



ELITE YOUTH ATHLETE GUIDELINES

Recommendations for supporting the wellbeing,
development and performance of U18 individuals
across high performance (HP) sport.



INTRODUCTION

During the last 20 years 423 Olympic / Paralympic Games and World Championship medals have been won by under 18 athletes, (first time medallists). Notably, 38 of those medals (9%) have been won by Australian Elite Youth Athletes (Olympic = 9 Paralympic = 29). In this period, Australia has been the third best nation, behind China, (71 medals) and the USA (60 medals) at identifying, developing and progressing under 18 athletes to become first time medallists.

This data shows that chronological age alone is not an adequate guide for high-performance inclusion. Instead, age must be assessed in the context of each athlete's biological maturation, physical readiness, psychosocial growth, developmental trajectory, International Federation competition rules and medallist age profile.

Elite Youth Athletes (EYAs) represent a unique cohort within the Australian high performance sport system. Many EYAs are navigating high performance environments designed for mature athletes and training alongside adults, while simultaneously undergoing critical physical, mental, and emotional growth.

High performance environments can pose risks to EYAs. These risks may stem from environments where EYA needs are overlooked, unsafe practices are normalised, personal boundaries are eroded, and power imbalances or a win-at-all-costs mentality prevail.

In response to rising EYA participation in pinnacle events, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2024 released a consensus statement on "Elite Youth Athletes Competing at the Olympic Games: Essentials to a healthy, safe and sustainable paradigm," highlighting the need for attention in this area.

At the start of 2026 there are 347 nationally categorised EYAs (109 male / 238 female) across 37 sports in the Australian high performance sport system, and the system is calling for improvements to better support EYAs.

Australia's HP system is uniquely positioned to meet the wants and needs of EYAs because it:

- Oversees the Daily Performance Environments where most training, medical, and wellbeing interactions occur, giving it the greatest direct influence over athlete safety and development.
- Is responsible for key HP pathway decisions, talent identification, selection, competition scheduling, and load management allowing integration of age-appropriate medical, psychological, and educational safeguards from the outset.
- Houses multi-disciplinary expertise (coaches, sports medicine, mental-health professionals, wellbeing and education staff) capable of delivering coordinated, evidence-based care that other sport structures cannot match.
- Sets national standards and funding priorities, enabling consistent implementation of child-safe policies and resources across sports and states/territories.

Together, these factors mean the HP system is not only responsible for but also best placed to provide the structured, evidence-informed, child-centred environments required to protect health, foster holistic development, and enable sustainable success for Australia's next generation of international athletes.

Neither the International Olympic or Paralympic Committee impose a universal minimum age. Instead they delegate age eligibility to each sport's International Federation (IF) who set age eligibility rules for competitions to ensure athletes meet minimum age requirements for fairness, safety, and developmental appropriateness. In 2026, the variation in minimum age requirements by sport (as set by International Federations for international competition) spans eight years, with the lowest minimum age being 12 yrs and the highest minimum age 19 yrs. From 2028 the variation in minimum age requirements by sport will span six years, with the lowest minimum age being 14 yrs and the highest minimum age 19 yrs.

This resource provides integrated, evidence-informed guidelines to help organisations across the Australian high performance sport system strengthen their support for EYA wellbeing, identification, development, and performance. The EYA Guidelines serve as a practical tool for establishing, reviewing, and maintaining environments where EYAs can thrive as athletes and as young people.

Elite Youth Athletes

An Elite Youth Athlete is defined in this document as an athlete who is categorised within the National Athlete Categorisation Framework (NACF), and who is under the age of 18. Under the NACF, an athlete may be categorised for the current-cycle (Podium, Podium Ready, Podium Potential) or future-cycle (Developing, Emerging).

When referring to EYAs, this resource will use the term 'adolescent' in general and high performance contexts, and the term 'child' in the specific context of child safety, child safeguarding, child protection, and the various legal and regulatory frameworks that apply to these matters.

Document development and recommended use

These guidelines were developed in consultation with stakeholders from across the Australian High Performance Sport System and are intended to complement and support: The National Principles for Child Safe Organisations; The National Integrity Framework; and sport-specific policies and applied EYA high performance practices. The guidelines are aligned with the HP2032+ Win Well Strategy and the IOC's consensus statements on EYAs.

This resource:

- Should be reviewed regularly to remain aligned with evolving best practices in EYA wellbeing, development, and performance.
- Is not a child safeguarding, protection, or compliance policy; however, it complements and aligns with existing policies related to child safety, protection, and compliance.
- Does not override or replace existing organisational policies or those in development.
- Is intended to inform not only daily performance and competition environments but also national talent identification and selection processes.

The application of the EYA Guidelines should be integrated with other national systems and processes, such as Athlete Categorisation, Talent Identification and Development, and athlete selection, to ensure alignment and impact across the performance pathway.

Organisations are encouraged to customise application of the guidelines and recommendations according to their specific requirements, taking a staged approach where appropriate, in alignment with Child Safe legislation.

Organisations are also encouraged to participate in regular knowledge-exchange forums coordinated by the AIS (Australian Institute of Sport), NIN (National Institute Network) or their sport, to share emerging evidence and best practice for supporting Elite Youth Athletes across the high performance system.

