreational and employment options outside of sport and growing expertise within the sport. Once again, this forefronts the practice of agency and the determination and delivery of consent decisions as closely connected to relationships.

Highlighting the role of intergenerational relationships in children's sporting experiences, the study found that, as children learn, gain experience and are viewed as holding increasing levels of expertise, this affects the practice of intergeneracy in consent decisions. Following these gains and increases, children, and others, experience greater strength and confidence in children's choices in sport. The study also highlighted that consent decisions by children (and those by parents, which are discussed in Section 8.1.3) take place away from the sport as they are negotiated in family settings outside of rugby before being communicated back to the sporting environment. This dynamic anticipates the possibility of disparate views and experiences by parents and children within the same families that may not necessarily be communicated to the sporting context. Recalling the caution that family settings may be locations of nurture and support, but also of potential challenge and harm, this reinforces the importance that intergenerational negotiations are supported by trust,

knowledge and effective communication – particularly relating to wellbeing, which is explored in relation to parental consent, below.

### **8.1.3. Research question 3**

*How do children, parents and coaches view and understand parental consent in competitive sport and how does this affect children's perceptions of their own wellbeing and harm, agency and consent?*

The study's final research question sought to explore views and understandings of parental consent in children's competitive sport, and the impact that these can have on children's experiences of wellbeing and harm, agency and consent in competitive sport. In addition to providing new evidence relating to how parental consent is viewed and understood, this filled a research gap in the understanding of how children perceive and understand parental consent to their participation in competitive sport and what this means for their experiences, boundary-setting and wellbeing. Findings relating to this research question were primarily presented within Chapter 7.

Parental consent was commonly perceived and experienced as a form of permission for children to play a sport they wanted to play, in line with the discussions of children's agency, wellbeing and consent under Section 8.1.2. Accordingly, the study found that parental consent decisions were made within the context of negotiation and trust in their intergenerational relationships with their children – negotiation and trust relating to the suitability, wellbeing and potential harm associated with the sport. While examining constructions and understandings of this consent, this study considered the role of formal consent processes. These remain central to many aspects of children's sports participation, including where relevant to legal frameworks, for example on data protection, medical procedures or insurance. However, the study's findings reinforced Channon and Matthews' (2021) work by indicating that other forms of consent were relied upon in the communication of parental consent, with several coaches suggesting that forms were insufficient assurance of parental agreement to the sport.

Further, the research highlighted that children at the case study club understood their parents to have consented to them playing within the parameters of that sport and within boundaries that were connected to their wellbeing and to harm. A core consideration regarding children's wellbeing and protection thus lies in the alignment between such parameters, parental perceptions of children's wellbeing and harm and

children's experiences of wellbeing and harm. This is also connected to coaches' questioning of parental capacity to fully understand the sport, and the extent to which parents can develop sufficient expertise to understand the experience of playing the sport without having played themselves. While contributing perspectives to ongoing discussions about consent in sport, including rugby (Anderson et al., 2023), this finding encourages the placement of value in parental engagement in and knowledge of sport. Within this context, views and understandings of parental consent also highlighted the importance of parental presence, noting that this contributed to awareness of the sport and of children's experiences within the sport. Physical parental presence was noted to be a resource and logistical challenge, despite this importance, with the potential that such challenges were exacerbated by the context in which girls' and boys' teams play – with additional travel required for those on girls' teams, though this was not the only factor that could make it difficult for parents to attend.

To the extent that a sport's rules and guidelines protect children from harm, the research suggests that their role as a boundary of parental consent can be protective. Further, children's perceptions of the rules of a sport as limiting consent can enable children to participate within boundaries of safety and positive wellbeing. Similarly, where parents and children communicate and negotiate consent boundaries that align with children's experiences of wellbeing and harm, this too is protective. However, where rules do not fulfil a sufficiently protective function, or where wellbeing based boundaries are ill-defined or poorly understood, children continue to be at risk. This highlights the importance of governing bodies' responsibilities to set appropriate rules that protect children from harm and to support appropriate coaching behaviours. It also highlights the importance that these boundaries are communicated to children, parents, coaches and others involved in the sport. These findings also reiterate the value of parental engagement and interaction with the sport to enable them to develop an 'accurate' perspective of their children's wellbeing, which, in turn, forms part of the intergenerational consent communications between children and parents. This is, of course, complicated by concerns around insufficiency of rules and guidance (e.g., Anderson et al., 2023) and the potential impact of the sport ethic (e.g., Alexander et al., 2011; Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

## **8.2. Implications and reflections**

The contributions set out above bring with them attendant implications and reflections in relation to theory and literature, policy and practice and for future research. These are explored below.

### ***8.2.1. Implications for theory and literature***

As discussed above, this research contributed to the literary and theoretical landscape in its application of concepts relating to children's agency in the context of children's sport. This included considerations of generagency (Leonard, 2016), ambiguous agency (Bordonaro & Payne, 2012) and thick/thin agency (Klocker, 2007). Though existing research relating to children's sport has touched upon children's agency, the application of concepts from childhood studies to the sporting context is somewhat uncommon. Fletcher (2020) highlights what he calls a "dilemma facing sociologists in taking sport seriously," citing Bourdieu's (1988) essay 'Program for a Sociology of Sport' and explaining that "many academics, Bourdieu suggests, refrain from thinking deeply about sport because they do not consider it to be fundamental to the inner workings of society" (p. 5). Fletcher (2020) suggests that this challenge remains. Similarly, scholars focusing on child protection in sports have urged researchers to draw on the body of literature around youth and childhood studies (e.g., Lang, 2022; Messner & Musto, 2014). That the use of such concepts within this doctoral study has been successful in generating contributions to the understanding of children's experiences in sport argues for further application of concepts and theories from childhood studies in the future. Similarly, the developing of childhood studies' concepts through their utilisation in a sporting context articulates to the possibility of further studies within childhood sport, drawing on a rich background of literature, particularly in relation to children's experiences of wellbeing and harm in sport (e.g., Hartill et al., 2023).

