



## Article

# Children's Rights to and in Sport: A Comparative Analysis of Organizational Policies in the Scandinavian Countries

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**Abstract:** It has long been stated that children have the rights to protection from, e.g., abuse and to the provision of age-appropriate leisure, play, and recreational activities along with participation in all matters that concerns them. Yet, the full range of children's rights to and in sport has not yet been explored in detail. To do so, it is relevant to turn to the Scandinavian countries, which are praised for promoting children's rights and well-being, with organized sport forming part of the daily lives of many children and youths. In this paper, we examine the organizational policies in Scandinavian sport in order to develop foundational knowledge about how the range of children's rights to and in sport may be supported. Comparing key policy documents of the major sports confederations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, these analyses identify great variety in the following: 1. when and how children's rights to and in sport have been made explicit in the three countries; 2. whether the emphasis is on protection and/or provision of sport to children and youths or their participation in shaping sporting activities; 3. the degree to and ways in which such rights are regulated. In sum, our findings reflect a disparity between organizational policies in the three countries, with a more liberal and individualistic approach to public policy in the Danish context, providing some explanation of the only recent development in and scattered enactment of regulations to support children's rights to and in sports. Furthermore, we identify that political attention has mainly been drawn to the protection and provision of sports to children and youths, while their participation in shaping sport is a shared challenge for sport confederations in the Scandinavian countries and beyond.

**Keywords:** youth sport; physical activity; civil society; protection; provision; participation



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## 1. Introduction

The United Nations launched the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989. The convention urges participating state parties to recognize the human rights of children and has become widely referred to, making it a powerful child rights instrument. Its starting point is that children are vulnerable and in particular need of *protection* (from, e.g., abuse, discrimination, and neglect) and have rights to *provision* (of, among others, education and health). Yet, the convention also states that children are active subjects who can and want to exercise their rights to *participation* (that is, the right to be heard and have their voices accounted for in decisions that affect their lives).

The UNCRC does not mention sport explicitly, although researchers maintain that most of its substantive articles have a bearing on children's and youth sports<sup>1</sup> (Donnelly 2008)—some more than others. For example, Article 31 states the following: "State parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts". Another one is Article 12, which argues for children's right to express their views and to have them considered in all matters that concern them. The core article of the convention,

which is also highly applicable to sport, is Article 3 which says the following: “In all actions concerning children, the best interest of the child shall be the major consideration”.

In the wake of the UNCRC, research has developed to consider what the child’s best interests are in various societal arenas (Horgan and Kennan 2022; Reynaert et al. 2009; Quennerstedt and Quennerstedt 2014). When it comes to research regarding children’s rights in relation to sport, numerous publications have focused on abuse and violations of children’s rights in sport (Bjørnseth and Szabo 2018; Wilinsky and McCabe 2020). A recently published literature review points to the relevance of paying more direct attention to children’s right in relation to sport to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon (Pavlogiannis et al. 2024).

In this paper, we seek to move in this direction through considering both the rights of children to have access to recreational activities and the rights of children within sport to have their views, welfare, and safety considered—what we, in this paper, refer to as children’s rights to and in sport. This range in our focus is also based in sport-specific knowledge about current issues in children’s and youth sports such as inequities in access to organized sport for disparate groups of children and youths (Owen et al. 2022) and research that points to challenges in sport, e.g., when organized with competitiveness as the main convention (Skille 2010) and little if any room for play and creativity (Rasmussen 2023). Thus, we find it more relevant than ever to consider what variety of regulations may be put in place to ensure children’s access to play and recreational activities along with their rights in sports when taking part.

In so doing, we turn to the Scandinavian countries, which are often praised for ensuring children’s rights and well-being, with organized sport forming part of the daily lives of many children and youths. The sports confederations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are independent, non-governmental organizations, but they, nevertheless, receive extensive state funding. Each confederation has, as their members, thousands of local sports clubs that are voluntarily driven and democratically governed; although independent, the local practices in such clubs may also be regulated by the sports confederation’s policies. In former comparative studies, organized sports across the Scandinavian countries have been described as ‘most similar cases’ (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010; Andersen and Ronglan 2012; Støckel et al. 2010), with the exception that there are two major sports confederations in Denmark—Danish Gymnastics and Sport Associations (DGI) and National Olympic Committee and Sport Confederation of Denmark (DIF)—and not one, as in Norway (Norwegian Confederation of Sport (NIF)) and Sweden (Swedish Sports Confederation (RF)).

The aim of this article is to examine these Scandinavian sport confederations’ policies in order to develop foundational knowledge about how children’s rights to and in sport may be supported. Comparing key policy documents of the major sports confederations in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, we will pursue three research questions: 1. How and when have children’s rights to and in sport been made explicit in the three countries? 2. Is the emphasis on protection of children and youths and the provision of sport to them or their participation in sport? 3. To what degree and in what ways are such organizational regulations enacted?

