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**Children’s experiences in sport**

**Budapest, 15 January 2014 – Sport is primarily a source of pleasure, and the majority of children undertake it because they enjoy the physical activity and the camaraderie of a team or sporting community. However, two thirds of children have had experience of psychological or sexual abuse during their sporting careers. What can we learn about the experience of Hungarian children, and what can we do to protect them? This is what UNICEF Hungary aims to shed light on with its study, “Children’s experiences in sport”.**

Sport and play broadens the mind, builds character and facilitates children’s physical and psychological development. Through play, children are able to appropriate tolerance, patience and discipline. In addition, sport enables the diffusion of conflicts and furthers social cohesion and integration. For all these reasons UNICEF campaigns to uphold the child’s right to recreation and play, and through its activities has always highlighted the beneficial effects of sport.

This study by UNICEF Hungary is the **first to deal with children’s rights** with regards to experiences in sport. The precursor to the study was the 2010 “Protection of children from abuse in sport” **international report prepared by UNICEF**, and made available in Hungary in 2012. The current study is based on an online survey answered by 957 people between the ages of 18 and 63 about their experiences in organized sport as children. **The sample included data from 886 of these respondents, and testimonies from 858.** The research is not representative, but due to its size and quality it is certainly informative. We present the conclusions of the report based on the aforementioned sample data.

The approach of the subject matter from the perspective of children’s rights encompasses the belief in the right of all children to recreation, with an age-appropriate provision of sport and play (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Art. 31) and protection from all forms of violence (Art. 19). These basic principles are not mutually exclusive, and must be ensured simultaneously. Sport in itself means the testing of ones limits, and the controlled extrication from one’s comfort zone. However, these aspirations cannot circumvent or ignore basic principles of human dignity or the zero tolerance regarding violence towards children, in effect in Hungary since 2005.

According to the study children undertake sport primarily for the joy of physical activity (29%), spending time with friends (22%), and for recreation (14%). Success or overcoming ones limits – as motivating factors – only feature subsequently (13% and 12%, respectively) among the responses.

Of the respondents 63% felt their childhood experiences with sport were fundamentally positive, and were satisfied with the attention they received from their former coach. 69% of respondents believed that sport was essential for a healthy upbringing and that it contributed positively to self-esteem.

The research data shows that in 73% of cases psychological abuse occurred to respondents, in 39% there was physical abuse, 31% experienced sexual abuse and 15% went through an initiation process. The data also shows a strong correlation between the different forms of abuse. Psychological abuse was experienced by 96% of those who suffered physical abuse, and 95% of those suffered sexual abuse. Every second child who suffered abuse experienced a distortion in their self-image and body-image.

All children under the age of 18 who practice sport are first and foremost children and only secondarily sportsmen. This requires that their rights, needs and the specific laws pertaining to their protection have to be ensured. Violence and abuse are not inherent to sport, and should not be used to extract better performance or higher achievement. This cannot be a price we are willing to pay.

The **European Commission’s 2007 White Paper** points out that there are dangers to sport such as the exploitation and abuse of young athletes. **One of six issues requiring specific attention included the lack of adequate protection of young athletes and the harmful effects of abuse in sport.** A separate point highlights the importance of the protection of children, **calling for efforts to combat the sexual abuse of minors.** Furthermore, it draws attention to the economic exploitation of children, equal opportunity issues, racism, drug use, and the issue of violence during sporting events.

Hungary is a ‘sporting nation’ that deserves to be proud of its achievements. We have a long way to go towards ensuring the protection of children in sport, though. The existing rules and structures concerning the governance of sports and the training of sports professionals are inadequate. The principles that would ensure the protection of children’s rights and instigate the sensitivities of those in the field are lacking. Let us not forget that **childhood is unique and unrepeatable**. We must do all that is necessary so that our children are guaranteed recreation and play, the enjoyment of sport, and protection from any and all forms of violence.

We are confident that our research will contribute to the development of an open and transparent system to confront the facts of violence towards children in sport, and will help lawmakers and professionals in the field make the right decisions for the protection of children and improving their experience of sport.

The research report also contains detailed suggestions for children, parents, sports clubs, as well as law-making professionals. In doing so, our aim is to increase awareness about children’s rights, the training of coaches, inform about national and international best practices, and suggest avenues for further study.