While the study drew upon existing literature about children's experiences of wellbeing and harm within sport (e.g., Alexander et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2022), it also contributes to this field through its findings relating to children's appreciation of non-physical benefits of a physical sport. In line with this, it has presented discussion of the co-construction of safe spaces to support wellbeing. As such, it has presented a case study example in which children, parents and coaches worked together in a

context of trust to support wellbeing and prevent harm but through which potentialities of harm are identified, in particular, marginalisation, discrimination and emotionally harmful coaching and parenting practices relating to comparison and pressure. Research to further explore such considerations is proposed under Section 8.2.3 below.

Furthermore, as set out above, this study has contributed to closing a gap in the understanding of how children (and parents and coaches) experience parental consent and the impact of this on children's wellbeing, highlighting the importance of relationality and trust to agency, wellbeing and consent (e.g., Cook & Santana, 2020; Leonard, 2016). Just as this research referenced frameworks for research and medical consent, the research approach and findings are likely to find applicability and relevance to settings beyond children's sports. Indeed, the findings from this thesis have extensive potential for contribution to other fields. Findings relating to consent could, for example, contribute to understandings of how children experience and understand parental consent to their participation in research, to their medical treatment, to participation in extra-curricular activities or to other aspects of children's lives in which parental consent is a requirement, particularly those in which children's wellbeing and potential harm are implicated. Within this, the analytical findings on relationality of decision making – including in contexts of trust – are especially pertinent, complementing previous consideration of communication of consent and requests for the consideration of consent in children's sport (Channon & Matthews, 2021). Further, this study, while not directly addressing ongoing conversations and concerns relating to children's contact sports and parental consent within these, contributes the voices of children participating in a contact sport (and associated adults) in relation to their experiences of agency, wellbeing and consent to this discourse.

### ***8.2.2. Implications for policy and practice***

As noted earlier, this research was inspired by concern and consideration for the protection of children's wellbeing in competitive sport. One of the potential benefits of the research that was presented to participants in participant information sheets was the possibility of contributing to improvements in policy and practice to the benefit of children playing sport. This is borne out by the following recommendations and implications which derive from the findings presented above.

Firstly, this study has reinforced that children experience sport to offer wellbeing benefits, including both physical and non-physical benefits. This provides additional evidence supporting policies that encourage children to participate in sports. Perhaps more challenging within this is the study's recognition that sports can offer wellbeing benefits as an alternative or escape from aspects of children's lives that can cause difficulties. This adds impetus to safeguarding programs within sports organisations to ensure that safeguarding officers, coaches and other officials are attuned to challenges that children may be having outside of sport in order to support a safe environment within the sport itself. This is particularly important to the extent that such challenges represent child protection or safeguarding risks, articulating to the importance of safeguarding guidance, training and practice. Data from The Club suggested that the integration of safeguarding practice into the club ethos is crucial to this. Practices in this regard include training but also close adherence to safeguarding rules and best practices, visibility of safeguarding materials, organisation of discussions and consultation opportunities for children, parents and coaches and the presence of effective and engaged safeguarding and wellbeing officers.

As noted in Section 8.2.1, this study found that perceived lack of status for 'youth girls' teams continues to be of concern (see, e.g., Petrie et al., 2024, Schailleé et al., 2021; Senne, 2016). Ongoing efforts by governing bodies, sports clubs and coaching officials could help to address this issue (e.g., RFU, 2023b). While exploring experiences of wellbeing related to team belonging and relationships, the study found that that one area of consideration relating to teams' gender categorisation is that many girls' teams drew children from a wider geographical area and from more schools than boys' teams. While participants shared that this had some benefits, including offering an additional layer of 'escape' from school settings, the findings also highlighted the importance of ensuring opportunities to foster a positive 'family' experience. This may include the investment of time and resources into social activities. Further, clubs can support and enact equal treatment of girls' and boys' teams through equitable planning of activities and other club interactions.

One area in which this research contributed to the literature was in advancing knowledge about how children (and their parents and coaches) identify and understand 'harm' in sport. In this regard, the research highlighted that the plethora of rules, guidelines and even co-constructed ethos connected with a sport can influence

perceptions of acceptability of physical harm. The research also found that children, and others, were particularly concerned about emotional harm in sport. This suggests that rules relating to physicality, while protecting against physical harm, could also 'normalise' any harm that they do not adequately protect against. Further, given concerns over emotional harm, and understanding that these are less conclusively covered by training materials, it is essential that governing bodies develop and disseminate training and awareness raising materials relating to emotional harm, including appropriate coaching practices and parental support. This study highlighted the role of coaches in all aspects of children's wellbeing and harm prevention in sport and, accordingly, such action should include training for coaches that promotes positive coaching practices. The importance of emotional wellbeing to participants, both as something benefited by sport and as a potential source of harm, advocates for it to be taken seriously by coaches, clubs and governing bodies.

One of the more challenging and complex research findings concerned the importance of parental engagement in competitive sport. The study found that parental presence can support children's wellbeing through the perception of support and through sufficiency of knowledge and awareness relating to children's experiences and appropriate boundaries within the sport itself. While, within the context of rugby, this has an association with the risk of physical harm, concerns relating to other forms of harm within sport suggest that such informed presence may act protectively in other sporting environments. That said, mandating parental presence would likely act as a barrier to participation for many children and their families, especially for those with multiple children or in single-parent households, or with other barriers that make getting to training sessions difficult, including, for example, the relative scarcity of 'girls' teams. On the other hand, although there remains a research gap in this regard, literature suggests that parents can perpetrate maltreatment towards children in sport, through neglect (e.g., Fortier et al., 2020), and other forms of ill-treatment (e.g., Alexander et al., 2011) and that parental pressure, which could be exacerbated by presence, can be harmful to children (Dorsch et al., 2016; Dorsch et al., 2021).