## 2. Current Research on Children’s Rights to and in Sport

When it comes to considering the existing research on children’s rights to sport, this research is often not explicitly focused on children’s rights (Pavlogiannis et al. 2024). This is the case in the increasing number of studies describing the inequity in access to sports for children and youths and how inclusion in sporting communities may be promoted (cf. review by Hjort and Agergaard 2022). Recent studies have demonstrated that it is particularly children and youths from low socio-economic and minority ethnic backgrounds, along with disabled children and youths, that do not have access to sport to the same extent as other children and youths (Andersen and Bakken 2018; Elofsson et al. 2019; Rask et al. 2020; Strandbu et al. 2019; Strandbu and Bakken 2024). While such studies provide important descriptions, they call for more studies about the rights-related issues

involved in providing access to sport. Furthermore, studies about inequity in access to sport are seldom linked with studies of children's rights in sport, even if rights to and rights in are closely linked in children's and youth's experiences of sport.

In the book, *Human Rights in Youth Sport: A critical review of children's rights in competitive sport*, David demonstrates that human rights and competitive sport are closely interwoven, but he notes that "they have ignored each other for decades" (David 2005, p. 3). David's book was an eye-opener for many and prompted academics, concerned parents, and former athletes to speak out against severe training regimes and to call for investigations into the balance between individual rights and adult and state responsibilities in sport. As pointed out by Wrang et al. (2022), the issue is whether children and young people are regarded as athletes first and children second in the sporting context. Since David's book, research has acknowledged different forms of exploitation of child athletes, such as sexual abuse and the "trafficking" of young football players (Strandbu et al. 2023; Yilmaz et al. 2020). Research also points to the culture of silence that often seems to prevail in sporting contexts (Rulofs et al. 2019; Barker-Ruchti and Varea 2023) that serves as a barrier to reporting and revealing abuse and harassment. Followingly, there has been an increased awareness of the need for the protection of children in sport—as underlined in the growing research on safeguarding in sport (Brackenridge and Rhind 2014; Lang and Hartill 2014; Rhind and Owusu-Sekyere 2017).

In the Scandinavian context, some studies have addressed children's rights to have their voices heard (e.g., Eliasson 2017; Redelius and Eliasson 2022; Redelius and Larsson 2016; Skrubbeltrang et al. 2022). These studies show that coaches are not used to address or talk about children's rights in sports. The right to take part in training is emphasized, and coaches do state that children have the right to express their opinions, come up with ideas, and ask questions, at least in some cases—the views appear to be mainly considered, when the children's suggestions are in line with coaches' views. Therefore, children's voices appear weak in many sporting contexts. Thus, it is timely for research on children's rights in sport to capture not only protection issues—whether children and youths are safe and free from harms of various kinds—but also participation issues about children's rights to have their voices heard (Lang 2022). So far, less research attention has been given to children's agency and their right to have their voices heard, although pointed out as important by many organizations. Thus, there is a need for research that conceptualizes and covers the full range of children's rights to and rights in sport.

### 3. Conceptual Framework

In the analyses below, we will distinguish between the three overall categorizations of children's rights—protection, provision, and participation—known colloquially as "the three Ps" (Lang 2022, p. 3). We do so by examining what variety of children's rights are considered in organized sport: *Provision* captures access to sport; whether all children have access regardless of their socioeconomic background, gender, ethnicity, etc.; and if sport clubs arrange suitable activities for children. *Protection* includes attempts to protect children from abuse, harassment, and other negative experiences in sport. *Participation* comprises children's rights to freedom of speech and information and to take part in and influence the exercise of power in sport (Quennerstedt 2010).

When further analyzing the organizational policies of the national sports confederations, we rely on Johan Norberg's (2013) conceptualization of three strategies for political governance: (1) *Governance by rules* captures direct regulations like making mandatory rules for how sport for children should be arranged. (2) *Governance by economic assets* captures giving (or withdrawing) financial support to clubs or federations that follow (or do not follow) the wanted suggestions and values of the confederation. (3) *Governance by values* is the softest form of governance and involves campaigns and projects to promote sport for children and youths that align with the values described in policies of the organization. Overall, we refer to *regulations* in this paper as comprising both rules and less demand-

ing/restrictive statements about how sport activities should be arranged by the national sports confederations.

#### 4. Materials and Methods

This paper is based in a multiple-case study of organizational policies in the three Scandinavian countries, and, more particularly, the Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish sports confederations' policies directed towards supporting children's rights to and in sport. We consider such organizational policies as 'most likely cases' (Flyvbjerg 2006) for promoting children's rights to and in sport. We expect that studies in Scandinavian settings can provide insights into ways in which organized sport can come to ensure children's rights. Thus our findings can be analytically generalized to what might also be done in other countries. Further, while Scandinavian settings may share many features, this multiple-case study will also showcase a variety of political regulations on children's rights to and in sport, along with limitations in the enactment of such political attention that also deserves consideration beyond the Nordic context.

When we compare the organizational policies for children's and youth sport across the countries, we organize the descriptions around the following dimensions:

1. Historically—when and how children's rights to and in sport have been made explicit as policies for the major sports confederations in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.
2. Socio-culturally—whether the emphasis in key policy documents is on protection during, participation in, and/or the provision of sport for children and youths.
3. Politically—the degree to which and ways that such current policies are enacted (governed) by the Scandinavian sports confederation.

