Safe Spaces in Sport for Development and Mental Health

A pragmatic resource

Introduction

Physical and emotional safe spaces are well acknowledged as an integral part of Sport for Development. Despite this there has been limited robust scientific exploration into how safe spaces are effectively delivered. A recent study hosted by Edinburgh Napier University sought to address the gap and if you wish to read the peer reviewed output from this study you can at the following link:

Marshall, J. & Martindale, R. (2024). A Delphi study exploring physical and emotional safe spaces within sport for development projects targeting mental health. *Journal of Sport for Development*, *12*(2).

This document aims to summarise the pragmatic findings from this study, so they are readily accessible for any interested Sport for Development organisation. The document will consist of the following sections:

Study Overview - Methods

In order to best explore safe spaces within Sport for Development targeting mental health, a Delphi method was utilised to establish consensus on key elements related to safe space implementation. The Delphi technique was developed in the Cold War and is based around the systematic surveying of a panel of experts to establish consensus on a topic of interest.

The Delphi process involves an initial round of open questions around the topic of interest. From the responses to these questions a series of statements are generated which are presented back to participants in subsequent rounds. Participants are asked to rate their agreement and offer feedback related to the refinement of these statements or new potential statements. At each round if a statement reaches a predefined level of agreement (80% in this study) consensus has been reached and the statement is adopted for study outputs. These rounds continue until all participant feedback has been addressed.

The key outputs of the study are these consensus statements which provide pragmatic insight to key elements related to the facilitation of physical and emotional safe spaces within Sport for Development.

Study Overview - Participants

Given the aims of the study, active coaches from established Sport for Development programmes were deemed the most appropriate participants for surveying. Coaches' understanding and experiences of pragmatic implementation of safe spaces in real world settings provide the foundations for this research.

Coaches were recruited from a deliberately broad range of organisations in terms of context, geography, participants, and sports modality. This variance ensured a wide range of perspectives were captured and represented in the final consensus statements.

Organization	Location	Sport Modality	No. of Coach Participants	Website
ClimbAID	Lebanon	Rock Climbing	1	https://climbaid.org/
Elman Peace	Somalia	Multisport	2	http://elmanpeace.org/
HIV Free Generation	Kenya	Surfing	2	https://www.hivfreegeneration.org/
Lost Boyz Inc	USA	Baseball	3	https://www.lostboyzinc.org/
Maitryana	India	Netball	3	https://maitrayana.in/
Moving the Goalposts	Kenya	Soccer	3	https://www.mtgk.org/
Skateistan	South Africa	Skateboarding	2	https://skateistan.org/
School of Hard Knocks	United Kingdom	Rugby	2	https://www.schoolofhardknocks.org.uk/
Street Soccer Scotland	United Kingdom	Soccer	2	https://streetsoccerscotland.org/
Waves for Change	South Africa	Surfing	2	https://waves-for-change.org/
Waves for Hope	Trinidad	Surfing & Skateboarding	2	https://www.waves-for-hope.org/
Watford FC Community Trust	United Kingdom	Soccer	2	https://www.watfordfccsetrust.com/

Safe Space Characteristics

The following consensus statements from the study represent key characteristics of safe spaces in Sport for Development.

- Free from judgement

- Empathetic

- Respectful

- Trusting

- Patient

- Inclusive and accepting

- Supportive

- Encouraging

- Caring

- Consistent and reliable

- Authentic and honest

- Collaborative

- Equitable (participants and facilitators held to same standards)

Programme Structure 1

The following consensus statements from the study represent key elements of programme structure that are foundational to the facilitation of safe spaces in Sport for Development.

- Projects should be aware of, and mitigate for, contextual potential reprisals against or negative repercussions for participants engaging with the project.

- The project must carry out thorough risk assessment of activities, including where possible removing hazards present in activity locations and weather planning.

- The project must be delivered in a secure location that provides a barrier, as much as is possible, to external contextual threats to the safe space.

- The project must provide activity based first aid cover.

- The project must provide appropriate and sufficiently maintained equipment.

- Projects should always manage hydration appropriately.

- Where feasible and appropriate projects would replace energy lost through activities through feeding elements. This is especially true for populations facing challenges associated with food insecurity.

Programme Structure 2

- The project should provide regular training for facilitators, focused on up to date mental health and project specific practices.

- Facilitators should be appropriately qualified for their context; it must be noted the nature of these qualifications will vary around the world.

- Where possible and feasible facilitators should have access to clinical/professional support for their own mental health.

- Projects should maintain contextually/project appropriate rules for participants.