OVERVIEW

The document is organised into eight thematic guidelines, each comprised of:



The themes include:

1	Elite Youth Athletes as a Distinct Group in High Performance Sport
2	Safeguarding, Child Protection, and Compliance
3	Safe and Engaging Environments
4	Support Networks
5	Holistic Athlete Development
6	Medical and Injury Management
7	Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing
8	Governance and Accountability



ELITE YOUTH ATHLETES AS A DISTINCT GROUP IN HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT

Guideline 1: Recognise Elite Youth Athletes as a distinct High Performance group.

Key Recommendation

Ensure the organisation's public commitment to child safety explicitly includes Elite Youth Athletes (EYAs) in high performance sport, in line with the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations and the National Integrity Framework.

Rationale

The understanding that EYAs are first and foremost adolescents who are still developing across all domains should be held by every stakeholder group, from board members to volunteers, and inform every aspect of EYA involvement in high performance.

Key Action Areas

- 1.1 Publish a statement on child safety that includes reference to support for EYAs in high performance sport. For organisations that have an existing statement, ensure that EYA considerations are embedded.

Organisations are required under State and Territory Child Safe legislation to make a public commitment to child safety. Where a commitment statement does not already include EYAs, rather than creating a separate statement, organisations should adapt the existing one to include specific reference to children and young people involved in high performance sport (EYAs).

The commitment statement should reflect the organisation's values and commitments that guide and characterise EYA participation in high performance sport. A sample EYA-inclusive commitment statement can be found in Appendix A of this document and may be adapted to suit relevant state-based legislation and organisational context.

Child Protection Legislation means all state/territory Child/Young Person protection legislation as amended from time to time, a summary of which is available here: [Australian child protection legislation | Australian Institute of Family Studies](#)

- 1.2 Induct all existing and incoming EYA stakeholders on the organisation's commitment to child safety, the EYA Commitment Statement, and EYA resources. [Sport Integrity Australia Education Resources Catalogue is available via this link.](#)

SAFEGUARDING, CHILD PROTECTION, AND COMPLIANCE

Guideline 2: Safeguard Elite Youth Athletes from abuse, exploitation, and integrity breaches with age-appropriate systems for child safety, and compliance across all High Performance environments.

Key Recommendation

Uphold rigorous, transparent safeguarding standards by embedding abuse-prevention training, clear conduct codes, background checks, and accessible reporting mechanisms for Elite Youth Athletes, their support networks, and performance teams (inclusive of coaches, managers, support staff, and athletes).

Rationale

Involvement in high performance sport, ongoing inclusion in squads/teams, regular presence in DPEs, and in some instances having a public profile, can all combine in ways that make EYAs seem older than they are. While many EYAs are mature for their age and work closely and effectively with adults, it remains that EYAs are children: vulnerable; and protected by the legal, regulatory, and policy frameworks in Child Safe Organisations.

The National Integrity Framework (NIF) provides an overview of the expected standards of conduct for everyone involved in sport. Adherence to the NIF Safeguarding Children and Young People policy supports organisations to achieve the highest regulatory standards of child safe best practice based on the National Child Safe Principles.

Key Action Areas

- 2.1 Ensure your sport has signed up to Sport Integrity Australia's (SIA) National Integrity Framework or has met or exceeded the Sport Integrity Policy Standards.
- 2.2 Ensure that the HP Code of Conduct aligns with the organisation's public commitment to child safety and EYAs. An example of a Safeguarding Children and Young People Code of Conduct from the AFL can be found here: [Safeguarding-Children-and-Young-People_Code-of-Conduct.pdf](#).
- 2.3 Identify categories of abuse in relation to a child and ensure that definitions and descriptions of prohibited behaviour are clear and considered in an Annual Risk Assessment (see Guideline 8).

Categories of Child Abuse — The Commonwealth Child Safe Framework outlines that "abuse in relation to a child is intended to have its broadest meaning and includes: physical abuse, verbal abuse, psychological/emotional abuse, sexual abuse or other exploitation of a child, including child grooming, neglect of the child, exposure to violence."

- 2.4 Induct EYAs, support networks, and performance teams on abuse prevention. Sport Integrity Australia offer an online Safeguarding Children and Young People in Sport Induction which includes how to recognise and respond to possible breaches of safeguarding policy. This can be found at [Education | Sport Integrity Australia](#) under the eLearning tab (NB. Log in required).

Abuse prevention training should include:

- Clear physical-contact guidelines specific to the sport, with explicit protocols for therapeutic, medical, and technical interventions requiring touch.
- The early warning signs of grooming, predatory behaviour, and abuse/harassment/exploitation across categories.
- An emphasis on the normalisation of [subtle, but escalating] psychological/emotional abuse in the initial stage.
- Briefing, as relevant/appropriate, around dual/plural 'vulnerability factors' that can heighten risk (LGBTQI+ status, minority groups, individuals living with disability, financial dependence, etc.).
- Recognition that Aboriginal children and young people are at higher risk of harm and abuse.
- Trauma informed responding.

- 2.5 In addition to ongoing screening and regular monitoring of protocols for personnel in contact with EYAs, organisations should embed into their recruitment processes a requirement for applicants to provide express consent for international police checks, as well as reference and sanction checks with relevant bodies such as the national sporting organisation (NSO), Sport Integrity Australia (SIA), and the National Sports Tribunal.
- 2.6 Provide EYAs and their support networks with independent, age-appropriate channels to safely report concerns in both domestic and international environments. Proactively engage EYAs in HP matters that affect them (e.g. selection processes and camp design) to reduce risk and support early reporting. Organisations can create their own channels, or for organisations signed up to the NIF, SIA offers a reporting and management channel for child safeguarding (and other) matters which can be accessed here: [What you can report | Sport Integrity Australia](#).