Our analyses of the developing organizational policies for rights-based children's and youth sport in the three countries are mainly based on existing studies as well as historical knowledge about organizational policies and available pieces of information about how the organizational policies are governed today. In particular, in the Danish setting, the lack of former studies on children's rights in sport led us to rely on key informants. In addition to reviewing existing studies and information from colleagues and organizational employees, we have identified the following political documents of the sports confederations that refer to children's rights, yet in disparate ways:

- Norway: *Regulations on children's sport* from 1987; NIFs *Children's rights in sport and The provisions on children's sport* from 2007 and slightly revised in 2015 and 2019;<sup>2</sup> and *Guidelines for youth sport* from 1999 and revised in 2011.<sup>3</sup>
- Sweden: *Sport Wants To—The Sports Movement's Ideological Program*, launched in 1995 and slightly revised in 2009 and 2019<sup>4</sup>; and *Guidelines for Children and Youth Sport*, decided in 2021.<sup>5</sup>
- Denmark: *DGI's strategic foundation*,<sup>6</sup> *DIFs National vision statement for children and young people*,<sup>7</sup> and *DBUs The national FA's strategy for children's football*<sup>8</sup>

As for our analytical strategy, we have, rather deductively, examined the key policy documents mentioned above in line with procedures recommended by Bratberg (2021). Firstly, we have sought to identify how these documents are products of the developing attention to children's rights to and in sport in the Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish sport organizations, drawing also on information from colleagues and employees in the sport organizations. Secondly, we have read the key policy documents in more detail to identify whether the documents themselves focus on the provision of sport to children and youths, their protection, or children's rights to participation, i.e., having a voice and being able to influence their sport. Thirdly, we have examined the documents and home pages of the sport confederations, etc., for information about how the organizational policies are governed and enacted today.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Emerging Focus on Children's Rights to and in Sport

While organized sports in the Scandinavian countries are originally adult domains, children have increasingly come to participate in organized sport throughout the twentieth century (Støckel et al. 2010). In the 1940s, children mainly participated in informal sports. However, from the 1960–70s, a considerable growth in voluntary organized sport carved the way for widespread child and youth participation in organized sport (Støckel et al. 2010). In all Scandinavian countries, benevolent welfare policies and values of promoting sport for all led to support for children's and youth sports. Yet, from the 1970–1980s, particularly in Norway and Sweden, discussions arose about regulating children's and youth sports (Patriksson 1987; Wallin 2003).

#### 5.1.1. Norway: Early Concerns

In Norway, concerns for the protection of children from the possible harms of competitive sports can be traced even further back to the first years of the Norwegian confederation of sport (NIF), in the late 1940s (Solenes 2009).<sup>9</sup> Some forms of competition were considered to be possibly health-damaging for children and restrictions were made so that football and handball matches were shortened, and endurance sports like running and skiing had shorter distances compared to adult's. Medical risks were the main argument; with new medical knowledge developing, these restrictions were loosened in the late 1950s (Solenes 2009). The increased participation of children in organized sport in the 1970s intensified the concerns for children's welfare in sport and led the NIF, with some external pressure, to address how children's sport should be carried out. Consequently, *Guidelines for children's sport* was launched in 1976 and *Regulations on children's sport* were decided by the general assembly of the NIF in 1987.

These regulations were meant to protect children from aspects of adult sport that were seen as damaging for children, including, for instance, an exaggerated focus on competition and ranking. Encouraging all-round activities as the core of children's sport and avoiding specialization at an early age were among the key concerns, as well as making developmental plans for sports training suited for various age groups (Skirstad et al. 2012). Competition is also described as integral in children's sport—with progression adjusted to the developmental training plans. The damaging effects competition could have on children are underlined, illustrating a certain ambiguity concerning the role of competition in sport for children (Støckel et al. 2010).

The *Regulations on child sport* were revised by the general assembly of the NIF in 2007. The new regulations were divided into the *Children's rights in sport*, based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and a revised version of the regulations, *The provisions on children's sport* (see note 2). The modification of the latter allowed competition in the nearby environment or in the club from the age of 6 and participation in district championships from the age of 11. The overall impression is, nevertheless, a continuation of the former regulations. At the general assembly in 2019, a new paragraph was added that addressed economy as a barrier to sport participation, hence also including children's right to sport "regardless of their family's financial situation or involvement" (see note 2).

Youth sport has not been as strictly regulated as sport for children. *Guidelines for youth sport*, originally drafted by young members of the NIF, were adopted in 1999 by the general assembly of the NIF. These guidelines were further revised in 2011 and are presented as a continuation of the regulations on children's sport (see note 3). Reducing the dropouts of young people from organized sport is an important inducement for making these guidelines that address four areas: activity, co-determination, training, and facilities.