- Programs should plan to appropriately manage pre-existing social relationships between coaches and participants within the community.

- Programs should structure activities to encourage participants to take part at their own pace, and plan for participants taking part at different paces.

- Where appropriate, possible and feasible facilitators should signpost participants to further clinical/professional support for their mental health.

- The project must have contextually developed and targeted child protection policies.

Programme Structure 3

- The project must be up front and transparent around its goals and intentions.

- Where feasible and appropriate facilitators should be recruited from within the community and/or the population served by the project.

- The project must be grounded in expert knowledge of the target population.

- The project must have appropriate feedback mechanisms and be open to feedback provided.

- Projects should, as much as is possible, provide access to coaches of appropriate genders for participants.

- Projects should, as much as is possible, provide gender appropriate changing/toilet facilities. Where impossible structures to mitigate for this, such as staggered changing, individual changing etc, should be put in place.

- Safe spaces are a collaborative process, where possible, participants should be engaged in setting project structures around safe spaces (for example collaborative approaches to rule/goal setting).

- Projects should be aligned on purpose and implementation of activities, there should not be dissonance between management and facilitators.
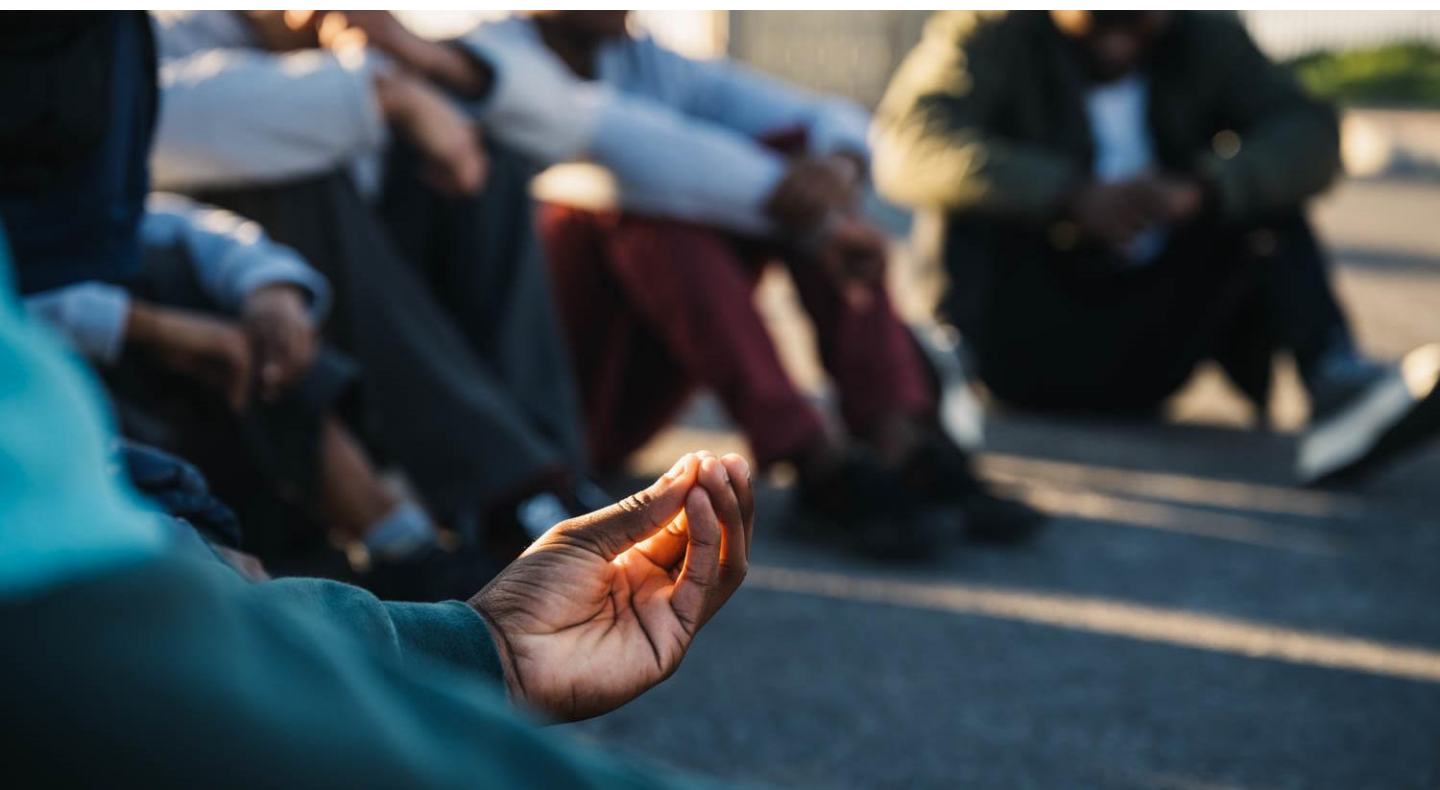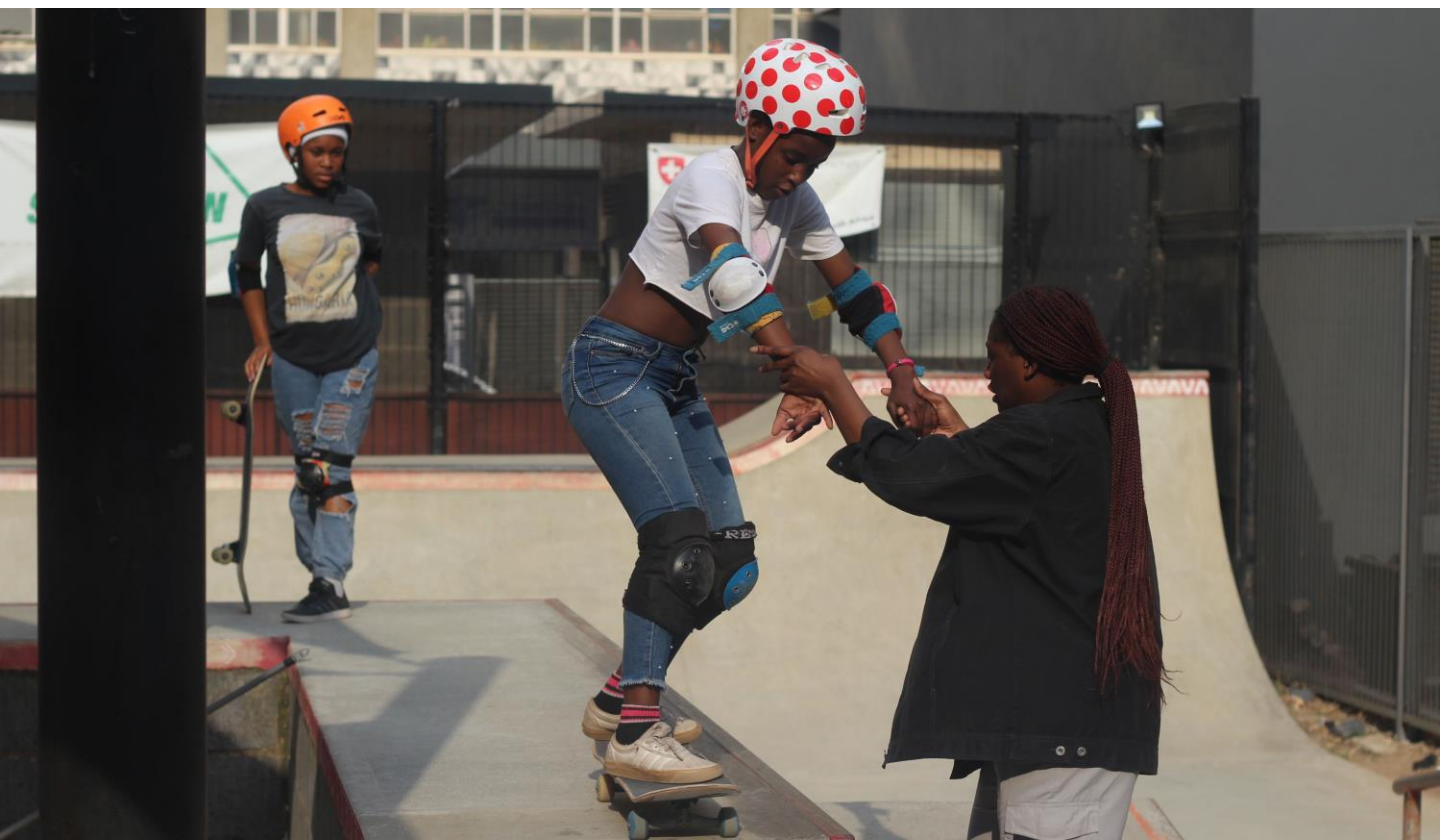
Coach Behaviours

The following consensus statements from the study represent coach behaviours that are foundational to the facilitation of safe spaces in Sport for Development.

- Coaches should maintain appropriate physical boundaries.