Therefore, it is a consideration for practice to promote parental engagement in a manner that is feasible and supportive of all parenting circumstances and that supports positive parenting engagement. This could include, for example, increasing awareness of the sport by offering parents opportunities to participate in online training

relating to injury, concussion and wellbeing. It may also involve encouraging parents to attend a minimal number of training sessions each season, in order to increase knowledge and awareness of sporting practices. Any such actions should take account of the importance for inclusivity, ensuring all parents and carers are supported to benefit from such programmes. To the extent that consent forms were found to serve only limited purpose in shaping understandings of consent, ensuring registration processes are connected to literature relating to consent and knowledge about the sport itself may also support consent negotiations and decisions that protect children's wellbeing. Given the research findings relating to intergenerational relationships, communication between parents and children around children's experiences in sport – perhaps through guided questions or suggested discussion topics – may help ensure shared understandings of wellbeing, harm and appropriate boundaries to consent.

Finally, the study findings have repeatedly shown that opportunities for 'voice', by children and parents, are crucial, both in addressing concerns as they happen, and in providing reassurance and trust that concerns could be addressed if necessary. Recognising that all sports operate in different ways, ensuring appropriate and adequate opportunities for 'voice' will remain essential to children's wellbeing in sport. Such opportunities could include player-led co-productive opportunities, player-led wellbeing activities, consultation sessions and open feedback solicitation. Guidance relating to such opportunities can be found within academic and practice-orientated literature (e.g., CPSU, 2023; Lang, 2022) and are vital to the co-construction of safe spaces for children in sport.

### **8.2.3. Reflections for future research**

While answering the research questions and addressing the research aim, this study has highlighted several areas for further exploration. Firstly, it has been noted at several points within this thesis, that, due to sensitivity and ethical concerns, the research approach did not incorporate collection of a level of demographic data to support intersectional exploration of children's experiences in sport. To the extent that the study did consider gender categorisations of teams, it touched upon participants' experiences in relation to these, highlighting accounts or concerns over gender-connected differences in experiences and treatment. The study also noted challenges associated with differential access and experiences based on gender categorisation, for example that girls' teams were fewer and farther between, making parental

presence, which was identified as relevant to wellbeing, agency and consent, more difficult and resource intensive. These findings strongly suggest that further research targeted to exploring gender in relation to children's agency, wellbeing and harm and consent in competitive sport would be pertinent and timely.

Additionally, and given the context provided in Chapters 2 and 3, which highlighted the disparate sporting access and opportunities for marginalised groups, it would appear essential to pursue research exploring the views of children who are underrepresented within sporting practice and sports research. Taking an intersectional approach where possible, this could include research with children that supports analysis relating to race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability and gender among other social and identity-related factors (for guidance, see Misra, et al., 2020). As with future research relating to gender identity and categorisation proposed above, such studies could take place across a range of sporting contexts, including team, individual, contact, contested and non-contact sports and across different age groups.

Further research could also seek to explore experiences of 'family' within sporting environments. This study presented extensive findings relating to 'family practices' within rugby, drawing on analysis relating to agency, wellbeing and harm and consent. Though the 'rugby family' was explored in predominantly positive terms within these findings, the potential for differing – potentially negative – experiences of 'family' was reiterated throughout. It is possible that further research, perhaps focusing specifically on 'family practices' and dynamics within sporting contexts, could build on this study's findings relating to family and sport. Again, this could take place across a range of sporting contexts and would need to be conducted with sensitivity and in full consideration of ethical concerns.

This study was intentionally positioned within the context of a contact sport to allow for discussion of wellbeing and harm in an environment in which physical injury was considered possible and perhaps even likely. As set out within Chapter 4, other criteria for selection of the case study sport and club developed from the literature review included those with publicised concerns and sports with high accident risks. These criteria could be applied to select different sports for case studies exploring similar issues to those within this study. Further, while the triad-as-embedded-units approach was particularly beneficial in obtaining perspectives from across three influential groups in children's sport and added richness to the single case study, where

resources allow, comparison across case study clubs and sports could support development of nuanced understandings of differences between sporting contexts. This research methodology would be suitable for application, for example, to other team sports as well as those that are primarily individual-based, other contact sports and non-contact sports and sports considered to involve early specialisation (see, e.g., Brenner et al., 2016). Further research could also introduce a mixed-methods element, perhaps involving a statistically representative approach to complement this study's "analytic generalization" (Yin, 2018, p. 37).

Finally, this was, by design, a child-centred piece of research. While the research questions and aim considered both parental and children's consent, the research did not explore consent provided by coaches. This is a matter several coaches mentioned during study interactions, with other officials highlighting their experiences as volunteers who have taken on duties and responsibilities towards children in their care. While research has previously considered the wellbeing experiences of coaches within sport (e.g., Hill et al., 2021), it appears that the consideration of coaching consent is a gap that would be worth pursuing, particularly given the responsibilities and trust connections within which child sports coaches act. Conducting research into the experiences of coaches and their understandings and perceptions of their agency and consent would be an important addition to the overall picture of consent in children's sport.

### **8.3. Concluding reflections**

This research has contributed to the extension of knowledge regarding constructions and understandings of wellbeing and harm and experiences of agency and consent in children's sport. It has also contributed to addressing a research gap as to how children, parents and coaches understand parental consent in sport, and the potential impact of these understandings on children's wellbeing, agency and consent. A further contribution of this research study has been to forefront the impact of generational dynamics on children's agency, on parents' and children's consent and on children's wellbeing (and harm) in sport, including through the exploration of 'family practices' in the 'rugby family'.