To ensure confidentiality and compliance, reporting channels should be:

- Structured to ensure freedom from retaliation or adverse consequences.
- Inclusive of anonymous options.
- Managed by third-party administration.
- Inclusive of associated escalation pathways.
- Connected with whistleblower protection policies tailored to EYAs and their support networks.

- 2.7 Employ 'two-person leadership' protocols across all high performance environments to ensure that no adult is ever alone with an EYA in a physical or online space. Pre-planning for unfamiliar environments should include rooming, travel and performance service provision. An example of a 'two-person leadership' approach for online and electronic communication is available in the Introduction of the SIA guidelines that can be found here: [Sport Integrity Australia | Communicating Online or Electronically with Children and Young People](#).
- 2.8 Tailor anti-doping protocols and resources for EYA and support networks to promote full understanding and awareness. Ensure that athlete representatives (i.e. adults who accompany underage athletes during sample collection processes) are thoroughly educated on the processes so they are equipped to adequately support EYAs.
- 2.9 Adapt/customise ethical decision-making processes for EYAs and support networks to enable both cohorts to spot/avoid/report integrity threats.
- 2.10 Ensure travel and transition protocols are in place. Designate and engage safeguarding personnel during identified periods of heightened vulnerability or risk (e.g. Sporting travel and transitions to new environments, squads, coaches etc).



SAFE AND ENGAGING ENVIRONMENTS

Guideline 3: Create positive, safe, and engaging environments for Elite Youth Athletes.

Key Recommendation

Ensure that all HP environments for EYAs are developmentally informed and led by trained performance teams, including coaches, who actively adopt age-appropriate coaching techniques. These teams must model positive cultures, support athlete voice, and maintain safe, inclusive interactions.

Rationale

Organisations are responsible for putting in place appropriate strategies to manage identified risks, to assure the physical and interpersonal environments for the EYAs who are included in their programs and/or are using their facilities and equipment. For an environment to be safe and welcoming, its:

- Physical characteristics must be safe, accessible, fit-for-purpose, and legally compliant.
- Interpersonal characteristics must include high standards of positive communication; opportunities for and promotion of the voice of the EYA; proactive cultures of care; and a commitment to mutual respect that is collectively observed and upheld.

These circumstances must be true from the perspective of an adult and via the lens of an adolescent.

EYAs experience different developmental, psychosocial and logistical demands depending on their sport format. Individual sport athletes often travel or train alone, work in small adult dominated entourages and can experience heightened performance pressure and social isolation. Team sport athletes gain peer connection but face risks from complex group dynamics such as peer to peer abuse and isolation.

Recognising these differences enables organisations to design DPEs that are developmentally appropriate and culturally safe for every EYA. Critically, coaches play a central role in shaping these environments. Their ability to apply developmentally appropriate coaching techniques, tailored to the cognitive, emotional, and physical maturity of EYAs, is essential to ensuring that interactions are not only effective but also psychologically safe and inclusive.

Key Action Areas

- 3.1 Ensure that all physical environments, [e.g. gyms, laboratories, equipment, training and competition areas, and changing rooms that cater for both adolescents and adults at the same time], are safe, accessible, fit for purpose, and legally compliant with respect to EYAs. Conduct regular re-checks. [SIA provide this resource on keeping change rooms safe: [Sport Integrity Australia | Keeping Change Room Facilities Safe for Children and Young People](#)].
- 3.2 Support HP coaches and staff to understand and respond to EYA requirements by encouraging or delivering upskilling opportunities.

Upskilling opportunities should focus on adolescent development and contemporary communication styles that effectively engage and include the EYA voice. Sport Integrity Australia offers an online 'Safe and Effective Coaching of Young Athletes in High Performance Sport' course located via the link to the eLearning platform: [Upskilling coaches of junior high performance athletes](#). An example of an NSO education plan can be found here: [Integrity Education Plan – Volleyball Australia](#).

- 3.3 Support HP coaches and staff to lead and model positive cultures of care, and to prioritise their own wellbeing.
- 3.4 Consider pairing senior HP coaches and staff who have strong EYA experience with young and emerging HP coaches and staff for feedback, mentorship, and professional development. An example of a successful coach mentorship program can be found here: [Athletics Australia High Performance Mentors – Athletics Coach by Australian Athletics](#).
- 3.5 Establish formal structures for EYAs to provide feedback about their experiences, participate in decision-making, and develop an appropriate and increasing sense of agency and autonomy. Ensure that consistently expressed perspectives from across the EYA cohort have genuine influence.

The Daily Performance Environments (DPE) Insights Survey is one way in which EYAs can provide anonymous feedback. Feedback is shared with the National Institute Network and National Sporting Organisations for their consideration. Use this link to access information on the [AIS Athlete Advisory Committee | ASC](#).

Alternative methods to anonymous surveys can be found in Appendix B.

- 3.6 Encourage active monitoring by high performance coaches and staff of athlete-to-athlete interactions to guard against peer-to-peer abuse or bullying (which is the fastest-growing form of abuse among EYAs).
- 3.7 Create peer-education resources or initiatives to empower EYAs around recognising, reporting, and safely intervening if bullying, hazing, and/or harassment occurs.



SUPPORT NETWORKS

Guideline 4: Actively engage, educate, and inform Elite Youth Athletes and their support networks.

