

MENTORS

CROSS-ANALYS RESEARCH REPORT

DESCRIPTION

Deliverable 2.1.

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DELIVERABLE 2.1. CROSS-ANALYSIS RESEARCH REPORT

Deliverable relating to Work Package 2, containing 3 tasks (Table 1).

Table 1
Tasks included in Work Package 2

TASK	DEFINITION	PARTICIPANTS
2.1.	Definition of the research methodology.	University of Seville.
2.2.	Performance of the literature review.	All partners.
	Performance of the on-field research.	All partners.
2.3.	Data collection and processing.	All partners.

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1. Introduction.

The development of sport values in childhood has become a central topic in contemporary research on youth sport, education, and psychosocial well-being. As sport continues to be recognized as a powerful socializing context, scholars increasingly emphasize its potential not only for physical development but also for fostering moral growth, socioemotional competencies, and positive life skills among children. When appropriately structured, youth sport offers a unique environment in which children learn to interact with peers, negotiate rules, develop self-regulation, and construct a sense of identity within a community. However, the transmission of values in sport is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Rather, it depends on a complex interplay of contextual factors, cultural norms, and, importantly, the influence of significant psychosocial agents who guide, reinforce, or hinder the learning of values.

Within this social ecology, parents, coaches, referees, teachers, and other community members act as key mediators in shaping children's attitudes, behaviours, and interpretations of sport participation. Their interactions with young athletes—whether through encouragement, modelling, instruction, or disciplinary strategies—contribute directly to how children understand concepts such as respect, fairness, cooperation, discipline, and emotional control. Recent research indicates that these agents play differentiated yet complementary roles: parents provide the foundational climate of support and expectations; coaches structure learning environments and promote team cohesion; referees embody impartiality and reinforce rule-based values; and broader educational communities contribute to integrating sport within holistic learning frameworks. Understanding how these agents operate and interact is therefore essential for designing evidence-based interventions that promote healthy value development and psychological well-being among children aged 6 to 12.

Despite the relevance of this topic, existing literature is highly heterogeneous in terms of methodologies, theoretical perspectives, and cultural contexts. Studies vary widely regarding the sports examined, the values prioritized, and the degree to which children's own perspectives are included. Moreover, the global distribution of research remains uneven, with a predominance of Western contexts and limited representation of non-Western cultural frameworks. These gaps highlight the need for systematic reviews that consolidate current evidence, clarify trends, and identify critical limitations that must be addressed in future research.

The present report responds to this need by synthesising empirical studies published between 2000 and 2025 that examine the influence of psychosocial agents on sport value development in children. Through a rigorous PRISMA-guided systematic review, the report aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how values are transmitted in youth sport settings, what factors shape this

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transmission, and where scientific knowledge remains fragmented. By doing so, it seeks to offer a foundation for future research and practical recommendations for strengthening value-based education in childhood sport.

The development of sport values in childhood has become a central topic in contemporary research on youth sport, education, and psychosocial well-being. As sport continues to be recognized as a powerful socializing context, scholars highlight its potential not only for physical development but also for fostering moral growth, socioemotional competencies, and positive life skills among children. When appropriately structured, youth sport offers a unique environment in which young participants learn to collaborate, follow rules, manage emotions, resolve conflicts, and construct a meaningful sense of identity. However, the transmission of values in youth sport is neither automatic nor homogeneous. Instead, it depends on a complex constellation of contextual factors, cultural expectations, normative beliefs, and, crucially, the influence of the significant psychosocial agents who interact with children in sport settings.

Within this social ecology, parents, coaches, referees, teachers, and community stakeholders act as central mediators who shape children's attitudes, behaviours, and perspectives on sport participation. Their actions—whether intentional or implicit—contribute to how children internalize values such as respect, fairness, cooperation, discipline, self-control, and empathy. Parents often set the emotional tone and expectations surrounding sport involvement; coaches design learning environments and model leadership and teamwork; referees embody impartiality and communicate rule-based values; and educational or club communities contribute to creating climates that either reinforce or undermine these messages. Understanding how these agents interact and the conditions under which they effectively support value-based development is essential for designing evidence-based strategies that foster children's psychosocial well-being.