#### 5.1.2. Sweden: Long Discussion of Children's and Youth Sports

Sweden and Norway share many characteristics regarding the overall development of youth sports. In Sweden, the first youth committee was established in the early 1940s. At that time, children and youths primarily engaged in sports within the school context; but,

since many completed their education in early adolescence, the committee's task was to promote the continuation of sports activities in organized clubs. An important responsibility was to educate leaders and coaches (Patriksson 1987). During the 1950s, the development intensified, and more young people began to engage in sports within clubs. A significant contributing factor to clubs reaching out to younger age groups was the introduction of state activity support, primarily aimed at protecting youths, from the dangers of alcohol since the restrictions that had previously existed in Sweden regarding alcohol sales were lifted (Patriksson 1987). These first two decades were mainly characterized by provision, i.e., to promote sports and enable more children and youths to participate (the right to sport).

How sport for children and youths should be designed (the rights in sport) began to be discussed seriously in Sweden in connection to the first research conference on the subject being organized in the early 1980s. The leading researchers of the time in different disciplines, such as physiology, medicine, and pedagogy, gathered and gave an interdisciplinary evaluation of the state of knowledge regarding children's sports. Researchers do not always agree; but, in the report that followed the conference, a unanimous picture is presented of how sports for children should be conducted (Engström and Forsberg 1982). The Secretary General of the Swedish Sports Confederation (RF), at that time, summarized the state of knowledge as follows:

“Children's sports are primarily for the children and their best interests. Therefore, the needs and interests of the children must come into focus. Children are not scale-reduced miniatures of adults. Children grow and mature at different rates. Sports—both training and competition—should be adapted to the development of the children and not vice versa. Sports should not prioritize early developed and disadvantage late developed. The question of developing skills in children must therefore be seen in a broad perspective. Ultimately, the question concerns the goal for the development of skills. It must then be clear that it is about the individual's best interests and not the prestige of sports, sports coaches, or parents.” (Engström and Forsberg 1982, p. 97, authors translation)

More than forty years have passed but the arguments above are still relevant. The discussion continued in other words, and in 1995 the general assembly of the RF unanimously decided to adopt a common goal and vision document, *Idrotten Vill* (sport wants to) (see note 4). The document describes the sports movement's core ideas and values and includes guidelines for how children's and youth sports should be conducted. Apart from some minor revisions, the guidelines have been basically the same since then. However, a significant addition was made in 2009 when it was added that sports for children up to 18 years should be conducted from a child rights perspective. The addition was a consequence of a previously made government decision that state support should only go to sports clubs that conduct an activity that is compatible with the UNCR. The existing guidelines were already well in line with the spirit of the convention and, therefore, did not entail any major change. The official position of the RF's democratically made decisions and the government's wishes for how sports for young people should be conducted were, thus, consistent, at least at a central level, but policy and practice have not always been.

### 5.1.3. Denmark; Little Imprint

In 1936, public debate arose about children in competitive sport when the 12-year-old swimmer Inge Sørensen won a bronze medal at the Olympics in Berlin (Trangbæk 1987). While such debates about how sports should be organized for children and youths have been going on for many decades, they do not appear to be imprinted in political documents and initiatives in Denmark to the same extent as in Norway and Sweden.

When the first law on elite sports in Denmark was ratified, it occurred using an article saying that children below 15 years old could not be supported by the Danish elite sports institution, Team Denmark (Storm 2012; Ibsen et al. 2013). However, when the elite sports law was revised in 2004, this age limitation was abolished. In the wake of the revision of the elite sports law, the conceptualization of age-specific training was developed by

Team Denmark and the Danish Sports Confederation (DIF).<sup>10</sup> The current revised edition of Team Denmark's report on age-specific training describes children's and young people's physical, mental, and social development and links this development with principles for age-specific training including physical training, the development of motor skills and techniques, knowledge about sports medicine, sports nutrition, sport psychology, and pedagogy along with athlete education.<sup>11</sup>

While the documents on age-specific training are directed towards training talented children and young people in particular, organizational policies concerned with sports for broader groups of children and young people are relatively absent and rather novel in Denmark. Just recently, in October 2023, the DIF presented a national vision statement on children and young people (see note 7). In the current strategy paper of the second national sports organization (DGI) (see note 6), children and young people are also mentioned as one among four main priorities. We will consider these documents in further detail below.

## 5.2. Focus on Key Policy Documents

While policy documents may not be directly translated into practice, they still express key values of the authoring organizations. Below, we focus on the identified documents on children's and youth sports and examine whether attention has primarily been given to the provision of recreational activities for children and youth, protection, or participation of children and young people within sports.

### 5.2.1. Norway; Protection in Focus

The first point in *Children's rights in sport* addresses *protection*: "Children have the right to practice in an environment that is safe and secure, without any inappropriate pressure or exploitation" (see note 2). The second right, on friendship and enjoyment; the sixth on the right to choose to compete (or not); and the seventh on the right to participate in activities that are suitable for the child's age and maturity could be stated as examples of *provision* (the last two also could be considered as aligning with participation and protection, respectively). At the general assembly in 2019, a new paragraph on economy as a barrier to sport participation was added, hence also including children's right to sport "regardless of their family's financial situation or involvement" (see note 2). This is also an example of rights in the sense of provision. *Participation* is underlined in the third right to learn and experience competence and in the fifth—the right to choose which and how many sports. Participation is most pronouncedly expressed in the fourth right—the right to influence: "Children should have the right to express their own opinions and that their opinions should be considered" (see note 2). Hence, all three P's are found in the Norwegian sports federation's *Children's rights in sport*—not surprisingly since the document is inspired by the UN Convention of the Child.