Key Recommendation

Use structured communication, induction, and advisory processes for EYAs and all members of their support network, to ensure shared understanding of responsibilities, rights, risks, and key protocols across all aspects of EYA High Performance involvement.

Rationale

An informed and engaged support network plays an indispensable role across every aspect of an EYA's involvement in high performance sport.

A support network can be described as both an athlete's close and extended circle of community and kinship; Elders, parents, guardians, and carers; immediate family and/or personal friends; mentors, confidants, partners, and social peers who engage in some positive and/or tangible capacity with the high-performance journey.

When aligned and well-informed support networks and performance teams understand the commitments required to succeed and progress in high performance, they are better equipped to support EYAs practically and logistically, physically and psychologically, across the key contexts of wellbeing, development, and performance.

Key Action Areas

- 4.1 Schedule detailed information sessions for prospective EYAs and the relevant people in their support network.

Information sessions may include:

- The requirements, commitments, and expectations that apply to athletes in high performance.
- EYA specific guidance around programs/resources, communication protocols and policies including online behaviours.
- The rights and responsibilities of parents/guardians/carers and all performance team staff in DPEs.

Information sessions for prospective EYAs and the relevant people in their support network should be culturally safe and ensure that all feel respected and valued. Athletics is an example of an NSO that has a First Nations and Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) Advisory Group that provides strategic advice to Australian Athletics Management and Member Associations across all aspects of engagement with First Nations people: [First Nations Programs | Australian Athletics](#).

- 4.2 Schedule three-cornered meetings involving athletes, parents/guardians/carers, and relevant members of the performance team at appropriate intervals to discuss progress, goals, and concerns in a safe, structured setting.
- 4.3 Provide parent/guardian/carer workshops and/or resources to deliver essential briefings on key topics.

Parent/guardian/carer workshop topics may include:

Child safety and safeguarding; compliance; risk mitigation (developmental challenge, physical injury, mental-emotional impact); heightened/customised support during transition phases including where athletes may have relocated from remote areas of Australia; selection and competition phases; communication channels; Critical Incident Management Plans (CIMPs); and procedures/protocols for EYAs when travelling for HP, including accommodation and chaperoning arrangements.

AIIS parent resources can be found here: [Clearinghouse for Sport | Australian Sports Commission](#) (Log in required).

Paralympics Australia's [The Start Line | Paralympics Australia](#) is an example of a dedicated home for information, guidance and opportunities for thriving Para-athletes to begin or continue their Para-sport journeys.

An example of a Parents, Carers, and Guardians webpage from Rugby Australia can be found here: [Parents, Carers and Guardians | Rugby Australia](#).

- 4.4 Consider establishing communication channels with support networks including:
- a. Knowledge-sharing platforms (e.g., website, newsletters, or formal online groups).
 - b. Parent/guardian/carer advisory groups with rotating membership to provide structured input around policies and practices. Designate a lead contact person within the group.

HOLISTIC ATHLETE DEVELOPMENT

Guideline 5: Commit to High Performance pathways and protocols that support holistic Elite Youth Athlete development across personal, social, academic, and vocational domains.

Key Recommendation

Ensure HP pathways actively protect against developmental risks by promoting balanced identity, autonomy, social connection, academic continuity, and life-skills growth — through structured support, flexible systems, and strong collaboration with support networks.

Rationale

Holistic athlete development is the development of an athlete that encompasses their physical, emotional, mental and social requirements, to achieve sustained success as a person and in their athletic pursuits.

In instances where development is not supported in a holistic manner, adverse consequences can be long-lasting and profound for the athlete within and outside of their sport. Organisations can emphasise holistic athlete development by integrating protections against EYA developmental challenges in critical contexts: personal-psychosocial; peer-to-peer networking; academic interests and continuity; and vocational/lifelong skills growth.

Key Action Areas

- 5.1 Provide EYAs with Athlete Wellbeing and Engagement support to foster healthy and diverse identity development. Foster independence and balanced identity for individual athletes and cultivate healthy group belonging for team athletes. AIS Wellbeing Modules that provide athletes with entry-level learning on a range of wellbeing & engagement topics that are important in high-performance sport can be found here: [AIS Athlete Wellbeing Education Modules](#).
- 5.2 Support strong educational engagement during adolescence to establish a solid foundation for lifelong learning and successful transitions into further education, training, or employment. Monitor academic progress and provide support if gaps arise, respect key education milestones (e.g. exam blocks) and collaborate with institutions to enable flexible learning.
- 5.3 In partnership with support networks, provide structured opportunities for career exploration. Refer to [Athlete Personal Development | Australian Sports Commission](#) or for a sport specific example go here: [Wellbeing and Engagement: Resources — Snow Australia](#).

Opportunities for career exploration may include:

- Explore opportunities for EYA internships and/or work experience that are compatible with training and competition schedules.
- Highlight the diversity of ways in which a high performance career can complement and accelerate a career outside of sport.

- 5.4 Where appropriate, tailor and deliver to EYAs, skills training around managing public scrutiny and media attention. Information on AIS social media education resources can be found here: [Education | Australian Sports Commission](#).
- 5.5 In partnership with retired/alumni athletes, consider mentorship programs or discussion series to share strategies and success stories with EYAs and support networks around effective transitions and balancing high performance alongside social, study, and career-planning demands. A sport specific example can be found here: [Mentor Program — Diving Australia](#).
- 5.6 Encourage planning for life outside of sport and lifelong skills training.