Despite its relevance, the existing scientific literature remains methodologically diverse and culturally uneven. Studies vary greatly in their theoretical frameworks, the sports examined, and the extent to which children's own perspectives are included. Furthermore, most research originates from Western contexts, limiting the global generalization of findings. These gaps underscore the need for systematic reviews that not only synthesize available evidence but also reveal recurrent patterns, conceptual challenges, and areas requiring further empirical attention.

The present report addresses this need by synthesizing empirical studies published between 2000 and 2025 that examine how psychosocial agents influence the development of sport values in children aged 6 to 12. Using a PRISMA-guided methodology, the review provides an integrated overview of the roles, mechanisms, and conditions shaping value transmission in sport settings. This synthesis serves

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as a foundation for developing informed guidelines and future research directions aimed at enhancing the educational potential of childhood sport participation.

In addition to the systematic review, insights from focus groups conducted with key stakeholders offer a complementary and contextually grounded perspective on the dynamics of value transmission in youth sport. Across sessions with parents, coaches, referees, and children, participants consistently emphasized the importance of creating emotionally safe and development-oriented environments. Parents highlighted concerns regarding excessive competitiveness and pressure, noting that these dynamics often conflict with the intended educational benefits of sport. Coaches and educators discussed the challenges of balancing performance expectations with the need to foster inclusive and respectful team cultures, while also acknowledging the limited training they often receive in value-based pedagogy.

Children's perspectives further enriched the analysis, revealing how young athletes interpret and negotiate the messages they receive from adults. Many children described positive experiences related to teamwork, friendship, and enjoyment, but also identified situations where they felt stressed, unfairly treated, or confused by inconsistent messages between coaches and parents. Referees contributed insights into the communicative and behavioural tensions they encounter, particularly regarding parental aggression or misunderstandings about their role in promoting fairness and respect. Together, these focus group findings illuminate the everyday complexities of value transmission in youth sport and underscore the need for coherent, multi-agent approaches that align educational goals across all stakeholders.

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2. Literature review.

2.1. Systematic review of scientific literature.

2.1.1. Method.

The systematic review was carried out using the criteria established in the PRISMA 2020 statement (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; Page et al., 2021) in order to ensure the reliability of the process. The research question guiding this review was: *How do significant psychosocial agents contribute to the development of sport values in children?* Breaking this question down using a PICo strategy, we have:

- P (Population): Significant psychosocial agents in youth sport (peers, family, coaches, and referees).
- I (Interest): Sport values.
- Co (Context): grassroots, recreational and/or school sport, and competitive sport.

Search protocol and strategy.

After conducting preliminary searches on the topic and using the APA PsycInfo and SportDiscus Thesaurus to identify the most appropriate vocabulary, on July 13, 2025, two reviewers independently carried out a search for relevant studies related to the influence of psychosocial agents on the development of sport values in children. To this end, an advanced search strategy was used that included various terms (see Table 2).

Table 2
Descriptors used in the database search

	Descriptors	Key words
P (Population)	Significant psychosocial agents	"coaches", "trainers", "parents", "family", "referees", "officials", "peers", "teammates", "social agents"
I (Interest)	Sport values	"sport values"
Co (Context)	Youth sport (grassroots, school, recreational)	"youth sport", "school sport", "recreational sport", "children sport"

A total of six databases were used for the search: Web of Science, Scopus, APA PsycInfo, SportDiscus, and ERIC.

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In addition to using the PICo question to formulate the research question, it was also used to define the eligibility criteria for the included studies, which were as follows:

- (P) participants had to be involved in youth sports (6–12 years old) in roles such as players/learners, first-degree family members, coaches, and/or referees-judges;
- (I) studies on sport values, focusing on their presence, transmission, and consequences of their presence/absence;
- (Co) studies had to focus on contexts related to children's physical activity. Another inclusion criterion was the type of documents (only empirical studies, both qualitative and quantitative).

Exclusion criteria included: studies whose participants were not children aged 6 to 12; studies that did not provide the necessary methodological information and/or were duplicates; studies without empirical data (such as meta-analyses, systematic reviews, theoretical articles, commentaries, editorials, and opinion essays), as well as other types of publications such as doctoral theses, conference abstracts, and unpublished work; and studies focused on sport as a tool for children with physical or mental disabilities, in order to maintain a normative developmental focus.