The second part of the regulations of child sport in Norway, *The provisions on children's sport*, is harder to classify. The most detailed part comprises rules for competitions, like when children can participate in competitions in their own sport club (from the age of 6), in regional setting (from the age of 9), and in the national or Nordic setting (from the age of 11). The rules also state that children up to the age of 13 cannot participate in Norwegian, European, or equivalent championships. Furthermore, the regulations state that all children shall receive prizes in competitions if prizes are given, and that tables and ranking can, if considered appropriate, be used from the year the children turn 11. The underlying logic in the restrictions put on competitions is the protection of children.

The protection of children is also part of the general safeguarding work of the NIF. The mandatory *Guidelines against Sexual harassment and abuse*<sup>12</sup> in Norwegian sports organizations, since 2010, are also part of the protection of children in sport, even though these guidelines are not especially directed against the harassment and abuse of children. *Safe at training* is a course for coaches and volunteers in sport for children to increase knowledge about violence, sexual abuse, and safeguarding. The course is developed by Save the Children, Norway (Sandvik et al. 2022).

Taken together, the overall impression is that protection has high importance in the NIF's stated values and regulations of sports for children. Provision has received increased attention in line with discussions about inequality in access to sport. Participation is underlined in *Children's rights in sport*. However, knowledge about how children's rights as well as provisions are influencing child sport at the grassroots is sparse.

### 5.2.2. Sweden; Multiple Provision Priorities

The present guidelines for children's and youth sports are outlined in a document covering over 30 pages. It is directed to the over 70 federations that are part of the Swedish sports confederation but also to local clubs and coaches. It takes its starting point and inspiration from the UNCRC. In the introduction, it is stated that "the guidelines should be seen as the sports confederation way to make the UN convention of the right of the child come into practice" (p. 14) (see note 5). Each guideline is also exemplified, and in that way legitimized, by two or three different articles from the UNCR. In the same vein, its overall aim is that as many as possible should be able to participate in sports for as long as possible, in the best possible environment. Moreover, a good children's and youth program is one that is welcoming, secure, and where everyone can influence their sporting practice, and the best interests of children and youth should guide the decisions and priorities of the program.

The specific guidelines for children and youth sports are five in number. The guidelines are as follows: (1) Safety—create secure and welcoming environments. (2) Participation—offer involvement and possibilities to influence. (3) Joy—promote inner drive and long-term development. (4) Versatility—enable diverse and playful sports participation. (5) Health—contribute to health and well-being over time. These five core values are both related to protection (as in guideline 1), participation (as in guideline 2), and provision (as in guidelines 3, 4, and 5).

It is not coincidental that these values are promoted. The guidelines can be seen as an attempt to address some of the problems highlighted in youth sports in recent years, such as high dropout rates. The participation pattern resembles a triangle in shape: children and youth form a broad base, but the top is narrow and pointed, primarily consisting of the relatively few who continue and reach elite levels. The future vision is that this triangle should instead become a rectangle, meaning that the number of athletes should not decrease with increasing age; rather, it should be possible to continue with organized club sports throughout life, regardless of skill and ambition levels. Another issue is that children's and youth sports, in general, are too intense and require specialization at an early age—a problem that seems to have been on the agenda since the 1970s (Wallin 2003) and onwards (Redelius et al. 2016). Essentially, the guidelines revolve around shaping sports where children and youth feel secure, welcomed, and involved and where their diverse and versatile development and well-being are the focal points.

### 5.2.3. Denmark: Attention without Reference to Children's Rights

In Denmark, there is some focus on the *protection* of children and young people in organized sports, most explicitly in the fact that all local sports clubs must gather a Child Protection Certificate. This procedure contributes to examining the criminal record of all adults that are in close contact with children. Such focus on *protection* is also present in the DIF's national vision statement for child and youth sport. The second of the four principles states the following: "All children and young people must encounter competent adults in sporting communities" (see note 7). As such, the focus on *protection* remains rather implicit, and the focus appears to be less on children's rights and more on competent training in line with the age-specific training concept.

Furthermore, the *provision* of sports to children and young people appears in-focus. In particular, the DGI has allocated DKK 70 million to promoting equal access to organized sports for children and youths.<sup>13</sup> As evident in their description, this initiative has to do with supporting the provision of facilities (particularly in areas with increasing population

density) along with supporting regional and local programs directed towards including groups of children and young people who are seldom part of organized sports. This focus on the provision of sport for all children and young people, no matter their background and context, is also apparent in the DIF's national vision statement on children and young people. This is evident in the first of four principles in the DIF's statement: "All children and young people must have access to sporting communities" (see note 7).

