

**Silent voices: Consulting children in sport**

**draft 27.9.04**

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**Note:** This article is based on a keynote speech to the annual conference of the Leisure Studies Association, Leeds Metropolitan University, July 2004.

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## **Silent voices: Consulting with children in sport**

### **ABSTRACT**

Despite being outnumbered by the over 60s in the 2001 Census, the children and young people have assumed a central role in the UK political agenda and are protected by several international statutes and directives. At the same time, leisure and sport researchers have been responsive to the political imperative for stakeholder consultation that characterises modern leisure policy. Focus groups, surveys and other tools of the social researcher's trade have been used extensively in research that serves the needs of leisure industry clients across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. Yet, arguably, the opinions of children and young people have not been seriously taken into account in the changes to policy and practice that result from such research. Young peoples' patterns of leisure consumption, highly influenced by commercial cultural forms, can either confirm or, often, contradict the rational recreation messages promulgated by government. The introduction of national standards for child protection in sport (CPSU, 2003) is, arguably, a manifestation of the policy fixation on youth and child welfare in public leisure provision that accommodates adults' own anxieties about uncertainty, fragmentation and discontinuity in modern life. This paper draws on the experience of researching child protection and young peoples' welfare in sport. It considers the research design, ethics and consent challenges involved and critically assesses clients' and researchers' effectiveness in giving voice to this major stakeholder group. It is argued that consultation is all-too-easily used as a mask for continuing paternalism by those for whom radical change would threaten their power base.

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This article addresses the issue of giving voice to children and young people and explores, in particular, some of the opportunities for and challenges of including young people in the sport research and policy process. It begins by reviewing the place of children and young people in the demographic and political landscape, revisiting the raft of legislative and other guidance that asserts their civil and human rights, and asks whether, and to what extent, children's rights are yet given expression within sport.

Next, the article examines the place of stakeholder consultation in leisure research and policy. Using a model of youth participation and some general examples of consultative initiatives, it is argued that sport and leisure agencies lag behind other services in upholding the rights of the young to be consulted. Differing discourses of 'participation' are uncovered, both within and outwith sport, that inhibit children and young people's proper engagement in shaping their own sport and leisure experiences.

Finally, using a particular research project on young people's involvement in football in England, the research design, ethical and operational challenges involved in trying to give voice to children and young people are discussed. Notwithstanding these challenges, and the limitations of rights discourses, it is posited that that consultation is all-too-easily used as a mask for continuing paternalism by those who make and deliver sports policy because radical change would threaten their power base. Suggestions for reorienting the definition of participation are offered as is a model of what sport could look like if children in sport were properly given voice.

## **CHILDHOODS AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS**

Childhood is socially constructed and usually set against constructions of adulthood and the family. We are constantly confronted by strong images of childhood of the 'devils v. angels' sort that reinforce these constructions. The 'devil construction', which emerged on the back of escalating moral panics about youth crime and disorder, especially after the death of James Bulger, has led to calls for tougher policies on youth offending: the 'angel construction' developed from welfarism and 'adulthood' (Scraton, 1997), has led to strongly interventionist models of child welfare and protection. So, we have what Scraton (1997, p. ix) calls a "paradoxical fusion of care, control and contempt"

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rooted in Victorian philanthropy (see Table 1). Both constructions have led to state intervention and regulation of childhood, and both bolster paternalistic attitudes to children as subjects.

### **[Insert Table 1 about here - Perspectives on childhood]**

We have reached a point where perceived risk (of child abuse and molestation) leads to perceived safety (from such abuses) being equated with ‘adults know best’, described by some as the ‘protectionist perspective’ (Prescott and Hartill, 2004) and others as ‘ethical socialism’ (Coppock, 1997). Just as happened with women as leisure consumers in the 1970s and 1980s, these dominant social constructions of childhood render children an homogeneous or undifferentiated group, which fails to take account of the many social and demographic factors that are now so readily acknowledged as influencing our (adult) lives.

The modern or ‘new’ sociology of childhood allows us to challenge this idea and, instead, to view children as heterogeneous, active agents with individual lived experiences. Seeing children as people rather than small (and lesser) adults allows us to break away from the protectionist approach towards more of a rights-based approach or what Scraton and Haydon (2002) call ‘positive rights’ or welfare-based rights. This perspective, among other things, regards children as active agents of social change, co-constructors of knowledge, and in power relations with adults rather than being subject to power of adults. In short, it shifts us from a sociology *of* childhood to one *for* childhood (Prescott and Hartill, 2004).

The real potential of a positive rights-based welfare approach is its challenge to construction of children as innocent, vulnerable and weak through promoting their right to information, expression of views and their participation in decision-making.

(Scraton and Haydon, 2002, p. 325)

Despite being outnumbered by the over 60s for the first time in the 2001 Census ([www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/demographic\\_uk.asp](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/demographic_uk.asp) accessed 10.6.04), children and young people have today assumed a central role in the UK political agenda and are now protected by several international statutes and directives.<sup>1</sup> The adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 (ratified by the UK in 1991) gave

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people under 18 years of age children a full set of human rights for the first time. This point marked a crucial shift in child welfare from the traditional protectionist approach to the more dynamic, rights-based approach David (2001, p. 1). The Convention (almost) universalizes the obligation for States to implement children's rights through legislative, financial, educational and other measures.<sup>2</sup> These rights are wide ranging and include: non-discrimination (Article 2); freedom of expression and thought (Articles 13 and 14); association (Article 15); privacy (Article 16); access to appropriate information (Article 17); and right to life, survival and development (Article 6).