Finally, the search strategy and process included exporting the records from the databases into a spreadsheet.

Study selection and description.

The spreadsheet containing the results from the database search included the following categories: source database, authorship, title, year of publication, source, volume, issue, start and end pages, DOI, abstract, keywords, document type, language, and link. Four additional adjacent columns were added (two for each reviewer): one column was used to score each article with 1 point if considered suitable for the review or 0 if not. The other column was reserved for comments or the reasons why the article was not suitable.

First, duplicates were removed. Study selection was then carried out based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, involving two independent reviewers. Two screening phases were conducted: in the first screening, titles, abstracts, and keywords were reviewed. At the end of this phase, both reviewers compared their results and reached unanimous agreement, so the intervention of a third person was not necessary. In the second screening, a full-text reading of the studies was conducted. Based on this two-step screening process, the final selection of articles was made.

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Data extraction and processing method.

Using a manually designed Excel template, systematic extraction of the following data was carried out: article metadata (authorship, year, article title, and reference); study characteristics, such as objectives, theoretical framework, and design (e.g., cross-sectional, longitudinal, quantitative, or qualitative); participant characteristics (age of the children involved, sex/gender, type of sport practiced, type of psychosocial agents involved, as well as means and standard deviations).

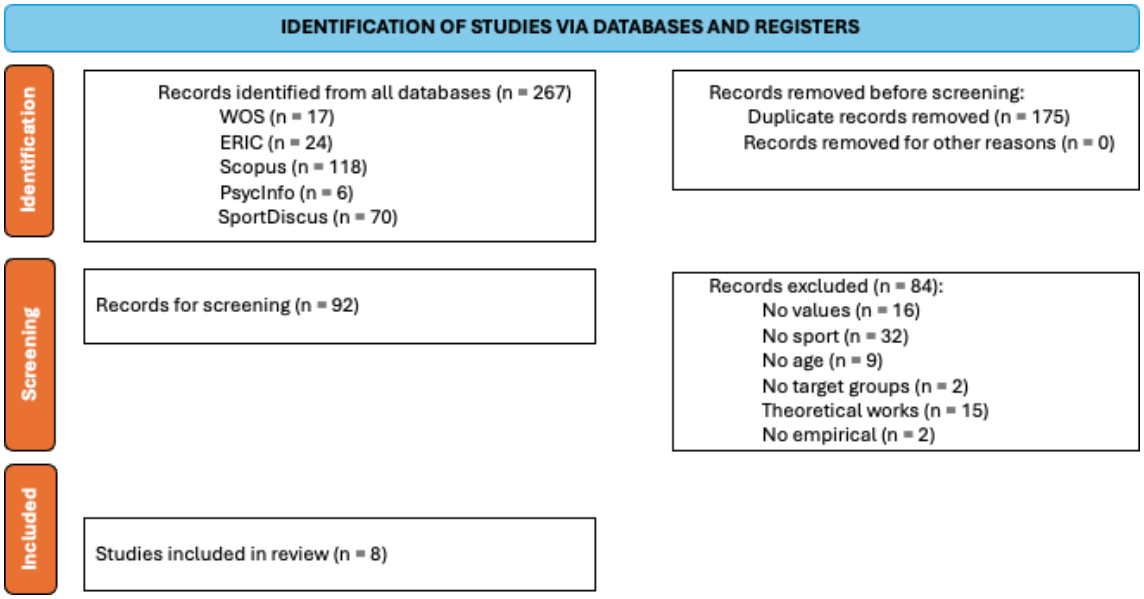
Additionally, other relevant variables related to the study were recorded, such as the values examined, instruments used to assess those values, the role of the values (dependent, independent, moderating variable...), other related variables, statistical findings, main contributions, description of the intervention (if applicable), and reported limitations.

2.1.2. Results.

The database search yielded a total of 267 articles, whose metadata were transferred to an Excel spreadsheet. Following the guidelines of the PRISMA method (Page et al., 2021) for scientific literature reviews, 175 of these 267 results were eliminated because they were duplicates. The inclusion and exclusion criteria determined for the review were then systematically and sequentially applied, leaving a total of 31 papers to be analysed after the first screening and 8 after the full-text analysis (see Figure1 for the complete process).