More directly related to rights-based issues are the third and fourth principles in the DIF's statement. In the third statement ("All children and young people must be involved and have a say in sporting communities" (see note 7)), the DIF suggests a rather explicit focus on children's right to participate. The DIF does so by pointing to the significance of not just involving but also sharing decisions with children and young people. Further, the key concern in the UNCRC—the best interests of the child—is somewhat reflected in the final principle in the DIF's national vision statement: "Sporting communities must promote the well-being and personal development of all children and young people" (see note 7). As such, the fourth principle points beyond the protection of children to the active role that sports organizations may take in promoting the well-being and development of children and young people. Still, these principles were only recently authored and only by one of the two major sports organizations in Denmark.

In sum, the two major Danish sports organizations are both concerned with the protection of children and youths in organized sport related to criminal records. Yet, there appears to be little explicit reference to children's right to the provision of opportunities along with their right to have a say in shaping sporting activities and, ultimately, organizational policies concerning children and youth.

### 5.3. Enactment of Organizational Policies

While the paragraphs above have identified key policy documents and focus areas for the current organization of children's and youth sports in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, we will now examine how such regulations are enacted. Based on Norberg's distinction between governance by rules, economic assets, and values, we analyze how the national sports organizations demand, encourage, or inspire local sports clubs (and sports federations) to follow the current regulations.

#### 5.3.1. Norway: Detailed Recommendations

The key document *Children's rights in sport* states the recommendations for sports activities for children and could be described as governance by values. The recommendations should be followed, but they are quite general in their expression. *The provisions on children's sport*, on the contrary, is more detailed, focusing on the organization of competitions, and could be described as governance by rules. It is mandatory for the sports clubs to follow these rules. The various national sports federations make their own "translation" of the general regulations to fit the uniqueness of their sport. Each federation must decide their own sanctions on violations including the option of withdrawing clubs' right to participate in competitions. In the case of repeated violations, or serious violations, the case must be reported to the Adjudication Committee of the NIF.

Another example of governance by rules is the required police clearance ("Politiattest" in Norwegian).<sup>14</sup> All people with a sporting assignment that involves a relationship of trust with or responsibility towards minors or people with intellectual disabilities must present a valid criminal record certificate. The actual implementation and effectiveness of this effort has been questioned.<sup>15</sup> The demand that all sport clubs, which organize children's sports, must appoint a board member with responsibility for children's sports ("Barneidrettsansvarlig"<sup>16</sup>) can also be described as governance by rule. The board member shall ensure good routines for disseminating information about children's rights in sports and provisions for children's sports in the sports club.

Still, the tension between different ideals about the meaning of sport for children show up from time to time (Skirstad et al. 2012; Strandbu et al. 2021). Children are often coached

by unpaid parents. Although the NIF has basic coach/activity leader education, in many cases, coaches in children's sports lack formal training and education. A study of sports leaders in Norway and their knowledge about the regulations of children's sports showed a decreasing trend in knowledge in the organization. Leaders at the local level were reported to have the least knowledge about the regulations. At the same time, the study concludes that the values of children's sport—especially the principle about all-round activity and sport on the children's premises—is highly approved at all levels in the NIF (Ingebrigtsen and Sæther 2006). A study of highly skilled coaches in children's sports also shows that their views on talent development in sport, for the most part, aligns with the NIF's version of *Children's rights in sport* (Ellingsen and Danielsen 2017).

### 5.3.2. Sweden: Value-Based Governing with Little Follow-Up

When it comes to governing the implementation of guidelines for children's and youth sports, in Sweden, this has essentially been conducted through value-based governance. This means that the Swedish Sports Confederation has informed about and promoted the values that should permeate children's and youth sports to sport federations, but there have been few systematic follow-ups or evaluations and there are really no consequences if it turns out that federations or clubs are not conducting activities in line with the centrally formulated and decided guidelines. An exception is a case that happened a decade ago, when abuse and misconduct in artistic competitive gymnastics was brought to light in the media. The Swedish Gymnastics Federation then requested an independent investigation that revealed clear misconduct (Stier 2012). As a result, the Swedish Sports Confederation issued financial sanctions by withholding elite support until the Gymnastics Federation could present an action plan for addressing the misconduct that had been identified.

Apart from this case, there is only one example of governance through regulations. Since 2020, when the UNCRC became part of Swedish legislation, federations and clubs must, as is also the case in Norway, request a limited extract from the criminal records of coaches who are employed, have assignments in clubs, and have direct and regular contact with children. Otherwise, there are very few regulations to ensure that the guidelines are adhered to.

However, there is a function called a 'Sports Ombudsman' that works towards ensuring that the sports movement's mission, vision, and core values are followed within the sports community. The 'Sports Ombudsman' (IO) has two employees who are part of the Swedish Sports Confederation but also has an independent function. If one does not want to or dares not to contact the 'Sports Ombudsman' directly, it is possible to use the anonymous and encrypted whistleblower service, where the 'Sports Ombudsman' receives cases. The purpose of the whistleblower service is to make it easier to report serious misconduct in sports. The whistleblower service is, therefore, an alternative when, for some reason, it is not possible to take the matter to an association or confederation. Whistleblower cases can, for example, concern financial irregularities, abuse, or harassment. All messages are treated confidentially, and the one reporting has the option of being completely anonymous.

### 5.3.3. Denmark: Indirect Governing

In the Danish context, there is next to no regulation to ensure that organizational policies concerning sports for children and young people are enacted by the many local sports clubs.