- Coaches should appropriately manage competitive elements of activities to ensure they do not undermine safe space provision.

- Coaches should be patient with participants, understanding where they have come from and offering no judgement.

- Coaches should encourage and support participants to take part at their own pace.

- Coaches should never over promise on things that they cannot deliver.

- Coaches must be intentional in their use of language and share this with participants.

- Coaches must be aware of, and able to implement all child protection policies.

- Coaches should always be aware of their own tone and body language when facilitating.

- Coaches should offer an appropriate degree of vulnerability to build trust with participants, such as sharing examples from their own lives.

Coach Behaviours 2

- Coaches must never show favouritism.
- Coaches should endeavour to include all participants within all activities, as much as is possible.
- Coaches should utilise real world examples within discussions of mental health.
- Coaches must not tolerate bullying or harassment of any kind.
- Coaches should actively and intentionally listen to participants within group discussion/activities.
- Coaches should role model behaviours relating to safe spaces and project aims.
- Coaches should plan for potential difficult conversations and/or topics that may come up.
- Coaches must always be aware of and remove wherever possible, perceived and actual contextual barriers to participation.
- Coaches must be experts in the population targeted.
- Coaches should appropriately challenge negative stereotypes/judgements that arise within activities.

Coach Behaviours 3

- Coaches should especially challenge gender stereotypes around sport participation. Where possible the local community should also be engaged with this discussion.

- Coaches should be held to the same standards of behaviour as participants.

- Coaches should always facilitate with an awareness of wider context and what is going on in the community.

- Coaches must be aware of biases and/or stigma they may hold, and that may be prevalent within the local context.

- Coaches should intentionally provide time/space for reflection on activities/learnings.

- Coaches should allow for mistakes and, wherever possible, reframe examples of failure as learning opportunities.

- Coaches must be open to questions that emerge from activities.

Barriers to Safe Spaces

The examples from the study represent key pragmatic barriers to the facilitations of safe spaces in Sport for Development. *Note consensus was not developed on barriers due to their contextual nature.

- Rubbish/trash at the activity site
- Dangerous objects in and around activity site (eg. munitions, firearms, landmines, broken glass, drug paraphernalia, other sharp items)
- Inappropriate equipment
- Poorly maintained equipment
- Lack of nutritional support
- Poor/dangerous weather conditions
- Lack of private and gender appropriate spaces (especially for changing)
- Lack of suitable toilet facilities
- Inappropriate behaviours of non-programme individuals in proximity of activity site (eg. drinking, drug taking, immodesty)
- Intrusion of non-programme individuals (eg. heckling, shouting, trying to join in, using equipment)
- Interference of negative community groups (eg. armed groups, criminal groups, gangs)
- Participants not being allowed to attend by third parties (eg. family, peers, teachers, gangs, probation personnel)
- Poorly managed participant behaviour
- Harmful traditional beliefs within the community
- Negative stereotypes within the community
- Reluctance to allow female participation
- Community hostility and/or suspicion of programme
- Reprisals against participants for involvement
- Tensions between different local communities
- Political/religious/tribal divisions
- Lack of local child protection knowledge and infrastructure
- Inappropriate behaviour of coaches (not being positive role models by e.g. not taking care of equipment, not being motivated, not being prepared etc.).
- Working alongside difficult to access and/or isolated communities
- The implications of trauma upon participants

Perceived Benefits of Safe Spaces

The following consensus statements from the study represent perceived benefits inherent in safe spaces as delivered through Sport for Development.

- Safe spaces are sanctuaries that provide participants with respite from wider challenges face away from projects.

- Safe spaces allow participants to enjoy activities away from pervading stigma and/or stereotypes.

- Safe spaces allow youth participants a space to be children and play, in contrast to adultification (premature exposure to adult stressors and responsibilities) they may face in wider lives.

- Safe spaces can in and of themselves nurture mental health.

- Safe spaces allow participants to get advice about mental health free from judgment/stigma.

Perceived Benefits of Safe Spaces 2

- Safe spaces are ideal for learning about and developing coping/resilience mental health skills.

- Safe spaces provide an opportunity for developing new and positive relationships.

- Safe spaces allow participants to share how they are feeling openly, something they may not otherwise have access to on a regular basis.

- Safe spaces allow participants to be themselves.

- Safe spaces optimise learning experiences and activities.

- Safe spaces allow participants to challenge themselves and take on new responsibilities.

- Safe spaces can promote the inclusion of similar behaviours/spaces within the local context/community away from the project.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to build consensus on key elements relating to the delivery of safe spaces within Sport for Development. This was achieved through a systematic Delphi process and the generous contribution of leading Sport for Development projects.