In the UK, it is not uncommon for children's rights to appear in public service charters, one recent example being the Scottish Executive's *The Charter: Protecting Children and Young People* (2004a and 2004b). The work of the State in delivering the rights agenda for children has been complemented by work in a range of voluntary sector agencies, notably through children's charities such as Barnados, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), the National Children's Home (NCH), and many more. A good international example is Right to Play (formerly Olympic Aid) ([www.righttoplay.com/overview.asp](http://www.righttoplay.com/overview.asp)), a non-governmental organisation that grew out of the legacy of the Lillehammer Winter Olympics. It is committed to sport for development with disadvantaged children and runs programmes with the United Nations, UNICEF, the World Health Organisation and the International Labour Organisation, among others.

Whether children's rights have been addressed adequately in youth sport is a point of debate. David, for example, argues that that:

... the promotion and protection of human rights of young athletes in the context of competitive sport has received almost no recognition and has rarely been discussed and addressed ... despite the existence of a wealth of academic literature and knowledge on the impact of sport on children ... Human rights and sports are historically two fields which have had only very restricted interaction.

He sets out five possible sport situations that, in addition to the usual raft of discriminations based on sex, race, class and ability, can threaten the physical and mental integrity of children:

- 1) involvement in intensive early training (violation of Article 19 – protection from child abuse and all forms of violence, and Article 32 – protection from economic exploitation)

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- 2) sexual exploitation (violation of Article 19 – protection from sexual abuse and violence)
- 3) doping (violation of Articles 24 and 33 – right to health and protection from drugs)
- 4) buying, selling and transfers (violation of Article 32 – economic exploitation – and Article 35 – protection from sale and trafficking)
- 5) restrictions on education because of involvement in sport (violation of Article 28 – right to education)

At the same time as David and others are turning their attention to the possible violations of rights that occur within sport, sport is being prescribed for its health, social and community development benefits through both state programmes, such as those to tackle obesity and urban crime (Physical Activity Task Force, 2003; Allison, 1999; Nichols 2004). Whilst private investment in ‘nurturing’ youth soccer players as commodities, for example, is certainly not consistent with children’s own desires to be left alone to have fun, the exhortation for physical activity and healthy living is perhaps the major example of a public sector rational recreation message today. Safe sex is another. Young peoples’ patterns of leisure consumption, which are strongly influenced by commercial cultural forms, sometimes confirm but often contradict these rational recreation messages promulgated by government. But, here again, ‘adultism’ rules, for these are the lifestyles and activity patterns deemed by others to be appropriate and ‘in the child’s best interests’.

Donnelly (1997) used an analysis of the child labour laws in Canada in his critique of youth sports and a similar exercise in the UK would readily throw up similar issues. The Children and Young Persons’ Act 1933, for example, controls the age at which children may start paid work, the number of hours they may work and the sorts of jobs they may do (Morgan, undated). A child of school age cannot work, for example, before 7am or after 7pm. Children also cannot work for more than two hours on a school weekday or more than one hour before schools starts, for more than two hours on any Sunday or for more than 8 hours on Saturdays. Given the intensity of training and competition hours for some children in some sports these seem like close parallels with labour exploitation in children’s sport uncovered in Canada.

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After almost two decades of lobbying and cajoling, England now has a functioning, dedicated Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) inside its largest child welfare charity, the NSPCC, co-funded by them and Sport England ([www.thecpsue.org.co.uk](http://www.thecpsue.org.co.uk)). Why, and why now? And what does this say about a child-centred view of life in England? The rapid incursion of the NSPCC into the previously voluntary domain of sport, and the tilt away from permissive towards prescriptive child protection in English governing bodies, may well reflect exaggerated welfarist concerns. The introduction of both guidance on and national standards for child protection in sport (CPSU, 2002, 2003) is, arguably, a manifestation of the policy fixation on youth and child welfare in public leisure provision that accommodates adults' own anxieties about uncertainty, fragmentation and discontinuity in modern life. Sport sociologists have known for decades that the inherent conservatism of sport and sportspeople acts as a brake on social change. Perhaps the ideological 'purity' of sport (more accurately an ideological vacuum) reflects a reluctance to change? Perhaps we English adults suffer from a kind of 'double vision', looking at children now but seeing them as we were and therefore being unwilling to adopt or adapt to their own wishes?

## **DISCOURSES OF PARTICIPATION – THE LEISURE LAG**

The principle that young people should participate in decision-making and be consulted about political processes is enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states that every child who is capable of forming his/her own views has "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".

In the UK, there are many examples of consultation initiatives across the public and voluntary sectors. Government Departments are now required to write and implement Action Plans for the involvement of children and young people in their work. In 2001 the Children and Young People's Unit (CYPU) of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published *Learning to Listen: Core Principles for the Involvement of Children and Young People*. Based on the underpinning of the UN Convention, this document offers advice and examples of good practice for the involvement of children and young

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people in the planning, delivery and evaluation of government policies and services. The Quality Protects (DoH programme)<sup>3</sup> (Sinclair and Franklin, 2000), Children's Funds, schools councils, youth councils and the UK Youth Parliament ([www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk/4655/46854.html](http://www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk/4655/46854.html) accessed 8.6.04) all offers avenues for children and young people to express their views on various services.