Providing regular opportunities for EYAs to develop an identity outside of sport may include:

- Supporting opportunities for EYAs to explore interests, values, and capabilities outside of sport.
- Scheduling protected time for social interaction with peers, and support networks, both within and outside of sports environments.
- Promoting transferable and/or lifelong skills training across topic areas such as leadership, time management, communication, financial planning/literacy, and managing successful transitions.

- 5.7 Recognise and celebrate achievements in various domains outside of high performance sport.

MEDICAL AND INJURY MANAGEMENT

Guideline 6: Proactively mitigate the heightened physical-injury risks of the adolescent Elite Youth Athlete by embedding developmentally appropriate, health-first practices.

Key Recommendation

Prioritise long-term EYA health by tailoring assessments, training, competition, recovery and education to individual developmental profiles — ensuring decisions are medically informed, collaboratively made, and grounded in safe, gradual progression.

Rationale

There is a heightened risk of physical injury inherent in adolescence. Added to this are the risks of elite sport, and the variability of physical development between males and females and within individuals. (See Appendix C).

For example, risks may be associated with premature specialisation; poor foundational movement and physical literacy; inappropriate training loads and competition formats; misalignment between chronological and biological maturity; inadequate rest and recovery periods; failure to adjust programs for rapid growth spurts; insufficient sleep for both performance and growth; and sub-optimal nutrition/hydration for both performance and growth.

Key Action Areas

- 6.1 Align with best practice recommendations for health and injury management in high performance sport, e.g. [Performance Support | Australian Sports Commission](#).
- 6.2 Ensure important high performance pathway, selection, and transition decisions are tailored to EYAs:

Decisions tailored to EYAs:

- Include consideration of biological maturation status (skeletal age, growth velocity, pubertal stage) alongside chronological age.
- Include growth milestones and musculoskeletal screening (injury risk).
- Consider foundational movement competency ahead of sport specific technical mastery.
- Are guided by objective development metrics rather than calendar deadlines.
- Prioritise long-term athlete development over short-term competitive outcomes.
- Are, in the case of injury and return-to-play, grounded in clinical assessment from a sports physician, with input from expert paediatric medical opinion as required, rather than environmental or competitive pressures.

- 6.3 Manage training loads, skill progression, and recovery according to EYA needs:

- Adjust training loads during growth spurts when injury susceptibility peaks.
- Ensure sport-specific technical demands increase gradually, as appropriate to developmental readiness.
- Promote and encourage diverse movement experiences. Align specialisation timing with individual developmental readiness.
- Mandate rest periods and scheduled off-seasons to align with developmental needs and ensure physical recovery.

- 6.4 Modify competition formats to accommodate developing athletes. Protect late-maturing athletes from unnecessary injury risk. An example of the way in which Swimming Australia measured and accounted for the influence of individual differences in growth and maturation can be found here: [Swimming Australia — Project H2Grow](#).

6.5 Implement injury monitoring processes for EYAs.

- Use a high performance athlete monitoring system (AMS) that is appropriate and effective for EYAs. Ensure injury surveillance and reporting is rigorous.
- Establish early warning systems for overtraining, overuse, and burnout. Brief EYAs, performance teams and support networks around the importance of proactive reporting and risks of training through pain.

6.6 Support and educate EYAs and support networks on best practice protocols for sleep, nutrition, and hydration in the context of adolescent development and specific warning signs for inadequacies and associated conditions. Integrate with AMS as practical/necessary.



MENTAL HEALTH AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Guideline 7: Protect against mental-emotional harm by embedding proactive monitoring, education, and support systems that address the psychological demands of High Performance sport for Elite Youth Athletes.

Key Recommendation

Integrate structured mental-health literacy, and tailored support into HP environments — normalising help-seeking, educating EYAs and their support networks, and intervening early at high-risk moments to safeguard emotional wellbeing.

Rationale

For EYAs, the combination of performance pressures with multiple stressors (e.g. selection worries, injuries, travel burden, peer dynamics, study and exam stress) unfolds against the backdrop of rapid cognitive development. For additional risks, refer to Appendix D.

With mental health disorders now thought to affect 40% of Australians aged 16-24, this combination of factors carries significant risk for impacting mental and emotional wellbeing among EYAs. Adolescent girls often exhibit and report a greater prevalence of internalising mental health conditions (e.g., anxiety, mood disorders), whereas boys are more commonly linked with exhibiting and reporting externalising conditions (e.g., ADHD, substance misuse). Research has also shown that LGBTIQ+ and First Nations individuals can have higher rates of mental health challenges.

Key Action Areas

- 7.1 Before making HP Pathway identification, selection and progression decisions, confirm that choices are appropriate to the EYA's psychosocial stage, mental health and individual or team sport context. Stakeholders are encouraged to read [IOC Mental Health in Elite Athletes Toolkit](#) to gain a more comprehensive overview of their role and how it complements efforts by other key groups.
- 7.2 Align with best practice recommendations for mental health management in high performance sport, e.g. [Health and wellbeing | Australian Sports Commission](#).
- 7.3 Assure mental-emotional health monitoring, literacy, and action. Organisations should:
 - Establish visible processes for accessing confidential mental health support.
 - Ensure that messaging in DPEs and high performance information resources:
 - Normalises help-seeking behaviour for EYAs.
 - Characterises the assessment and prioritising of one's own mental-emotional health as a 'high performance trait'.
 - Design athlete monitoring systems to include a psychological component.
 - Educate performance teams to recognise and respond to the early signs of psychological distress in adolescents with structured age-appropriate interventions.
- 7.4 Brief and support EYAs and support networks around key concepts in mental-emotional health: An example from Swimming Australia can be found here: [Body Empowerment | Swimming Australia](#).