One overall finding of the study was highlighting the complexity, and amount of intentional work that facilitating such safe spaces entails.

These findings are presented Sport for Development practitioners in order to support the implementation of physical and emotional safe spaces, especially when targeting mental health outcomes.

It is in no way intended to close the book on safes spaces, but rather exist as a jumping off point for further understanding and optimization of safe spaces in pragmatic real-world settings.

For any further questions about this resource or the study it is based on please contact Dr Jamie Marshall from Edinburgh Napier University (J.Marshall4@napier.ac.uk).
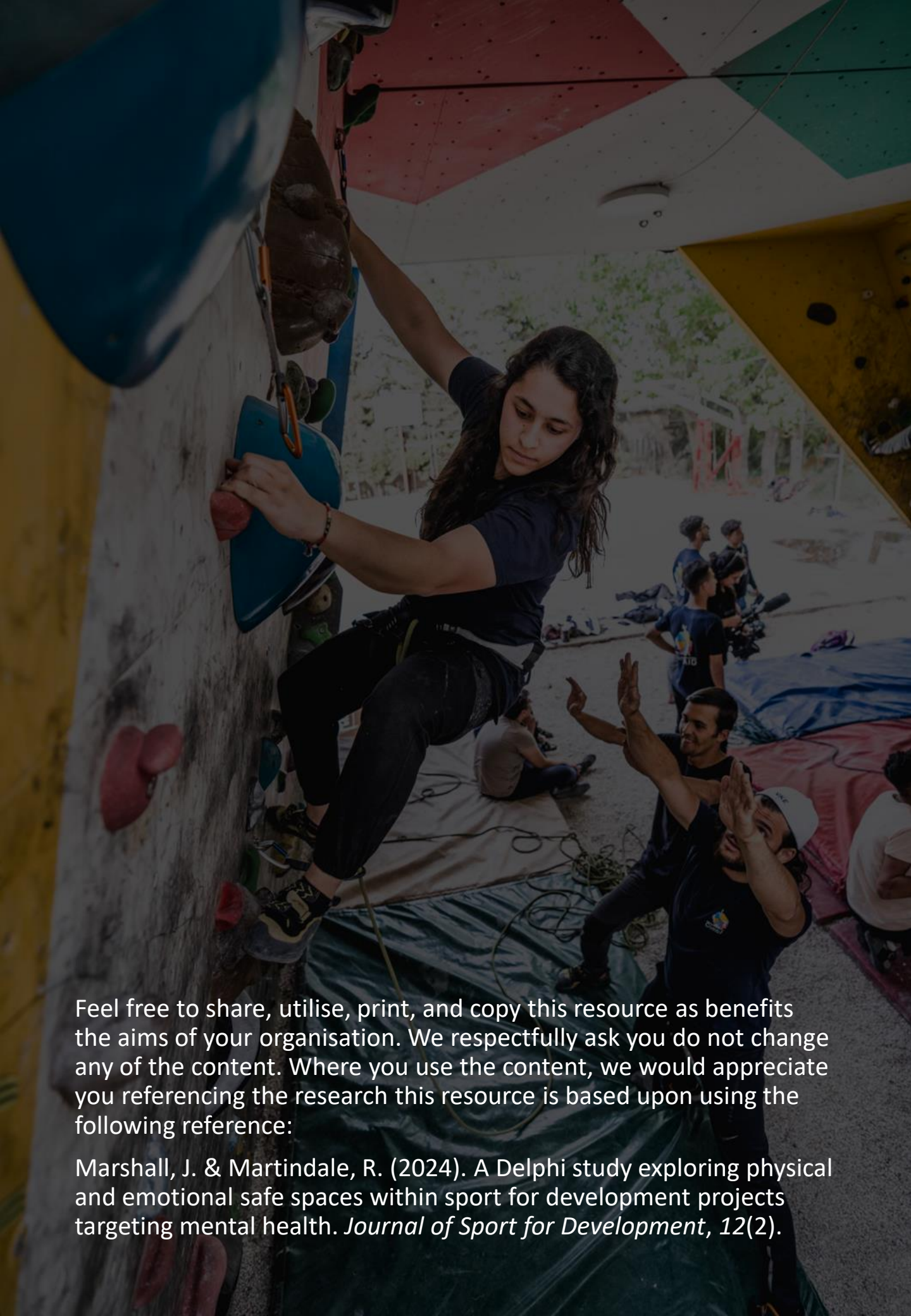
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