

How Sport Can Make Children Safer.

A conversation with David Grevember

written by Elizabeth Coleman

The Commonwealth Games is the first major sporting organization to implement child rights standards, protecting young athletes but also millions of children. Says chief executive David Grevember: “The very work of sport, our relations with our 71 nations and territories – the conversation, the expectation, the rights and obligations – are now to uphold the highest standards of child safeguarding.”

What this looks like in practice – and how the Commonwealth Games got there – is a model in the world of sport. In the wake of news that many sporting organisations have failed to protect young athletes from sexual abuse and other harm, the Commonwealth Games story offers a path forward. We asked David Grevember to share how they came to see sport as a vehicle for improving the lives of children.

The Commonwealth Games is a voluntary association of 71 countries and territories that represents one third of the world’s population. Its new vision, adopted in 2014 is: *Building peaceful, sustainable and prosperous communities globally, by inspiring Commonwealth Athletes to drive the impact and ambition of all Commonwealth Citizens through sport.*

Says David: “If we are running a major sporting event, if we are running a development programme, if we are simply governing a sport in a country, it must have impact on peace, sustainability and prosperity.”

The impetus for change

David became chief executive of the organising committee for the 2014 Glasgow Games not long after the 2010 Delhi Games, which were beset by a series of safety issues. To demonstrate that the Games could have a positive impact, and following input from communities across Scotland, they teamed up with UNICEF. The opening ceremony raised GGP 6.5 million to help children in 53 countries. But the impact was also seen in the event itself.

“We created a culture and an ethos around child empowerment embedded in the development, promotion and actual delivery of our Games,” he says. “In every single contract, every single community tender, we talked about community benefits. In every single creative piece, we sought to get the input of children.”

Incorporating child rights across the federation

Over the next few years, David, now as chief executive of the entire federation, worked with his team to ensure that human rights and child safeguards were upheld at the 2015 Youth Games in Samoa, the 2017 Youth Games in Bahamas and the 2018 Gold Coast Commonwealth Games in Australia. Such measures impact a wide set of activities, from building new infrastructure to providing food, lodging and other services, improving safety and even changing legislation. The measures affect thousands of workers, volunteers and community members, including children.

Says David, “Child safeguarding and engagement is now a fundamental part of the culture of our Games, shifting the dialogue and shifting the conversation.”

Making sport a safe place for children

Despite traveling with young athletes to competitions around the world, few federation countries and sports teams have safeguarding policies in place. The federation hopes to change that.

“Making sport itself a safe space for children will require regional training across all of our Commonwealth Games and associations,” he says. These trainings, which are being rolled out following a successful pilot project, also set a global benchmark, because 53 of their members also serve as National Olympic Committees.

Other efforts include rewriting bylaws to require supporters and affiliates to have safeguarding standards and priorities, and convincing governments and sports ministers to view safeguarding as fundamental to the integrity and legitimacy of sport.

“It’s about bringing awareness, taking strong advocacy positions and action by setting standards and holding people to them,” says David. He also recently chaired an industry group that set the first guidelines on sport governance and human rights, which includes child safeguarding.

Changing the definition of athletic excellence

David believes that we need to replace the win-at-all costs culture in sports with a more balanced perspective of what it means to be a great athlete. In the future, instead of a myopic focus on high performance, athletes might ask: Through my personal best, how do I impact the lives of others?

He sees this as key to sport regaining its credibility after disclosures of abuse, corruption, doping. “The children are the future and the hope for being able to transform this,” he says.

The federation describes it this way: To Commonwealth Athletes, sport is more than just competition. Sport connects them – and all of us – with dreams, goals and aspirations for ourselves, our families and our communities.

More on the Commonwealth Athlete and the Commonwealth Games Federation’s transformational agenda can be found here. https://thecgf.com/sites/default/files/2018-03/Transformation-2022_updateJul15.pdf