The lens of 'generagency' and understandings of relational agency supported the exploration of how children experience their own agency, their wellbeing and consent

– both their own and their parents’ – in competitive sport. It highlighted that these cannot be separated from intergenerational dynamics, which evolve as part of changing relationships between children and parents and which bring with them a complex interplay of enabling and constraining factors for children’s practices of agency. This study addressed questions and considerations over the understanding and protection of children’s agentic participation in sport, given that research has revealed all sports to involve risks of harm (e.g., Hartill et al., 2023). Throughout participants’ experiences of wellbeing, consent and agency was a common thread of rules and guidance as boundary setting. This, therefore, requires that they are indeed protective, and that guidance includes support in relation to emotional harm, in order to protect children’s wellbeing and agency in the pursuit of sports they enjoy.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Ethical approval letter



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH  
Moray House School of  
Education and Sport

Research, Knowledge Exchange and Impact Office  
Moray House School of Education and Sport  
The University of Edinburgh  
Old Moray House  
Holyrood Road  
Edinburgh EH8 8AQ

D/D +44 (0)131 651 4846  
S/B +44 (0)131 650 1000

[www.ed.ac.uk](http://www.ed.ac.uk)

Ref: BRUTH26072022

Ruth BARNES  
Moray House School of Education and Sport

Date: 12<sup>th</sup> September 2022

Dear Ruth,

Title: We can: Wellbeing, consent and agency in children's sport

The School of Education and Sport Ethics Sub-Committee has now considered your request for ethical approval for the studies detailed in the above application.

This is to confirm that the Sub-Committee is happy to approve your application and that the research meets the School Ethics Approval criterion for this particular project. A standard condition of this ethical approval is that should any amendment, or deviation from the original protocol outlined in your application need to be made to carry out or continue your research, please notify the Ethics Sub-Committee at [MHSES-Ethics@ed.ac.uk](mailto:MHSES-Ethics@ed.ac.uk)

The Committee also needs to be notified if there are any unexpected results or events once the research is underway that raise questions about the safety of the research.

Should you receive any formal complaints relating to the study you should notify the MHSE Ethics Committee immediately by email to [MHSES-Ethics@ed.ac.uk](mailto:MHSES-Ethics@ed.ac.uk)

Yours sincerely,

[Redacted signature]

On behalf of:

[Redacted name]

Director of Ethics

## Appendix B: Cover sheet for introductory package

Intro.Cover.Sheet.CYP/PC.2, 22.11.2022



### INFORMATION COVER SHEET

#### "We can: Wellbeing, consent and agency in children's sport"

Hello! My name is Ruth Barnes and I am a PhD researcher at Edinburgh University. I'm really excited to be working with your club to learn about children's wellbeing, consent and agency in competitive sport.



My study is hoping to find out what children, parents and coaches think about some aspects of children's wellbeing in sport.

This includes ideas about positive wellbeing, but also harm. It also includes consent by parents and children. The research will also look at children's 'agency', which means their choices and decision making. The study will look at these things together to consider how they support children's wellbeing in sport.

I will be working with the club to carry out this study in three main ways:

- **Observations:** I will watch some training sessions. I will confirm at the start if you are happy to be included in what I write about. For children under 18, please complete a consent form signed by you and a parent or carer. If you don't consent, I will not write about what you say or do, but I may still watch and make notes about the group in general.<sup>1</sup> I am looking forward to seeing what rugby training is like!
- **Group Discussions:** I am very excited to be running group discussions of around 6-8 players (date/ time to be confirmed). These sessions will take just over an hour and will be at the club. The sessions will involve group activities and discussions. Everyone who joins in will get a £10 One4all gift card (and snacks/refreshments).
- **Individual Interviews:** Next year, I will be looking for around 6-8 'sets' of parents and players for individual interviews. These will last around 45 minutes to an hour each. Parents' interviews can be done online. Players can choose where they are interviewed. Parents and players will both receive a £10 One4all gift card for taking part. This is a great opportunity for parents to get involved! I will also be interviewing coaches and club staff.

All of the research data will be anonymised and participation is voluntary. In this package, I have included some important information about my research. The documents are:

- A Participant Information Sheet for Parents and Carers
- A Participant Information Sheet for Children and Young People
- An Observation Consent Form for Children and Young People for Observations

Stay tuned for more information about discussions and interviews!

If you have any questions, please find me when I am at the club or contact me at [REDACTED]

*This is a great opportunity for you to have your say about children's wellbeing in sport.*

*Thank you for supporting my research!*

<sup>1</sup> This is in line with British Educational Research Association guidelines.

## Appendix C: Example of Participant Information Sheet and consent form for children

"We can", PIS v.CYP.3, 22.11.2022



### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE**

#### **"We can: Wellbeing, consent and agency in children's sport"**

You are being invited to take part in research on wellbeing, consent and agency in children's sport.

My name is Ruth Barnes and I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh. I am leading this research.

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

#### **WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?**

This study is hoping to find out what children, parents and coaches think about some aspects of children's wellbeing in sport. This includes ideas about positive wellbeing, but also harm in sport. It also includes ideas about consent by parents and children. In addition, the research will also look at children's 'agency', which means their choices and decision making.

Overall, the study will look at all of these issues together to try to understand how they support children's wellbeing in sport.

#### **WHY HAVE I BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?**

I am inviting you to take part because I am conducting research with children and young people who play rugby for your club.

#### **DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART?**

No – it is entirely up to you. If you decide you want to take part, you can still withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. You can opt in and out of any research activities or the project overall. Deciding not to take part or withdrawing from the study will not affect your involvement in the rugby club.

Please note that your contributions could be used in producing research outputs prior to your withdrawal. You are advised to contact me, Ruth Barnes [redacted] as soon as possible if you want to withdraw from the study. Please be aware that after analysis and publication it may not be possible to withdraw your data from the study.

#### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?**

If you do decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet. Please complete and sign the attached Consent Form(s), asking a parent or carer to sign them as well. Please hand these to Ruth Barnes or send them to [redacted] (scanned/photographed copies are fine).



"We can", PIS v.CYP.3, 22.11.2022

There are **three ways** that you could be involved in this research. Not everyone will be asked to participate in all of these ways

1. Ruth Barnes will attend some training sessions to take notes about them (called 'Observations'). You won't be asked questions during observations and they will be like a normal training session, just with an extra person watching and taking notes.
2. Some children will be invited to participate in **group discussions**. These are small group sessions with activities and discussions lasting for around 60-75 minutes. These will take place at the club at a convenient time.
3. Some children will be asked to take part in **individual interviews**. These will last for around 45-60 minutes and will take place in a safe environment that is convenient to you. If you are asked to interview and would like to have a friend with you during the interview, please let me know.

Participants in group discussions and interviews will be asked to talk about wellbeing, harm, parental and children's consent and agency (meaning choices and decision making). Participants will be asked to share their ideas and feelings about these issues.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?**

There are no direct benefits to participation in observations. Those who participate in group discussions and interviews will receive £10 One4all vouchers in recognition of their time and efforts. I will also provide simple refreshments for group discussions. If you withdraw during a discussion or interview, you will still receive a voucher.

Also, by taking part and sharing your ideas you could help to improve understanding of child wellbeing in sport. This could lead to policy or practice changes.

#### **ARE THERE ANY RISKS OR DISADVANTAGES ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING PART?**

There are no significant risks associated with taking part. However, the research does cover some topics that can be difficult to talk about at times. It is important to remember that your participation is always voluntary and anyone can withdraw at any time. I have included some support services information at the end of this Information Sheet in case these are helpful.

Also, there is a small risk of others identifying you when the research is reported because the study is small and focuses on the club. I will take measures to anonymise the data and nobody will be named. All efforts will be made to write up the research findings in a way that minimises this risk.

#### **RISKS OF PARTICIPATION (COVID-19)**

I will minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19 during the study by following the most up to date Government guidance. However, even with these measures, there remains some risk of exposure from participating in this study.

#### ***What if I am unwell before the research interaction?***

If you feel unwell or experience COVID-19-related symptoms, please contact me ( ), and we will postpone or cancel.

Page 2 of 4



### WILL MY TAKING PART BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

All the information I collect during the research will be kept confidential and there are strict laws which safeguard your privacy at every stage. You will not be named in the research findings. I will ask all research participants to keep group discussions confidential but this cannot be guaranteed. Please refer to the note above about how I will minimise the risk of identification.

Should you disclose any information that makes me think you or another person are at risk of significant harm, I will work within child protection procedures to address this. This may mean breaking confidentiality to do so.

### HOW WILL WE USE INFORMATION ABOUT YOU?

I will keep all information about you safe and secure. With the permission of research participants, I will record notes and discussions. I will anonymise these notes and recordings. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file through the University of Edinburgh. All paper records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Your data will only be viewed by me and my supervisors, who will help me complete the study.

All recordings and other non-anonymised information will be deleted at the end of the study. Once I have finished the study, I will keep some of the anonymised data so the results can be checked if necessary. With your consent, your anonymised information may also be kept for future research for a minimum of 10 years.

Where can you find out more about how your information is used?

You can find out more about how your information is used at <https://www.ed.ac.uk/records-management/privacy-notice-research>

You can also email [REDACTED]

### WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?

I will analyse the notes and recordings. The results of this will be used in a range of outputs, such as presentations and publications and in a PhD thesis. I will do my best to write reports in a way that no one can work out that you took part in the study. A summary of the findings from the study will be made and shared with participants.

### WHO IS ORGANISING THE RESEARCH?

This study has been organised by Ruth Barnes, a PhD student at Moray House School of Education and Sport at the University of Edinburgh.

### WHO HAS REVIEWED THE STUDY?

The study proposal has been reviewed by the Moray House School of Education and Sport's Research Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh.



"We can", PIS v.CYP.3, 22.11.2022

**WHO CAN I CONTACT?**

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me, the lead researcher, Ruth Barnes, [REDACTED]

You may also contact my supervisors, Prof Debi Fry, [REDACTED] and Prof Kay Tisdall, [REDACTED] of Moray House School of Education and Sport, the University of Edinburgh.

If you would like to discuss this study with someone independent of the study please contact Ethics Lead, Moray House School of Education and Sport [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

If you wish to make a complaint about the study, please contact: Research Governance Team at [REDACTED]

**SUPPORT SERVICES AND INFORMATION**

The following support services are available locally for children, young people, families and adults:

\*Support services and information are potentially identifying and therefore redacted.



**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**  
**CHILD OBSERVATION PARTICIPANTS**

**Study Title:** "We can: Wellbeing, consent and agency in children's sport"

Researcher's name and contact details: Ruth Barnes, [REDACTED]

Please tick if agreed

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheets (Version CYP.3 and PC.3 dated 22.11.2022 for the above study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided and ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I understand my participation is voluntary and that I can ask to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and there will be no negative consequences.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I understand that after analysis and publication it may not be possible to withdraw my data from the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I agree to observation notes being audio recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I understand that these observations notes, which could include my anonymised data, will be stored for a minimum of 10 years and may be used in future ethically approved research.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I understand that research findings will be shared publicly through presentations, a PhD thesis and other outputs. I will be anonymised in these outputs.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I am aware that participating in this study may carry risks in relation to potential exposure to coronavirus, and I understand the steps that have been taken in relation to minimise the risks of exposure and transmission.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I understand this study is subject to safeguarding procedures. I understand there are limits to confidentiality if it comes to light that either myself or another person is at risk of significant harm.	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I agree to take part in the observation.  <i>The researcher will confirm consent at the session</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of child giving consent

Date

Signature


\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of parent/carer giving consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

Child's age group training session: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D: Example of Participant Information Sheet and consent form for adults (parents)



"We can", PIS v.PC.3, 22.11.2022

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – PARENTS/CARERS

**"We can: Wellbeing, consent and agency in children's sport"**

You and your child are being invited to take part in research on wellbeing, consent and agency in children's sport.