Figure 1

Flow chart of the application of the PRISMA method for the literature review.



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Characteristics of the studies

After the screening process, 8 studies published between 2000 and 2025 were included, analysing the influence of psychosocial agents on the development of sport values in children aged 6 to 12**.** These studies (see Table 3) show notable methodological heterogeneity, reflecting the complexity of the phenomenon and the diversity of approaches in the literature.

Table 3

Studies included in the review

AUTHOR (YEAR)	OBJECTIVE
Álvarez-Muñoz et al. (2024)	To determine whether or not attendance at federated sports practices affects relationships and family dynamics from the parents' perspective, and its impact on minors' family life, especially on the transmission of values.
Andersson (2020)	Contribute knowledge about parent-created educational practices and conditions for the political socialization of players in competitive grassroots soccer.
McCallister, S.G. et al. (2000)	(1) To identify the values and life skills coaches consider important and how they teach them. (2) To examine youth sport coaches' philosophies and the degree to which they implement them.
Mirehie et al. (2019)	To examine parental values associated with children's participation in organized sports, how these values are shaped by social class, race, and age, and the influence of elite youth sport participation on family life.
Ntalachani et al. (2024)	To explore parents' beliefs about the factors that shape a positive coaching climate in youth sport.
Orozco, A. et al. (2022)	To understand the competitive expressions involved in school soccer through participant observation, reflecting on the formative value of the activity. Also, to explore personal integration of sports rivalry and propose formative implications.
Płoszaj et al. (2025)	To explore the verbal communication behavior of Rugby Union referees in children's sport in relation to the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework.
Nolte & Roux (2023)	Determinar si el judo es una herramienta educativa apropiada en un contexto escolar sudafricano para promover los valores inherentes al Currículo CAPS (Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement).

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Temporal and methodological distribution

The studies cover a 25-year period, with a notable increase in publications during the last decade, indicating growing interest in value education through sport. Regarding methodology, 5 studies (62.5%) are qualitative, 2 (25%) are quantitative, and 1 (12.5%) employs a mixed-methods design (Álvarez-Muñoz et al., 2024; Andersson, 2020; McCallister et al., 2000; Mirehie et al., 2019; Ntalachani et al., 2024; Orozco et al., 2022; Płoszaj et al., 2025; Nolte & Roux, 2023). Cross-sectional or observational designs predominate, with no experimental interventions, suggesting that current evidence focuses more on describing and understanding the phenomenon than evaluating specific programs.

Sample size and characteristics

The sample sizes varied greatly, ranging from 434 parents in the study conducted using mixed methods (Mirehie et al., 2019) to the seven referees in the qualitative study by Nolte and Roux (2023), including varied and intermediate samples in size, such as the one with 22 athletes (McCallister et al., 2000).

None of the samples included in the study were homogeneous in terms of the gender of the participants. However, with regard to families, the sample always had a higher number of female participants than male participants; this trend was reversed in the other roles studied.

Geographical context

The studies were conducted in Europe (Spain, Sweden, Greece, Poland), America (United States), and Africa (South Africa), with one case where the country is not clearly specified (Mirehie et al., 2019). This diversity provides a multicultural perspective on the transmission of values in sport settings, although the predominance of Western countries limits global generalisation.

Psychosocial agents analysed.

Parents are the most frequently studied agent, appearing in 6 out of 8 studies (75%), followed by coaches (50%), referees (12.5%), and other actors such as organisers and the educational community (12.5%). Family emerges as a key factor in value transmission and family organisation (Álvarez-Muñoz et al., 2024; Mirehie et al., 2019), while coaches influence the creation of positive climates and value-based teaching (McCallister et al., 2000; Ntalachani et al., 2024). The study by Płoszaj et al. (2025) introduces the role of referees in positive development through value-oriented verbal communication.

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Sport values addressed.

The most commonly studied values include:

- Respect, discipline, and self-control (Nolte & Roux, 2023; Álvarez-Muñoz et al., 2024).
- Fair play, team cohesion, and cooperation (McCallister et al., 2000; Álvarez-Muñoz et al., 2024).
- Philosophical values such as *Ubuntu* and the moral code of judo (Nolte & Roux, 2023).