Themes to provide information and support on include:

- Resilience and healthy coping mechanisms.
- Recognising and managing performance anxiety.
- The drivers/symptoms/warning signs of psychological distress, burnout, maladaptive perfectionism, disordered eating, and RED-S.
- Peer support — how to help or report friends or teammates.

- 7.5 Deliver stand-alone social-media training and/or resources for EYAs and support networks to deliver best practice guidance for safely managing social-media presence and combatting online harassment. More information can be found at: [How to recognise online abuse in sport | eSafety Commissioner](#).
- 7.6 Provide tailored, age-appropriate servicing to support EYA mental health.

EYA mental health servicing can include:

- Mental health/AW&E support immediately before, during, and after identified inflection points when the risk of mental emotional impact jumps sharply and feelings of isolation increase: Benchmark/Pinnacle Events; selection phases, injury setbacks, relocations, and major pathway transitions.
- Implementing structured peer-mentorship programs that connect EYAs with slightly older athletes who have successfully navigated mental and emotional challenges.
- Scheduled 'separation periods' away from DPEs in order that EYAs have space to connect with family, friends, and normal adolescent activities. Integrate schedules with recovery/embargo periods contemplated in other risk-mitigation areas.



GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Guideline 8: Embed governance structures that clearly reflect organisational commitment to Elite Youth Athlete wellbeing, development, and progress through strategic oversight and accountability.

Key Recommendation

Implement focused governance mechanisms and accountabilities — including independent risk oversight, accountability frameworks, data protections, and annual safeguarding and integrity reviews — ensuring leadership remains transparently and proactively responsible for EYA outcomes.

Rationale

Strong governance in relation to EYA guidelines is essential to ensure that organisational commitment to EYA wellbeing, development, and progression is not only stated but structurally upheld.

Boards and leadership bodies carry responsibility for oversight, and can actively define, implement, and monitor culturally safe and positive environments for EYAs that align with the commitment to “Winning Well”.

Key Action Areas

- 8.1 Undertake an Annual Risk Assessment in relation to EYAs considering the key action areas in this document to evaluate the risk of harm or abuse and put in place appropriate strategies to manage identified risks. Follow this link for [Risk-assessment-and-management-templates.docx](#).
- 8.2 Assign clear roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities for the development, implementation and tracking of identified EYA initiatives.

- Ensure the Board remains responsible for risk assessments and maintains high-level oversight of EYA policies and procedures. The Board may delegate responsibility to a Finance and Risk Committee, or equivalent subcommittee, with independent/external expertise.
- Outline responsibilities and accountabilities at each organisational level.
- Clarify the process for addressing non-fulfilment of safeguarding policies and procedures.

- 8.3 Employ robust privacy and data-management protocols, for use within the organisation and when collaborating with partner organisations, to ensure that EYA data is collected, secured, and managed in line with best practice.
- 8.4 Nominate an organisational lead to facilitate stakeholder collaboration and best-practice sharing.

Join national and state/territory forums (e.g. AIS Performance Pathways eforums) or in-person events (e.g. WC2WB) that bring together National Sporting Organisations, institutes/academies of sport, and relevant experts to review trends, case studies, and new research on EYA wellbeing, development, and performance.

Disseminate insights from these forums back into internal policy and practice.



APPENDIX A

Sample Child Safety Commitment Statement — Including Elite Youth Athletes (EYAs)

We are committed to providing a safe, supportive, and empowering environment for all children and young people, including those participating in high performance sport as Elite Youth Athletes (EYAs).

We recognise that EYAs are adolescents still developing physically, emotionally, and socially. Their involvement in high performance sport requires additional safeguards and tailored support to ensure their wellbeing, safety, and positive development.

Our organisation upholds the National Principles for Child Safe Organisations and integrates these into all aspects of EYA participation. We ensure that policies, practices, and decision-making reflect our commitment to protecting and nurturing EYAs in high performance environments.

APPENDIX B

Alternative Methods to Anonymous Surveys

- Focus Groups – Small, moderated discussions with safeguards like parental consent and trusted adults present.
- One-on-One Interviews – Personalised conversations with trusted figures to build rapport and gather deeper insights.
- Observational Techniques – Watching athletes in natural settings to understand behaviour and context.
- Digital Diaries/Journals – Secure platforms for athletes to reflect and share experiences over time.
- Proxy Reporting – Input from coaches, parents, or support staff who know the athlete well.
- Participatory Methods – Involving athletes in designing protocols to increase engagement and relevance.
- Gamified Tools – Interactive, game-like platforms to make feedback fun and less intimidating.

APPENDIX C

Physical Development Risks and Variables for Elite Youth Athletes

Chronological and maturation risk

- Muscles, bones, and tissues develop at different rates in adolescence. This 'uneven' pattern is normal, but heightens injury susceptibility — especially during growth spurts.
- The onset of puberty also initiates sex-specific increases in the risk of acute injury. Anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries, for example, occur approximately 3.5 times more often in female athletes, a discrepancy that does not emerge until the onset of puberty.
- Maturation timing varies greatly between males, females, and individuals, leading to competitive inequities among same-age athletes. Age minimums may implicitly encourage inappropriate pathway progress.