My name is Ruth Barnes and I am a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh. I am leading this research.

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?**

This study is hoping to find out what children, parents and coaches think about some aspects of children's wellbeing in sport. This includes ideas about positive wellbeing, but also harm in sport. It also includes ideas about consent by parents and children. In addition, the research will look at children's 'agency', which means their choices and decision making.

Overall, the study will look at all of these issues together to try to understand how they support children's wellbeing in sport.

**WHY HAVE MY CHILD AND I BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?**

I am inviting your child to take part because I am conducting research with children of your child's age at their rugby club. I am inviting you to take part as a parent/carer of a child who plays at the rugby club.

**DO MY CHILD AND I HAVE TO TAKE PART?**

No – it is entirely up to you and your child. If your child decides to take part and you agree, they can still withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. They/you can opt in and out of any research activities or the project overall. Deciding not to take part or withdrawing from the study will not affect involvement in the rugby club.

Please note that your/their contributions could be used in producing research outputs prior to your withdrawal. You are advised to contact me, Ruth Barnes (██████████) as soon as possible if you want to withdraw from the study. Please be aware that after analysis and publication it may not be possible to withdraw your data from the study.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF MY CHILD DECIDES TO TAKE PART?**

If your child decides to take part, please keep this Information Sheet. Your child has received a Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form(s) for you to complete and sign. Please hand these to Ruth Barnes or send them to ██████████ (scanned/photographed copies are acceptable).

There are three ways your child could be involved in this research. Not everyone will be asked to participate in all of these ways

Page 1 of 4



"We can", PIS v.PC.3, 22.11.2022

1. Ruth Barnes will attend some training sessions to take notes about them (called 'Observations'). Children won't be asked questions during observations and they will be like a normal training session, just with an additional person watching and taking notes.
2. Some children will be invited to participate in group discussions. These are small group sessions with activities and discussions lasting for around 60-75 minutes. These will take place at the club at a convenient time.
3. Some children will be asked to take part in individual interviews. These will last for around 45-60 minutes and will take place in a safe environment that is convenient to them and you. If children are asked to interview and would like to have a friend with them during the interview, please let me know.

#### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I DECIDE TO TAKE PART?**

If you decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet. There are two ways that you could be involved in this research. Not everyone will be asked to participate in all of these ways

1. You could be present for the observations described above. You won't be asked questions during these and they will be like a normal training session, just with an additional person watching and taking notes. You will be asked to consent to this verbally.
2. Some parents or carers will be asked to take part in individual interviews. These will last for around 45-60 minutes and will take place in a safe environment that is convenient to you. These can take place online or in person. If applicable, you will be provided with a Consent Form for your participation.

Participants in interviews will be asked to talk about wellbeing, harm, parental and children's consent and agency (meaning choices and decision making). Participants will be asked to share their ideas and feelings about these issues.

#### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?**

There are no direct benefits to participation in observations. Those who participate in group discussions and interviews will receive £10 One4all vouchers in recognition of their time and efforts. I will also provide simple refreshments for group discussions. If you (or your child) withdraw during an interview, you/they will still receive the voucher.

By taking part and sharing your ideas you could help to improve understanding of child wellbeing in sport. This could lead to policy or practice changes.

#### **ARE THERE ANY RISKS OR DISADVANTAGES ASSOCIATED WITH TAKING PART?**

There are no significant risks associated with taking part. However, the research does cover some topics that can be difficult to talk about at times. It is important to remember that participation is always voluntary and anyone can withdraw at any time. I have included some support services information at the end of this Information Sheet.



"We can", PIS v.PC.3, 22.11.2022

Also, there is a small risk of others identifying you or your child when the research is reported because the study is small and focuses on the club. I will take measures to anonymise the data and nobody will be named. All efforts will be made to write up the research findings in a way that minimises this risk.

### **RISKS OF PARTICIPATION (COVID-19)**

I will minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19 during the study by adhering to the most up to date Government guidance. However, even with these control measures, there remains some risk of exposure from participating in this study.

#### ***What if I am unwell before the research interaction?***

If you or your child feel unwell or experience COVID-19 related symptoms, please contact me [REDACTED] and we will postpone or cancel.

### **WILL OUR TAKING PART BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

All the information I collect during the research will be kept confidential and there are strict laws which safeguard you and your child's privacy at every stage. You and your child will not be named in the research findings. I will ask all research participants to keep group discussions confidential but this cannot be guaranteed. Please refer to the note above about how I will minimise the risk of identification.

Should you or your child disclose any information that makes me think you, they, or another person are at risk of significant harm, I will work within child protection procedures to address this. This may mean breaking confidentiality to do so.

### **HOW WILL WE USE INFORMATION ABOUT YOU AND YOUR CHILD?**

I will keep all information about you and your child safe and secure. With permission of research participants, I will record notes and discussions. I will anonymise these notes and recordings. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file through the University Edinburgh. All paper records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Your data will only be viewed by me and my supervisors, who will help me complete the study work.

All recordings and other non-anonymised information will be deleted at the end of the project. Once I have finished the study, I will keep some of the anonymised data so the results can be checked if necessary. With your consent, your anonymised information may also be kept for future research for a minimum of 10 years.

#### **Where can you find out more about how your information is used?**

You can find out more about how your information is used at <https://www.ed.ac.uk/records-management/privacy-notice-research>.