The nearest we get to governance by rule is the law on "Child Protection Certificate" that was issued in 2005 and revised in 2012.<sup>17</sup> It has made it compulsory for all local sports clubs to ensure a spotless certificate of criminal record for all coaches who are in direct contact with (or can get in contact with) children and young people below 15 years of age.

Also, governance by economic asset is rare. Team Denmark asks the federations they support to describe how they will follow the age-specific training concept. As mentioned earlier, this part of the organizational policies is directed towards talented young athletes, in particular. So far, it is only the National Football Federation (DBU) that has explicitly

authored a document about children's rights (see note 8). The federation does not monitor whether local football clubs follow these regulations. Still, describing a number of children's rights to and in football is innovative in the Danish setting. Other sports federations are likely to follow the national FA with the rising public attention given to children's rights in the wake of the governmental program entitled *Children First* from 2021 and the *Children's law* from 2024.<sup>18</sup>

The main form of governance of the organization of children's and youth sport in Denmark is governance by values. As mentioned, the DIF has presented a national vision statement on children and young people (see note 7). Also, the DGI mentions in their strategy paper that children and young people are one of their four main priority areas (see note 6). While such value-based governing of the organization of children's and youth sports may not ensure implementation, this aligns with broader tendencies observed across the organizational policies in Scandinavian sport that we will discuss in more details below.

## 6. Discussion

Our comparative analysis shows that, even though the protection of children from presumed damaging experiences in competitive sport has received attention in Scandinavia for several decades, discussions about the rights of the child to influence their sport have received little attention until recently. This is surprising given the popularity of sport as a leisure activity and the key role sport is given in welfare policies in the Scandinavian countries.

The limited attention given to children's rights in organized sport is particularly true in Denmark, where there is no explicit reference to the UNCRC. This lack of attention and regulation aligns with comparative studies of health policies in the Scandinavian countries that have pointed to the presence of more liberal policies and individualistic approaches in Denmark (Vallgård 2011). Even though there is an implicit agreement between the state and the sports organizations in all three countries, there might be a political culture in Denmark for not interfering in private/civil matters, giving the DGI and the DIF greater freedom (and responsibility) to organize sport for children and youth. The same political culture for not interfering in private/civil matters might also make the national confederations less eager to make regulations or codes of conduct on matters that seems to be self-evident or private. Yet, bearing in mind that the state and the national sports organization are related in figurations of interdependency (Thing and Ottesen 2010), the recent focus of the Danish state on children's rights will probably also initiate rising attention to such issues in organized sports.

Considering how the major Scandinavian sports confederations regulate their policies in relation to their associated federations and member clubs, we found sparse use of mandatory rules and rewards for how sports for children should be arranged (*governance by rules and economic assets*). The exceptions are rather detailed rules for competitions in the Norwegian case, whereas there are only guidelines in Sweden, along with demands for a spotless criminal record for coaches of children and youths in all three countries. In comparison, *governance by values* is, by far, the most common approach reflected in policy documents, campaigns, and projects to promote sport for children and youths that align with the values described in the policies of the sport confederations. Such a shared soft policy approach in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark may follow in the wake of the implicit contract between the state and the sports confederations in Scandinavia (Norberg 2004), trickling down into a soft approach also being applied in the collaboration between the national sports confederations and local sports clubs as well.

The three overall categorizations of children's rights—protection, provision, and participation—also help us to compare the variety of children's rights to and in organized sport in Scandinavia. Our analyses identified that attention has mainly been drawn to protection in Norway (through attempts to protect children from abuse, harassment, and other negative experiences) and to multiple priorities of provision (access to suitable sport activities, regardless of socioeconomic background, gender, ethnicity, etc.). Sweden has, in many ways, followed in the wake of Norway, while the focus on children's rights is still

novel in organized sport in Denmark. Even though the participation of children and young people is underlined in some of the statements of the Scandinavian sport confederations, their attention to the voices of children and youths still appears underdeveloped. As seen in the context of the UN rights of the child, participation refers to children's rights to freedom of speech and information and to take part in and influence the exercise of power in sport. Such rights of children to participation seem to be an unmet challenge for organized sport in Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

Still, it is worth keeping in mind that our analyses have primarily addressed the existing regulations and attempts to promote the rights of the child in sport. Our concern has not been how the regulations and attempts are followed up and practiced in local sport clubs at the grassroots level. However, our review of current research revealed that these topics are only sparsely researched in the Scandinavian countries. With the exception of Sweden (Eliasson et al. 2017; Redelius et al. 2016; Waerner et al. 2024), few studies have researched how children's rights to and in sports are put into practice in the Scandinavian countries. This is surprising given the high numbers of children taking part in sport and the recent attention given to children's rights in various societal arenas. Hopefully, our comparative analysis of the Scandinavian sport confederation's policies and our attempts to initiate conceptual development within this research field by pointing at the range of children's rights to and in sport will inspire further research.