Training and skill acquisition risk

- EYAs are vulnerable to musculoskeletal injuries; risk is exacerbated by overuse. Early specialisation is associated with diverse negative physical impacts over extended time frames.
- Training loads calibrated for adults can lead to overtraining syndrome and athlete burnout. EYAs require longer recovery periods due to ongoing soft-tissue development.
- Ongoing bone and musculoskeletal development in EYAs necessitates specific injury-prevention strategies and safeguards.

Competition, risk assessment factors

- Sport-specific demands calibrated for adults can oblige EYAs to attempt techniques inappropriate for their phase of development; shortfalls in risk assessment are a compounding factor.
- Competition formats and/or compressed schedules designed for adults impose excessive physical demands on developing bodies.

Sleep, nutrition and hydration

- Sleep requirements are greater in adolescence. Distinguishing growth-related fatigue from normal training fatigue is important.
- EYAs have higher energy needs due to both growth and training demands; inadequate nutrition compromises development, and can result in Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S).
- Inappropriate eating practices can have detrimental effects on sports performance. In addition to the direct impairment of physiological and psychological function, Disordered Eating can increase the risk of illness and injury, compromise training quality and consistency and indirectly interfere with competition goals.
- Adolescent changes in thermal regulation and hydration-need increase the risk of EYA heat exhaustion, exertional heat illness. Excessively warm environments are riskier for EYAs.

Information sourced from [IOC consensus statement on elite youth athletes competing at the Olympic Games: essentials to a healthy, safe and sustainable paradigm](#). For further information click the link and refer to The elite youth athlete — challenges and solution opportunities p.952-957.

APPENDIX D

Mental Health Risks for Elite Youth Athletes

Anxiety and depression

- DPEs that prioritise results over wellbeing and development can condition EYAs to conceal M-E struggles for fear of non-selection/deselection.
- Harmful messaging around 'mental toughness' can normalise psychological suffering and discourage help-seeking behaviours.

Maladaptive perfectionism

- Early HP success, early specialisation, DPEs that emphasise perfection, unrealistic expectations, and identity foreclosure can drive maladaptive perfectionism.
- M-E impact for maladaptive perfectionists is severe: extreme self-criticism, poor self-esteem, obsession with mistakes, inability to enjoy/acknowledge achievements.

Disordered eating

- Three categories of sports, defined as aesthetically judged, gravitational and weight class, are consistently identified as high risk for the development of Disordered Eating and Eating Disorders. Successful performance in these sports generally involves individual, or combinations of, features such as low body mass, leanness, high power to weight ratio, subjective judgements on appearance and rapid weight loss for weigh-ins.
- Risk of Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport (RED-S) in severe cases. Exposure to unhealthy social-media content around body image is an aggravating factor.
- Female EYAs face additional risks including greater levels of online abuse, higher rates of disordered eating, body image issues, and depressive disorders compared to male counterparts.
- Disordered eating can occur in any athlete, in any sport, at any time, crossing boundaries of gender, age, body size, culture, socio-economic background, athletic calibre and ability.

Inflection points that heighten risk

- Before and during BME/PEs, EYAs face acute psychosocial pressures (performance expectations, media attention, public scrutiny). Separation from normal SNs/environments exacerbates these pressures.
- In addition to competition and selection, major HP pathway transitions are associated with increased M-E impact (travel, relocation, social isolation, disrupted sleep over a prolonged period, etc.).

Information sourced from [IOC consensus statement on elite youth athletes competing at the Olympic Games: essentials to a healthy, safe and sustainable paradigm](#). For further information click the link and refer to Mental health and safeguarding for the elite youth athlete p.957–960.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are placed at higher risk of harm and abuse in organisations because of:

- Trauma that has been passed down over generations.
- Being removed from families.
- Feelings of shame.
- Feeling afraid to raise a safety concern because it could affect their family and community.
- Ongoing systemic racism.

Information sourced from [An Anti-Racism Framework: Voices of First Nations Peoples | Australian Human Rights Commission](#).

RESOURCES

Human Rights

[An Anti-Racism Framework: Voices of First Nations Peoples | Australian Human Rights Commission](#)

[Children's version of the Convention on the Rights of the Child – UNICEF](#)

[Convention on the Rights of the Child – OHCHR](#)

IOC Consensus Statements

[IOC consensus statement on elite youth athletes competing at the Olympic Games: essentials to a healthy, safe and sustainable paradigm](#)

[The IOC Consensus Statement: harassment and abuse \(non-accidental violence\) in sport](#)

[IOC consensus statement: interpersonal violence and safeguarding in sport](#)

[IOC Mental Health in Elite Athletes Toolkit](#)

[Mental health in elite athletes: International Olympic Committee consensus statement \(2019\) – British Journal of Sports Medicine](#)

[International Olympic Committee consensus statement on youth athletic development | British Journal of Sports Medicine](#)

National Child Safety

[A guide for creating a Child Safe Organisation](#)

[Australian child protection legislation – Australian Institute of Family Studies](#)

[Child Safety Risk Management Resources – National Office for Child Safety](#)

[Framework Requirement 4 Annual reporting – National Office for Child Safety](#)

[Getting Ahead of the Game: Athlete Data in Professional Sport](#)

[Online safety – eSafety Commissioner](#)

[Risk assessment and management templates](#)

Sport Integrity Australia

[Anti-Doping](#)

[Competition Manipulation & Sports Wagering](#)