You can also email [REDACTED]

### **WHAT WILL HAPPEN WITH THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY?**

I will analyse these notes and recordings. The results of this will be used in a range of outputs, such as presentations and publications and in a PhD thesis. I will do my best to



"We can", PIS v.PC.3, 22.11.2022

write reports in a way that no-one can work out that you took part in the study. A summary of the findings from the study will be made shared with participants.

### **WHO IS ORGANISING THE RESEARCH?**

This study has been organised by Ruth Barnes, a PhD student at Moray House School of Education and Sport at the University of Edinburgh.

### **WHO HAS REVIEWED THE STUDY?**

The study proposal has been reviewed by the Moray House School of Education and Sport's Research Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh.

### **WHO CAN I CONTACT?**

If you have any further questions about the study, please contact me, the lead researcher, Ruth Barnes, [REDACTED]

You may also contact my supervisors, Prof Debi Fry, [REDACTED] and Prof Kay Tisdall, [REDACTED] of Moray House School of Education and Sport, the University of Edinburgh.

If you would like to discuss this study with someone independent of the study please contact Ethics Lead, Moray House School of Education and Sport at [REDACTED]

If you wish to make a complaint about the study, please contact: Research Governance Team at [REDACTED]

### **SUPPORT SERVICES AND INFORMATION**

These support services are available locally for children, young people, families and adults:

\*Support services and information are potentially identifying and therefore redacted.



**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**  
**PARENTS/CARERS INTERVIEWS**

**Study Title:** "We can: Wellbeing, consent and agency in children's sport"

Researcher's name and contact details: Ruth Barnes, [REDACTED]

Please check if agreed

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet ("We can", XX, dated DD MM YYYY) for the above study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I have been given the opportunity to consider the information provided and ask questions and have had these questions answered to my satisfaction.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I understand my participation is voluntary and that I can ask to withdraw at any time without giving a reason and there will be no negative consequences.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I understand that after analysis and publication it may not be possible to withdraw my data from the study.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I agree to my contribution being audio and/or video recorded.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I understand that my anonymised data will be stored for a minimum of 10 years and may be used in future ethically approved research.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I understand that research findings will be shared publicly through presentations, a PhD thesis and other outputs. I will be anonymised in these outputs.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I am aware that participating in this study may carry risks in relation to potential exposure to coronavirus, and I understand the steps that have been taken in relation to minimise the risks of exposure and transmission.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I understand this study is subject to safeguarding procedures. I understand there are limits to confidentiality if it comes to light that either myself or another person is at risk of significant harm.	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I agree to take part in an interview.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Name of parent/carer

Date

Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of child

\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix E: Example of semi-structured interview tool

### Introductory script

Hello. Thank you for your time today. My name is Ruth and I am a research student at the University of Edinburgh. My research is about children's wellbeing, their choices and decisions (sometimes called agency) and their consent in competitive sport. For this study, I'm talking to children, parents and coaches at your club and a few other people who know about rugby.

I really appreciate your time today. There are a few things I want to point out before we begin.

The chat today will last around 30 minutes. I will be recording this discussion using this voice recorder.

I've received your consent form but I'd like to confirm that you've had a chance to read the information sheet and that you do want to participate.

OK, a few things before we get going.

1. It's important for you to know that this is completely voluntary. Hopefully you will enjoy the discussion but if you don't like it, of course you are free to leave or stop. You can also decide not to answer a question, and you don't need to give me a reason. None of this will affect whether you get a voucher, which you will get as a thank you for your time.
2. What you say to me will be used by me and my team in my research but I will be changing names and some details so it will be hard to work out who said what, but [REDACTED] it is possible that someone will work out who has been interviewed. There's another time where I have to tell someone else what has been said and who said it – that's if I'm concerned someone is at current risk of significant harm.

You have my email address so if you change your mind about anything you've said, just email me and let me know.

Do you have any questions? Are you happy to go ahead?

### Closing script

Thank you so very much for your time. Do you have anything else you'd like to add or say? Before we close, I'd like to share this support information with you. It is in case you'd like to get any help on the things we've talked about today. One of the things it's really important to know is that England Rugby has some support channels, including at this club [mention safeguarding officer].

After my research is completed, I will write everything up into a thesis, which is like a really long report, and some smaller reports and I'll provide you with some highlights about what I've learned. This is from all of the interviews and discussions and remember I will be very careful about privacy and confidentiality. If you would like to withdraw or want me to remove any of what you said, please let me know as soon as possible, because once I have anonymised and started analysing it may not be possible.

Do you have any questions about this? Please accept this voucher.

\*Redaction made due to potentially (minimally) identifying information regarding The Club.