Together with Investing in Children (a County Durham partnership), the National Children's Bureau (NCB) has promoted a number of events focussed on young people's participation in decision making (NCB, 2001) and Save the Children ([www.savethechildren.org.uk](http://www.savethechildren.org.uk)) has produced a guide entitled *Children are Service Users Too: A guide to consulting children and young people* (2002). The University of Essex hosts the The Children's Legal Centre (CLC, [www.childrenslegalcentre.com](http://www.childrenslegalcentre.com)), a charity promoting information about children and legal issues, which produces a range of materials on consulting children, confidentiality, ages of consent and other topics of relevance to sport and leisure. The National Children's Bureau (NCB) has also published a number of documents exploring children's rights and children's views.<sup>4</sup>

Although the shift to private funding has de-emphasised welfare considerations in leisure service delivery (Coalter, 1998), the requirements of Best Value (HMSO, 1999) have also promoted greater transparency in service allocation methods and greater community group advocacy through a range of consultation techniques (Howell and McNamee, 2003, p. 20). The consultation directive is delivered through, for example, citizens' panels and community surveys that yield quantitative and qualitative information from service users. Leisure and sport researchers have been responsive to this political imperative for stakeholder consultation, also using focus groups, surveys and other tools of the social researcher's trade in their research across the public, private and not-for-profit sectors. But where do children and young people feature within this consultation fest?

According to Precilla Alderson (2004, p. 15) "We try to seal [children] into a risk-free world ... To be 'well-looked after' is to be constantly under adult care". In her view, adults underestimate children's capabilities which results in consultation being a charade or just 'talking shop'. She is critical of the UK government's new Children Bill for

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positing that all children are ‘at risk’ (the protectionist perspective) and should be tracked. She suggests that:

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Adults would not tolerate such an intrusion ... Instead of using children as the proxy measure of a service, real consultation treats them as the measurers.

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Reading Alderson’s account of children’s absence in decision making reminds one of the medical notion of ‘patient compliance’ which is used to describe adherence to prescribed medications. She suggests that the most common method of assessing service effectiveness is whether “children appear quieter or more law-abiding”. Similarly, Whitaker’s (2002) account of treatment regimes for the mentally ill over the past few centuries – *Mad in America* – repeatedly points to patient compliance as a performance measure for asylums and hospitals. Perhaps we have something similar going on here with children – ‘child compliance’ – where children are being manipulated to consume without any consumer rights?

Challenging Alderson’s critique, Jessica Gold (*The Guardian*, April 22, 2004, p.25), asserts that we are in fact experiencing a “velvet revolution”. She records that in 1998 around only 15% of primary schools had schools councils but that in 2004 as many as 70% do so. In the secondary sector, thousands of pupils attend training courses annually and over “20,000 copies of a handbook for schools councilors have been bought by schools”. Pupils are involved in a wide range of decisions within secondary school including building, curriculum and staffing issues. In Scotland and Wales, consultation with pupils is a statutory requirement. In England, all schools have received a DfES booklet entitled *Working Together* which asks for information about whether pupils have been consulted on curriculum, teaching and learning, target-setting, behaviour policy and staffing. Gold argues “This is not kid’s stuff”.

If Gold is right, then where is sport and leisure in this velvet revolution? The Sport England National Survey of Young People and Sport in 2002 found young people’s motivation to take part higher than it has been since 1994, with 7 out of 10 regarding themselves as a ‘sporty type person’ (Sport England, 2003). There are also now countless school and club-related initiatives focussed on sport programmes for youth, promoted through the Youth Sport Trust, governing bodies of sport, local authorities, schools and many others.<sup>5</sup> Efforts to promote social inclusion have also generated better chances for

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girls sport, children with disabilities and children from ethnic minorities than were in evidence ten or twenty years ago. Sport opportunities for young people are everywhere, then, but how many of them are genuinely consultative?

A report on children's rights commissioned by the British Council (Hawtin and Wyse, 1997a, p. 3) criticised the development of the National Curriculum for using a "tokenistic' consultation" and was especially critical of the failures to afford children rights to leisure and play.

The child's right to play and recreation is not recognised in legislation ... Children's own priorities often point to the importance they place on the arts, leisure time and play. This importance ... is supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child yet ... play and recreation is (sic) often marginalised.

(Hawtin and Wyse, 1997a, p. 4)

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The voice of the child in decision-making is often ignored ... This perpetuates the view of the child as the 'property' of adults, even if the adults view the child as valuable and precious property.

(Hawtin and Wyse, 1997b, pp. 1-2)

The importance of leisure and recreation to young people emerged again in September 2003 when, following Lord Laming's enquiry into the brutal death of Victoria Climbié, the government issued a Children's Green Paper - *Every Child Matters* - which set out a consultation framework for improving welfare and protection outcomes for all children and families. The main message that emerged from the consultative meetings with young people (around 750, mostly between 4 and 18 years old), was "the need to involve young people in decisions that affect their lives" ([www.dfes.gov.uk/everychildmatters](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/everychildmatters) accessed 16.6.04). The five major areas of concern identified in this exercise were:

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a positive contribution
- Economic well-being.