[Education](#)

[Governance](#)

[National Integrity Framework](#)

[NIF Safeguarding Children and Young People Policy](#)

[Protecting Sport Together](#)

[Safeguarding Children and Young People](#)

[Children and Young People Safe Practices Do's & Don'ts](#)

[Communicating Online or Electronically with Children and Young People](#)

[Education Resources Catalogue](#)

[Keeping Change Room Facilities Safe for Children and Young People\]](#)

[Transporting Children and Young People In Sport](#)

[Tell us about a concern or issue](#)

[Upskilling coaches of junior high performance athletes](#)

Australian Olympic Committee

[Safeguarding Children, Young and Vulnerable Persons Policy](#)

Paralympics Australia

[Safeguarding Children and Young People Policy Template 2023](#)

Australian Sports Commission

[All topics](#)

[Athlete Development Resources – Clearinghouse for Sport](#)

[Athlete Personal Development](#)

[Child Safe Policy](#)

[Data Governance](#)

[Disordered eating in high performance sport](#)

[Foundations, Talent, Elite, Mastery \(FTEM\) Pathways](#)

[Health and wellbeing](#)

[High performance toolkit](#)

[Integrity Policies and Programs](#)

[Leading sport bodies develop world-first coach course to safeguard young athletes](#)

[Mental Health Referral Network](#)

[Sexual Misconduct](#)

[Sport Governance Resources](#)

[Sport Specialisation in Young Athletes](#)

National Sport Organisation Resources

[Integrity Blueprint Plan AusTriathlon](#)

[Integrity Education Plan – Volleyball Australia](#)

[Mentor Program – Diving Australia](#)

[Orientation to High Performance](#)

[Orygen-AFL Evidence Guide – What works for mental health in sporting teams](#)

[Parents, Carers and Guardians – Rugby Australia](#)

[Safeguarding children and young people – Code of conduct](#)

[Swimming Australia – Project H2Grow](#)

[Swimming Australia – To enrich and inspire the nation](#)

[Wellbeing and Engagement – Snow Australia](#)

GLOSSARY

Term	Definition
ACL (Anterior Cruciate Ligament)	A key knee ligament prone to injury, particularly in female athletes after puberty.
Adolescent	Term used to describe Elite Youth Athletes (EYAs) in high performance contexts, acknowledging ongoing physical, mental, and emotional development.
AMS (Athlete Monitoring System)	A digital platform used to track athlete health, training loads, and injury/illness status.
Benchmark/Pinnacle Events (BME/PEs)	Major competitions (e.g., Olympic Games, World Championships) where performance pressures and psychosocial risks for EYAs are heightened.
Child	A person under 18 years of age.
Child Safe Standards/Legislation	Regulatory frameworks requiring organisations to uphold safety, protection, and safeguarding responsibilities for minors.
CIMPs (Critical Incident Management Plans)	Protocols for responding to emergencies or high-risk situations affecting athletes.
Daily Performance Environment (DPE)	The training, living, and competition environment in which athletes spend the majority of their time.
Disordered Eating	Unhealthy eating patterns that impair health and performance, which can lead to eating disorders.
Elite Youth Athlete (EYA)	An athlete under 18 categorised within the National Athlete Categorisation Framework (NACF).
EYA Commitment Statement	A public declaration by organisations outlining values, responsibilities, and commitments to safeguarding EYAs.
FTEM Pathway (Foundations, Talent, Elite, Mastery)	A framework used by the Australian Sports Commission to describe athlete development stages.
Governance	Oversight structures ensuring accountability for EYA wellbeing, safeguarding, and development.
High Performance (HP)	Competitive sport environments designed to achieve elite outcomes, often geared toward mature athletes.
HP2032+ Sport Strategy	National high performance strategy aligned with Brisbane 2032 Olympic Games and beyond.
IOC (International Olympic Committee)	Governing body of the Olympic Movement; has released consensus statements on youth athlete wellbeing.
Integrity Breaches	Misconduct or unethical behaviour such as abuse, harassment, exploitation, doping, or competition manipulation.
Maladaptive Perfectionism	Harmful form of perfectionism linked with self-criticism, poor self-esteem, and increased mental health risks.
Mental Health Literacy	Understanding of mental health concepts that enables recognition, support, and help-seeking.

Term	Definition
NACF (National Athlete Categorisation Framework)	Athlete Categorisation is a HP system tool used to identify, monitor and prioritise athletes with the greatest potential to support Australia consistently winning, and continually improving, at current and future pinnacle events.
NIF (National Integrity Framework)	Sport Integrity Australia's framework outlining safeguarding, anti-doping, and integrity policies.
Psychosocial Development	Growth in emotional regulation, social skills, and identity formation during adolescence.
RED-S (Relative Energy Deficiency in Sport)	A syndrome caused by insufficient nutrition relative to energy expenditure, affecting health and performance.
Risk Assessment	Evaluation of potential harms (physical, psychological, or safeguarding) and development of mitigation strategies.
Safeguarding	Policies and practices to protect young athletes from harm, abuse, exploitation, or neglect.
Support Network	An athlete's circle of family, guardians, peers, mentors, and community who play a role in their wellbeing and development.
Trauma-Informed Practice	Approach recognising the impact of trauma and promoting safe, supportive responses in sporting environments.
Two-Person Leadership Protocol	Policy ensuring no adult is ever alone with an EYA, online or in person, to reduce safeguarding risks.

DOCUMENT CONTROL

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