## Semi-structured interview tools: Children (triad)

Activity/Topic	Details/Probes
<b>1. Introduction</b> <b>Check recording</b>	1.1. Introduce myself 1.2. Confirm consent/withdrawal; privacy and rules for breach of confidentiality 1.3. Ask participants to select <b>new</b> pseudonym (record new pseudonym/real name)
<b>2. Background</b>	Together we're going to talk about rugby today. We'll talk about your ideas and your experiences. I'll make some notes and I'd like to invite you to make notes with me. 2.1. First, can we please confirm a few things? How old are you? How long have you played rugby? What sort of level would you say you are? Do you play matches? 2.2. Do you play for other teams or in other sports as well?
<b>3. Club story</b>	3.1. I'm going to give you some time to tell me about your rugby club. How did it happen that you started playing for this club? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probes (W): What do you like about it? Is there anything you don't like or wish was different?</li> <li>• Probes (A): Did you or your parents chose this club? Can you leave? Do you get to choose your position and whether you play? Is there a player council/captains?</li> <li>• Probes (C): Did you/ your parents sign an agreement so you could play here? Does it feel like you've said 'yes' or consented to playing here? Does it feel like your parents have given consent for you to play?</li> </ul> 3.2. How do you feel about matches? Do you play in matches? Do you enjoy this? What position do you normally play? Did you choose this? ( <i>how/when?</i> )
<b>4. Session story</b>	4.1. Thinking about the training sessions you've had this season. How often have you gone? Who takes you? When you are getting ready, what do you normally feel like? 4.2. Can you please tell me what you think a great training session would be like? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probes (W): What would happen to make it great? What would have to be missing?</li> <li>• Probes (A): What sort of choices do players get during training?</li> </ul> 4.3. Please can you think about what a bad training session would be like? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probes (W): What would happen? What could change to make it good?</li> <li>• Probes (A): If sessions are going badly, what can the players do to change things? (<i>could probe if contact/injury is a part of this</i>)</li> </ul> 4.4. When your parents or carers drop you off, do you feel like they are saying 'yes' to you being at training? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Probes (C): Does that mean anything that happens in the session is OK? What if you wanted to leave a session? If they want you to go and you don't want to, what happens? Do you think this changes over time – like as you get older is the parent or child's consent more important, or both?</li> </ul>
<b>5. Rugby generally</b>	Let's talk a little about rugby and wellbeing. What does wellbeing mean to you? 5.1. Do you think playing rugby is good for children's wellbeing? 5.2. What are the things that make it good for wellbeing? Is there anything that makes it bad for wellbeing? 5.3. When it comes to things like injuries, contact, or really harsh coaching, is that OK? How do you or other children know what is OK? What kind of pain or hurt is Ok to feel?? Is there anyone who would help you know? Do you talk to your parents about this? 5.4. Who would you talk to if you were feeling something wasn't right? (at the club?) 5.5. And, for the last question, what are your personal dreams for your sport?
<b>6. Closing</b> <b>Vouchers and support info</b>	6.1. Thanks, chance for further comments and close 6.2. Note next steps, including withdrawal 6.3. Provide voucher and support information

## Appendix F: Overview of group discussion activities

Timing	Activity	Details	Notes	Equipment
5 min (0-5)	1. Introduction and ground rules	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1. Introduce myself/the discussion <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confirm consent/withdrawal and opt-out area</li> <li>• Note expectation of privacy AND rules for breach of confidentiality</li> <li>• Hand out sticky notes</li> </ul> </li> <li>1.2. Ask participants to select pseudonyms as ice-breaker</li> </ol>	<p>Check video recording is working</p> <p>Make sure to cover:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Drink/snack as you wish</li> <li>- Opt-out area</li> <li>- One person at time ☺</li> </ul> <p>Confidentiality in the group</p>	<p>Name cards/labels</p> <p>Plenty of pens and paper</p> <p>Food, drink, napkins</p> <p>General: sticky notes for people to write rather than talk</p> <p>Sheets for opt out</p> <p>Support information forms</p>
15 min (5-20)	2. Activity 1: Stories	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2.1. Introduce the activity (2)</li> <li>2.2. Divide into three groups and give each group a story to read (5)</li> <li>2.3. Bring discussion together (8)</li> </ol>	See sheet for activity details	<p>Story sheets printed out</p> <p>Sticky notes for people to write rather than talk</p>
(5 min) 20-25	Comfort Break	Time made available for a comfort break or drink but note that this could be used for overflow. Stand up and walk around/ ice-breaker.		
15 min (25-40)	3. Activity 2: Agree/disagree	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1. Introduce the activity (2)</li> <li>3.2. Making choices (13)</li> </ol>	See sheet for activity details	<p>Flashcards with examples</p> <p>Felt tip pens</p>
5 min (40-45)	4. Closing and next steps	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4.1. Thank participants for their inputs</li> <li>4.2. Explain next steps</li> <li>4.3. Ask participants to complete information sheets including their pseudonym (3)</li> <li>4.4. Provide support information and vouchers on departure</li> </ol>	<p>Make sure people leaving early get vouchers</p>	<p>Vouchers</p> <p>Support service details</p> <p>Background sheets</p>

## Appendix G: Initial findings sheet

### “We can: wellbeing, consent and agency in children’s sport”

## Initial themes reflection sheet

This document covers the three main themes to come from the “we can” research study, carried out by Ruth Barnes, PhD Candidate at Moray House School of Education and Sport from 2022-23. These ideas are subject to finalisation based on participant feedback. Final study results are expected in 2024.

### 1. Wellbeing

**Children’s wellbeing in rugby is all about a ‘safe space’ that is created by coaches, parents and children**

**Rugby helps children’s wellbeing because of...**

Loving playing the game  
Feeling included and belonging  
Exercising ‘in the moment’  
Enjoying being physical within the rules  
Feeling part of a team and ‘family’  
Safeguarding and wellbeing actions



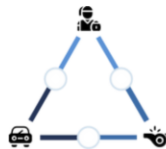
Facing exclusion or bullying  
Feeling pressures like school or exams  
Feeling unsafe in training and matches  
Feeling competition with teammates

### 2. Consent

**Children and parents decide consent together**

**Consent is about trust...**

...in children to know the game and want to play



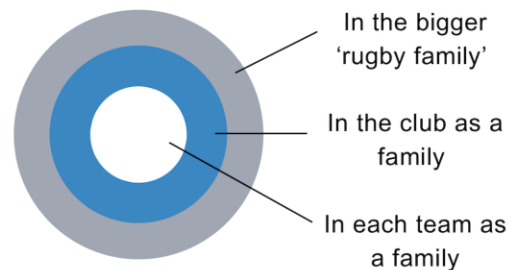
...in parents to understand the risks and support children

...in coaches to coach safely

**As children get more experienced, their role in consent decisions grows**

### 3. Agency (choices)

**Children’s choices are connected to ‘rugby family’ relationships...**



**As children move through age groups, coaching focus changes from managed safety to collaborative preparation for adult rugby (and adult life)**