Leisure freedoms, facilities and leisure activities (often linked to learning) featured frequently in the children's comments, just as they did when the National

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Children's Bureau conducted a study to find out young people's ideas and opinions (Tolley *et al.*, 1998). At the same time as this consultative exercise, the government introduced The Children Bill (currently for England only) which is intended to provide a joined up framework for services affecting children – health, education, social services and the police - but which, interestingly for us, does not address the voluntary sector (The *Guardian*, 2004, [www.society.guardian.co.uk/children/story/0,1074,1161971,00.html](http://www.society.guardian.co.uk/children/story/0,1074,1161971,00.html) accessed 16.6.04). One of the results of this initiative is a Young People's Fund with an initial budget of £200m. Other initiatives include Sure Start, intended to deliver multiple services through single centres in deprived neighbourhoods; the introduction of Children's Services Directors and Children's Trusts in every local authority; and, the development of a Sector Skills Council for Children and Young People's Services. Despite leisure's absence from The Children Bill agenda, ILAM (Ives, 2004, p. 1) argues that it offers leisure services an opportunity to “reinforce their contribution to health, social inclusion and educational achievement”. Leisure is also absent from Multi Agency Public Protection Panels (MAPPS) that have been established by government as joined-up public safety mechanisms to protect against sex offenders. Is this another example of ‘leisure blindness’, like gender blindness – leisure is always there but never noticed?

In our (sport and leisure) world, the term ‘participation’ refers to increasing the numbers of taking part in x or y activity – usually competitive sport or physical activity. In the world of social policy and welfare, however, it means refers to engagement in the political process and is an expression of the general rights referred to above. To this extent, then – and at the risk of perpetuating the myth of dualism - we engage in ‘disembodied’ (rather than disembodied) participation. In short, we still appear to be more satisfied with increasing the number of participants (for which read players) but not their activity level (for which read politicisation).

‘Driving up participation’, then, refers to getting people jumping about, not engaging them in critical reflection or review of the quality or type of service they receive. Indeed, Sport England's new Excellence Framework (Sport England, 2004) identifies as the most important outcome for sport being “an increase in participation in sport and active recreation”. One of the stated objectives of the Excellence Framework is to provide a platform for an inspection service in sport should it be developed in the

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future. If so, sport should watch out, for perhaps Ofsport (or Offside?) is in the pipeline? If this transpires, then the fast-vanishing boundary between state and voluntary sector will disappear altogether. Indeed, although the Excellence Framework is explicitly aimed at local government agencies it states:

... the principles of good management are the same in any organisation whatever its size or structure. The Excellence Framework is equally applicable to other organisation such as National Governing Bodies ...

(Sport England, 2004)

So, the National Framework for Excellence is intended also to cover other partners such as NGBs (for example through Whole Sport Plans), and thus to cross the public/voluntary divide. Importantly, user engagement and school or young people's forums feature in this document (perhaps for the first time?) as a directive for sport and services.

## **LISTENING v. HEARING**

There is a need to distinguish between giving young people an opportunity to participate in decision making and giving them meaningful experiences of participation (Olle, 2002, p. 7). Consultation initiatives with young people include the UK Youth Parliament ([www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk](http://www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk), accessed 08.6.04), and the Children and Young Peoples Unit.<sup>6</sup> The Unit was set up by the Prime Minister in 2000 to coordinate services to young people. It recently commissioned an evaluation of participatory practice with children and young people (Kirby *et al.*, 2003). The key findings were that organisations need to change in order to undertake meaningful and sustainable participation, that participation is a multi-layered and complex phenomenon, that it should apply to all areas of children's lives and not just selective areas, that listening is a crucial prerequisite for bringing about change, that there are many social as well as personal benefits of participation, and that organisations need to adopt a clear rationale for developing participatory practice from a range of possible reasons.

The research report is accompanied by a Handbook to stimulate thinking on this topic in organisations and to help them to develop a more participatory culture. Throughout the research project, the research team was supported by and worked a Young Advisors Group and a Young Researchers Group. Case study groups for this

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research, which worked mainly with 12-16 year olds, were selected from an initial database of organisations that met three criteria:

1. they had already involved children and young people
2. they had listened to them and taken action as a result
3. they had a degree of organisational commitment to participation and had attempted to evaluate their activity.

How many sport groups would pass this initial screening?

The researchers identified three different ‘cultures of participation’ ...

- *Consultation focussed organisations*: these consult children and young people to inform services, policy and product development.
- *Participation focussed organisations*: these involve young people in making decisions (as well as consultations) within participation activities that are time-bound or context specific. Often a sample rather than all relevant children are involved.
- *Child/youth-focussed organisations*: children and young people’s participation is central to these organisations’ practice and they establish a culture in which it is assumed that all children and young people will be listened to about all decisions that affect their lives.

... and proposed ten principles for children and young people’s policies and services:

- centred on the needs of the young person
- high quality
- family-orientated
- equitable and non-discriminatory
- inclusive
- empowering
- result-orientated and evidence-based
- coherent in design and delivery
- supportive and respectful
- community-enhancing

Despite this sizeable shift towards participatory politics, I would argue that the opinions of children and young people have generally not been taken seriously into account in sport. This could be because either research and/or policy innovation is lacking. For example, other than some attitudinal and activity-related items, I could not

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find any evidence of a young people's consultation in the 2002/third national survey of young people and sport (Sport England, 2003).