## 7. Conclusions

This article is based on information about the development of political attention to children's rights in organized sports as well as key policy documents of the major sports confederations in three Scandinavian countries. As such, this analysis is limited in nature and scope. Research shows that there is often a gap between the formulations on a policy level and what is going on at a practical level. From time to time, reports on, for example, early selection and early elite training that are not in line with guidelines make media headlines or are described in the literature (Redelius et al. 2016).

Nevertheless, the Scandinavian countries are rich and privileged in many ways. In several countries, children's rights and particularly the protection of children in sport—safeguarding—appear to be even more pressing concerns (Van Niekerk 2014). Still, a comparative analysis of the organizational policies in Scandinavian sport may serve to provide foundational knowledge about when, how, and in what ways attention may be directed towards children's rights to and in sport.

Our findings point to options of directing more explicit political attention to the range of children's rights to and in sport, as well as the possible future use of not only soft values but also rules and economic assets in regulating policies for children's and youth sports. Future research needs to pursue further knowledge about the reach of organizational policies and how the governance of sport may ensure that sport is conducted in the best interests of the child.

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## Notes

- 1 While the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child comprises children up to the age of 18, most sports organizations distinguish between sports for children (up to the age of 13) and youth sports (for 13 to 19 years of age). Regulations and guidelines for children’s sports and youth sports differ. In this article, we, therefore, use the terms children and youth—when considering the disparate policies of sports federations for the specific age groups—and simply children when referring to the UNCRC descriptions of children as all individuals under 18 years.
- 2 [https://flippage.impleoweb.no/dokumentpartner/8a4ab125083149639ebc3b0c0c7cd0a5/82\\_19\\_Barneidrettsbestemmelsene\\_EN.pdf#page=4](https://flippage.impleoweb.no/dokumentpartner/8a4ab125083149639ebc3b0c0c7cd0a5/82_19_Barneidrettsbestemmelsene_EN.pdf#page=4) (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- 3 Ungdomsidrett (idrettsforbundet.no).
- 4 <https://www.rf.se/download/18.7e76e6bd183a68d7b71179c/1664978259581/Idrotten%20Vill%20E2%80%93%20Idrottsr%C3%B6relsens%20id%C3%A9program.pdf> (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- 5 <https://www.rf.se/download/18.407871d3183abb2a6133d5/1665042792026/Riktlinjer%20barn-%20och%20ungdomsidrott.pdf> (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- 6 <http://e-pages.dk/dgi/1412/> (accessed on 20 January 2024).
- 7 <https://www.dif.dk/nyheder/2023/10/traenerloefte-og-mere-inkluderende-konkurrencer-nyt-boerne-og-ungesyn-skal-styrke-trivsel-blandt-800000-medlemmer> (accessed on 20 January 2024).
- 8 <https://www.dbu.dk/boern-og-unge/boernefodbold/strategi-for-dansk-boernefodbold/> (accessed on 20 January 2024).
- 9 There is historical evidence of earlier regulations on children’s participation in sport. For example, in 1899, The Central Association for Sport (Centralforeningen) forbid men and women under the age of 18 from participating in competitions that demanded high endurance. In 1925, “Landsforbundet for Idrett” stated that children under the age of 16 should not participate in any international competitions. This was the year after 11-year-old Sonja Henie represented Norway in figure-skating at the first winter Olympics in Chamonix, 1924. These are examples of how one has tried to shield the vulnerable child from the dangers of adult life (Solenes 2009).
- 10 <https://www.dif.dk/media/jualugwu/aldersrelateret-tr%C3%A6ning-h%C3%A6fte.pdf> (accessed on 20 January 2024).
- 11 [https://umbraco.teamdanmark.dk/media/1667/atk-20\\_low.pdf?](https://umbraco.teamdanmark.dk/media/1667/atk-20_low.pdf?) (accessed on 20 January 2024).
- 12 [https://www.idrettsforbundet.no/contentassets/25e0689adbe042beb798e716fca1d119/brosjyre\\_seksuell-trakassering\\_engelsk\\_web\\_red-2021-1.pdf](https://www.idrettsforbundet.no/contentassets/25e0689adbe042beb798e716fca1d119/brosjyre_seksuell-trakassering_engelsk_web_red-2021-1.pdf) (idrettsforbundet.no) (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- 13 <https://www.dgi.dk/samarbejd/om-vores-fokusomraader/fokusomraader/boerns-bevaegelsesglæde/alle-boern-og-unge-skal-have-adgang-til-foreningslivet> (accessed on 20 January 2024).
- 14 Politiattest (idrettsforbundet.no). <https://www.idrettsforbundet.no/tema/politiattest/> (accessed on 20 February 2024).
- 15 Several articles in the newspaper VG in 2020 and 2021 accused the sports federation of a lack of control over the actual practice of police clearance. See: Kommentar: Idrettsovergrebene: Pinglete plan for politiattester—VG.
- 16 Barneidrettsansvarlig (idrettsforbundet.no).
- 17 <https://politi.dk/service-og-tilladelser/straffeattest/bestil-boerneattest> (accessed on 20 January 2024).
- 18 <https://www.regeringen.dk/nyheder/2021/bred-politisk-aftale-om-boernene-foerst/> (accessed on 20 January 2024).

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