Adapting Hart's 'ladder of participation' (1992), which had 8 stages, Shier (2001) has proposed a 5 stage model of participation (see Table 2) which moves from Stage 1 – where children are listened to without having an opportunity to express a view or be heard, to Stage 5 – where children share power and responsibility for decision-making. Shier suggests that organisations and individuals move through a process of 'opening' (showing an interest in young people participating), then 'opportunity' (giving skills and resources to young people), and finally 'obligation' in which participation by young people becomes embedded in policy and practice. If we apply this idea to sport organisations it becomes clear fairly quickly that they are well off the pace.

### **[Insert Table 2 about here - Shier's five levels of participation by young people]**

Contrary to our adult fears, even very young children have astute judgement and are capable of expressing it. Consultation is not the norm in sport, however, and I would argue that sport is well behind other social provisions on this issue, not necessarily because of its failure to consult with children – although I think most schemes do not - but because of its failure to treat seriously the results of any such consultations. Why? Because the vested interests of those delivering youth sport would be undermined by listening to children's voices – sport would not be 'Sport'. This, then, is a form of paternalism verging on social control, based on false assumptions about the competence of young people.<sup>7</sup> Social control is adeptly applied in youth sport where adults choose, organize, deliver and evaluate activities and programmes without inviting comments or contributions from those who consume them – children.

## **CASE STUDY**

The rest of this paper uses a case study to illustrate the research design, ethics and consent challenges faced by researcher/advocates who wish to develop consultative research with young people and to give them a voice in sport policy. These issues have been fairly extensively addressed in educational and social policy research (Scraton, 1997; McKechnie, 2002; Lewis *et al.*, 2004; Fraser *et al.*, 2004) but, I would argue, not very well addressed yet in sport or leisure research.

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In 2001 the English Football Association commissioned a five year research project investigating the impact of the FA's child protection strategy on the game.<sup>8</sup> This was a massive task for the team of researchers but one which excited us enormously as it presented a rare opportunity to collect large scale, longitudinal, quantitative and qualitative data (Brackenridge *et al.*, 2004). In 2002 and 2003, for example, we conducted just short of 500 interviews, over 50 club case studies and 14 internet surveys (see Table 3). (Sadly, the FA withdrew the funding for next three years of this project pleading lack of money.)

### **[Insert Table 3 about here - The FA Child Protection in Football Research Project]**

Despite a marked decline in the adult men's game there has been a proliferation of children's and youth soccer opportunities in recent years (refs.). But, as so often happens, sport is a late adopter of social trends. The shift to stakeholder politics, in particular, has occurred late in sport but is now embedded within the modernisation programme for NGBs (Deloitte Touche, 2003a and b).

I am as culpable as any other researcher in that my own work on child protection and welfare in sport has not engaged, in the main, with children themselves (Brackenridge, 2001). From the outset with the FA project – which took two years of work to secure the design, methods, ethical protocols and budgetary approvals – we determined that children and young people in the game should be primary stakeholders in the research. This accords with the FA's own *Charter for Quality* (1997, p. 1) that says:

The central figure is ... the player and his or her best interests. Attempting to provide quality experiences for all young players at all levels is the overriding principle.

We built in longitudinal stakeholder consultation as one of the major elements of the research design and, within this, children were a core group. We adopted a different approach for the under 12s and those 12 and above, using an internet survey for the latter but not the former, to compliment interviews with both age groups, and we also designed some tailored methods for work with under 12s which were subsequently refined and repeated in the second year.

Needless to say, the political and personal and sensitivity of this research for all concerned meant that we had a long list of issues to address when preparing the ethics

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protocols. Some of these were resolved by recourse to existing ethics guidance and some had to be developed from scratch. In addition to setting up informed, voluntary consent and parental consent systems, we therefore used a host of ‘What if?’ scenarios to anticipate difficulties such as a set of steps to follow should we uncover abuse during the fieldwork, a method of dealing with difficult gatekeepers (which proved invaluable), a response formula should the media intrude on our work, and so on. Occasional staff training and review events and a written A-Z guidelines booklet for the research team all helped to ensure uniformity of approach.

In the spirit of reflexivity, all researchers on this project were encouraged to keep a research diary, charting not just the facts but also their feelings as the work developed. This is something I now do as a matter of course with all research students and that I have found particularly helpful in the past with long-term projects (Brackenridge, 1999). These diaries were not required but some researchers volunteered them and I am grateful to one in particular – Claudi Cockburn – who has given consent for excerpts to be reproduced here.

I use these excerpts not because they necessarily reflect especially well or badly on the research but because they capture: first, the messiness of fieldwork with young people; secondly, the ethical complexities of such work; and, last but not least, the conflicts between the theoretical commitment to consultative processes and the logistical realities of fieldwork (otherwise known as the ‘buggeration’ factor!). They also reflect how knowledge about children and child ‘safety’ in sport is constructed and reinforced and how power relations between adults and children often work against, rather than for, the ‘interests of children’.

### **Fieldnotes from Claudi Cockburn 2002 (with permission)**

#### **Excerpt one – junior girls club tournament:**

[8.6.02] I’m on location. It’s a 5 a-side tournament for ... under 14s and under 12s – all female. Serious looking referee all in black. Loud manager on the sidelines - or are they parents? Good strong girls playing well in shin pads and boots. Not quite sure how to hold the tape recorder as we’ll be standing and I want to write notes too! I’ve just seen a female manager smoking as she gives her pre-match talk ... There was an interesting incident where the parent of a daughter playing under 14s and another player had a row. One club (mine) had

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split their 11 a-side team into two 5 a-side teams for the tournament. They were playing each other in the final and one girl fouled the daughter of one of the dads watching who then had a go at the girl. The girl who had done the foul then left the pitch yelling and screaming at her father that she'd not done it on purpose, said sorry twice and that it was "his fault last week as well". So there is obviously some herstory there. It's interesting that the parent I had already interviewed had told me about this girl being a bit 'bolshy' but that the club took the line that life is not easy for her at home and that they treat each other as an individual i.e. they make allowances for her and try to help. The manager took everyone on one side – very much the 'peacemaker' – in his women's words, and 'too soft' in the parent I interviewed's words. It all seemed to calm itself down and 15 minutes later one of the players said 'let's go and find her (the one who'd been fouled) and get her to come back', seeming calmer and more mature than the parent! Already I'm learning that this is a repeated problem – abuse from parents, more commonly toward their own child ... [One] manager talked to me after the incident and asked me if he'd 'passed'. He said he was unable to do more than get people to talk to each other to resolve these things. There are no sanctions for parents like that – it's something they 'all have to live with'. The referee did not get involved at all. Ultimately, it's the kids who suffer, because even if they banned the father he'd probably just take his daughter away from the team.

### **Excerpt two – academy trainees training session:**

[18.7.02] I'm watching a session now that is very serious for 16 year olds. The coach is shouting and it seems to be a lot more serious than kids playing for their school. On the one hand they must feel like they're living out a dream to be playing (on a Thursday morning when everyone else is at school or college or work) with other professionals with a professional coach on a professional training ground with all the facilities, status and glory that comes with that. But on the other hand, I can hear this coach yelling at the lads in a serious and relatively intimidating, harsh, hard way, not very friendly, no use of humour. A very different feeling to what kids in other clubs are telling me about ... and yet watching this bloke, he's not a million miles from the parents I've seen at it at tournaments!

### **Excerpt three – deaf boys' soccer club training session in a public park:**

[19.7.02] Well, that was an amazing experience. I've just been sat in the park with four boys, three of whom are partially hearing and one deaf, all aged between 15 and 18. I'd approached the lads who were signing and they turned out to be from the club but the coach never turned up. They didn't even have a ball which was lucky for me because I had a captive audience. They were keen to go ahead with the interviews but I felt wrong about doing an interview without even having met the coach never mind having parental consent etc. So I offered to 'phone their parents to get consent over the 'phone but only one of them had a mum who speaks English. So I got her on the 'phone and she was fine about it so

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I did one interview and sent the form home with an SAE to his mum ... I said I'll come back in two weeks' time and gave the others consent forms in hope! But it was so nice to meet them and they were so sweet with me. They taught me to sign half a dozen words and we had a good laugh. While I was interviewing one lad, the others were messing about and making a noise and it was so funny, instead of turning round and telling them 'for heaven's sakes shut up' my interviewee told them 'for heaven's sakes sign will you!' At one point the deaf kid asked my interviewee to ask me if it was possible for deaf people to become famous playing football. It was so touching. I explained that only one in a million hearing people can become famous in football and that deaf people have a disadvantage but that he should go for it as much as he can.

[1.8.02] Well, I have driven for over two hours to get here and my deaf club haven't turned up – annoying to put it mildly! Well, it's quite a relief really. It's funny, it takes a lot of energy to re-introduce yourself and be that super-nice researcher! Only because a) you ought to be anyway; b) because you've driven for three hours and c) because that's what researchers do. I'm trying to make solid connections here. Supposing it's not me next year, I need to make sure it's good relationships I leave behind. So maybe I've been a bit stupid coming all this way at a time of year when they're not that committed to training, but having told those boys 2 weeks ago that I was coming I didn't want to let them down with no form of communication between us and the secretary being away on holiday ...

I'm sitting in the park, it's half past seven and all the other sad people around me are drinking out of a paper bag and leering at the girls as they go by. There are several groups of (sadly hearing) footballing blokes, including an ethnic group of oriental looking lads. Oh the joys of doing fieldwork; I'm getting eyed up now so I'm going to go for a walk and pretend I'm not 'Norah No Mates'. I'm glad it's [summer] and not February! I also thought the coach might just have had an ounce of responsibility and turned up because the lads told him I was coming. So I'm looking for someone who looks like he might be called 'Memmos' and who is looking for some footballers or a researcher woman. The trouble is, that most of the population round here looks like they could be called Memmos and are looking for somebody, wandering lonely in the park!

[2.8.02] ... All in all this CP thing in football is a haphazard set up of poor knowledge, mixed feelings and a will to do well but a volunteer base. And I think the FA need to get a grip on it ...

Many events and agendas could be deconstructed from these pieces, including the ethical issues, the tensions between empathy and objectivity, the power relations between children, adults and researchers, and the different 'faces' and spaces on show here. What they do for me, in a very graphic way, is to underline just how far policy-makers and

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researchers still have to go if 'participation' in the politics of children's sport is ever to be achieved.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

Despite the oft-cited use of football as a socialising and civilising force with young people there is remarkably little research on their experiences of the game. So, what came out of our project from a children's perspective? We found that the voice of the child was silent and that "... the game was used primarily as a means of control, pacification and discipline rather than as a source of empowerment." (Pitchford *et al.* 2004, p. 47). The mixture of care and control talked about earlier was certainly evident here and it was debatable whether youth football had reached even level one on Sheir's participatory scale.

A small number of the clubs in the study in 2003 told us that they had player representatives on committees or that players were consulted about selection or team tactics. In general, however, young people were woefully absent from decision-making processes in clubs. Even where they were represented on committees, there was a view from adults that children under 12 were simply not interested in or capable of contributing to the decision-making forum.

When we talked with children, they emphasised intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivations, often linked to particular skills or techniques (such as the sliding tackle on wet grass). They objected to lengthy warm ups and 'boring drills' and preferred matches to practices as, in competition, they were not constantly interrupted and could make personal choices. At the 2003 BASES Annual Conference a delegate from one of the nation's top Premier League clubs told how she set up a whole season in which 8 year olds in the academy played without adult intervention, with startlingly good results and much praise from the children. When she asked the club if she could repeat the experiment with this cohort as it moved up a year, permission was refused.

In the 1970s, the psychology of motor skill challenged the intuition of equipment manufacturers that had resulted in them providing children with miniature bats and balls. What children actually needed was larger, not smaller, surfaces to allow for greater margins of error in skill acquisition. In the same way, the commonsense development of

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mini-soccer has actually led to greater emotional and psychological intensity in its restricted spaces, with touchline abuse of both players and referees being augmented by spectators' close proximity to the game. Children we studied preferred an inclusive rather than meritocratic approach to football. Not surprisingly, we found numerous examples of children objecting to shouting, swearing, racism, sexism and loutish behaviour by adult spectators, who were often their own coaches or parents (Pitchford *et al.*, 2004). We also found examples of codes of practice and guidelines on behaviour but children were seldom given the chance to influence the development of these even when they were consulted about or involved in implementation.

Elsewhere (Pitchford *et al.*, 2004, p. 57) we propose a research agenda for children in football that accepts football's role in cultural (re)production and social control and that examines the exercise of power and the interplay between power and knowledge, by drawing on the 'new' sociology of childhood. Importantly, power, authority and control in football, and in sport more widely, still rest with rival institutions and individuals whose sectarian in-fighting leaves little time or energy for those young players who hold the key to the future. Consultation, on the rare occasions when it happens, is used as a mask for continuing paternalism by those for whom radical change would threaten their power base. The FA's annual child protection conference in October 2003 was entitled 'Putting children first' but nine months after submitting a second annual report to the FA the researchers were still waiting for an indication that its findings had influenced policy changes.

What would children's sports look like if adults both listened to and heard their voices?

- 1) Sport organisations would comply in letter, spirit and in practice with the international and national statutes on children's rights.
- 2) They would each adopt a child's rights policy with a charter of principles in children's own words.
- 3) Laws governing children's involvement would be enforced.
- 4) There would be full and proper investigative procedures for examining complaints into violations of children's rights and prosecution of offenders.

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- 5) There would be independent, commissioned research to investigate, monitor and evaluate children's experiences in relation to their rights in competitive sport.
- 6) There would be permanent, formal mechanisms for children to voice their opinions, make comments and complaints and to be represented in investigations about these.
- 7) All staff and volunteers in sport organisations would receive training in child welfare, rights and protection in sport. (Here, the FA have done a commendable job with over 55,000 people having attended the basic training course.)
- 8) All children and young people in the organisation would be empowered to express their views freely in matters affecting them.
- 9) An open ethos would be established whereby children could trust adults, and each other, and feel confident in sharing opinions or problems.
- 10) Children would have access to any information held by the organisation about themselves and their development.

If we set these outcomes against the current functioning of almost every governing body then we find sport wanting.

Rights discourses have been "criticized for being no more than symbolic gesturing rather than vehicles of effective structural change" (Scruton and Haydon, 2002, p. 323) and for detracting from collective responsibility. Scruton and Haydon (p. 324) argue that children require both protective and proactive rights - in short, a rights-based welfare approach. In order for this to happen in sport, not only does our notion of participation require re-interpretation but we also require a concerted effort on behalf of leisure researchers and policy makers to engage children and young people in both knowledge construction and power relations.

The danger is that everyone gets to have a say, and then the adults with power make whatever decisions they would have made in the first place ... If we believe that adults don't always know best, and that children and young people have a valuable contribution to make ... we would expect things to change after we have made our contribution, not for them to remain the same. Otherwise what's the point?

(National Children's Bureau, 2001, p. 24)

Listening to children in sport does not mean allowing anarchy on the sportsfield. The same limits on freedom should pertain as they do for adults but there should at least

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be some debate about this. The manner of play, if not the very structure of the game and the way it is managed, may well be changed through consultation. If, in seeking to develop children's rights in sport, we simply tinker with minor changes in coaching practices in order to promote child protection then we are moving the deck chairs on the Titanic and overlooking the macro social processes by which sport as an abusive practice has developed.

Long Term Athlete Development (Balyi and Hamilton, 2003), adopted by Sport England as *the* major underpinning framework for sport performance development, may look like a panacea for the ills of burn out, pressure, over training and over exposure but could also be conceived as a dubious practice that has as its end point *performance outcomes* and is essentially focused on human *doing* rather than human *being*: a 'don't do something, just stand there' approach might allow more reflexiveness and more constructive engagement with the subjects of youth sport, children themselves. Forster (1998, p. 165) argues that prolonged paternalism in the name of child protection can communicate to children that they are incapable of taking responsibility for their own actions. I would argue that paternalism is actually the modus operandi of sport. If I am right, and if sport participation continues to be de-politicised, then it is no wonder that athletes so often seem child-like and sport persists as never-never land.

## **Notes**

1. According to the 2001 Census, there were 19.8 million people aged 50 and over in the UK as against 11.7 million dependent children. Over 60s outnumbered children for the first time ([www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/demographic\\_uk.asp](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/demographic_uk.asp)).

2. Only the United States and Somalia, among the 193 possible States, failed to ratify to the Convention during the 1990s although these countries have now signalled their intention to do so ([www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm](http://www.unicef.org/crc/crc.htm)).

3. The Department of Health ([www.doh.gov.uk/qualityprotects/index.htm](http://www.doh.gov.uk/qualityprotects/index.htm)) has developed a 'Quality Assessment Tool' for managers of children and families under their Quality Protects programme which could very easily be adapted or adopted for use in sport. Under the same programme, National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy were adopted in November 2002 ([www.doh.gov.uk/childrensadvocacy/](http://www.doh.gov.uk/childrensadvocacy/)).

4. These include: *Young Opinions, Great Ideas* (1998) which is written by a group of young researchers "So that big people can see things from little people's eyes."; *The*

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*Emperor's New Clothes* (2001), *Young Europe* (Olle, 2002), and *Involving Young People in the Recruitment of Staff, Volunteers and Mentors* (Michel and Hart, 2002).

5. Young people in sport initiatives include: Sports Colleges; TOP programmes; School Sport Coordinators; the Nike/Youth Sport Trust Girls in Sport Partnership; the Junior Athlete Education programme for talented and gifted young people (all from the Youth Sport Trust); Dreams and Teams (The British Council); Sport Action Zones (local authorities).

6. The UK Youth Parliament (UKYP) is run as an independent charity with multi-agency funding and support. It was started by MP Andrew Rowe in 1996 after he faced criticism from young people in his own area that they were not listened to. Through him, the NSPCC developed a proposal that led to the formalisation of the Parliament in 2001. The Government aims to ensure that by 2006 all young people are aware of the UKYP and that those between 11 and 18 years old can take the opportunity to vote for members of the body. In 2003, 25,000 of a possible 40,000 on the electoral role cast votes for representatives and over 90% of local authorities had signed up to the principle of the Parliament.

7. The differences between 'soft' and 'hard' paternalism in relation to leisure management professionals are explicated by McNamee *et al.* (2000).

8. This project was undertaken by a team of researchers that also included: Andy Pitchford, Kate Russell, Joy D. Bringer, Gareth Nutt, Zofia Pawlaczek, Claudi Cockburn, Liz Kinder, Annie Kerr, Adrian Ibbetson, Jacquelyn Allen Collinson and Heather Sheridan.

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**Table 1** Perspectives on childhood

<b>Care perspective</b>	<b>Control perspective</b>
Disturbed	Disturbing
Welfare and support	Justice and control
Victimised	Victimiser
Protection of the child	Protection of the public
Troubled	Troublesome
What is best for the child	What is best for society
Supports the traditional 'Family' as the central unit of society	

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**Table 2** Shier's five levels of participation by young people  
(Source: After Olle, 2002, p. 8)

<b>1</b>	<b>Children are listened to</b> No effort is made to ascertain children's views on a topic but adults have to be ready to listen to children when they express a view.
<b>2</b>	<b>Discourses of participation – the leisure lag</b> Adults taking positive action to consult with children and opportunities are provided for children to have a say. Adults use a range of age-appropriate activities to enable young people to express their opinions.
<b>3</b>	<b>Children's views are taken into account</b> Children express their views and these will influence the decision. The child's views are given due weight, even if the final decision is not what the child asked for. This level of participation is mandatory for any organisation that has adopted the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
<b>4</b>	<b>Children are involved in the decision-making process</b> Children become directly involved in making the decision. Organisations establish procedures to enable children to participate fully such as becoming more child-friendly by changing the times and procedures of meetings.
<b>5</b>	<b>Children share power and responsibility for decision-making</b> To achieve this level, adults have to give up some of their power and share it with young people. This risks a decision being made that has negative consequences and adults and children have to learn to share the responsibility for this. Organisations find appropriate areas in which children can take on this responsibility and then support them in doing so.

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**Table 3      The FA Child Protection in Football Research Project:  
Data collection methods that included children and young people**

<b>Data collection method</b>	<b>n in 2002</b>	<b>n in 2003</b>
Internet survey of 12-17 yr olds	287	[39]
Stakeholder interviews overall ...	225	257
... of whom, chn and YP in clubs, academies/ centres of excellence and study centres	70 (31%)	119 (46%)
Club case studies	32	24