Some studies also examine competitiveness and its educational implications (Orozco et al., 2022).

Types of sport and context.

The studies analyse team sports (football, rugby) and individual sports (judo, athletics, swimming), in both schooland federated settings. Nolte & Roux (2023) highlight the integration of judo into school programs as a tool for value education, while Orozco et al. (2022) reflect on tensions between competitiveness and educational goals in school football.

Main findings

- Family and coaches are key agents in value transmission (Álvarez-Muñoz et al., 2024; McCallister et al., 2000).
- Competitive pressure may create tensions between educational development and performance (Orozco et al., 2022).
- Structured programs (e.g., judo in South Africa) show promise for integrating values into formal education (Nolte & Roux, 2023).
- Factors such as child age, socioeconomic status, and culture influence the importance attributed to certain values (Mirehie et al., 2019).

Common limitations

- Predominance of qualitative studies with small samples.
- Limited inclusion of children's own perspectives (focus is mostly on adults).
- Lack of longitudinal designs to assess value development over time.
- Absence of controlled interventions measuring the actual impact of educational programs.

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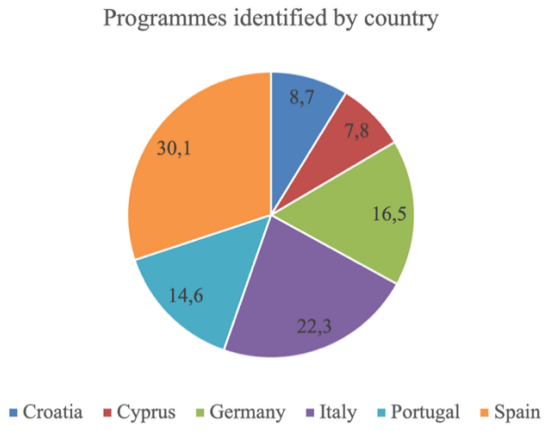
2.2. Good practices through applied programmes.

This good-practices report builds on the systematic analysis of 103 programs implemented across six countries: Italy, Cyprus, Croatia, Portugal, Germany, and Spain (see Appendix). The section is structured into three subsections. The first subsection examines the distribution of programs by country, providing a comparative overview. The second subsection investigates the role of social agents within the programs, highlighting patterns of involvement. The third subsection offers a view to identifying commonalities and divergences across national contexts in regard to sports values within the programs.

2.2.1. Cross-country distribution of programmes.

Figure 2 presents the distribution of sports values programmes across six European countries. Spain leads with 30.1% of the initiatives, followed by Italy with 22.3%, Germany with 16.5%, and Portugal with 14.6%. Croatia and Cyprus record the lowest shares, at 8.7% and 7.8% respectively. These findings suggest a notable concentration of programmes in Southern European countries. This may result from stronger institutional frameworks, sustained policy support, or deeper cultural integration of sports as a social tool. Conversely, the limited presence of such programmes in Croatia and Cyprus may be due to differences in national priorities, institutional development, or available resources.

Figure 2.
Distribution of sports values and social agents programmes, by country.



2.2.2. Information regarding social agents in programmes.

The role of social agents in promoting sports values.

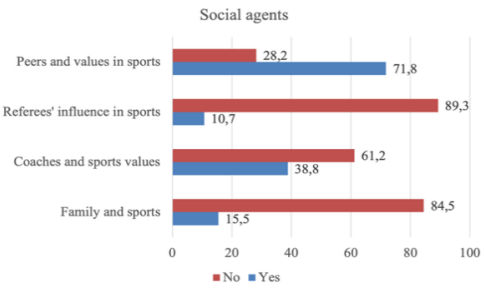
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Figure 3 explores how social agents are acknowledged in sports programmes. Peers are the most recognized, with 71.8% of programmes citing their influence. Coaches follow at 38.8%, while referees and families are much less acknowledged, at 10.7% and 15.5% respectively. This pattern indicates a strong reliance on direct engagement from teammates and coaches. These agents are regularly involved in training and competitions, fostering close relationships that support value transmission. On the other hand, referees and families appear to be on the periphery, reflecting limited awareness of their potential educational role within the sporting environment.

Figure 3.

Social agents influencing sports values.

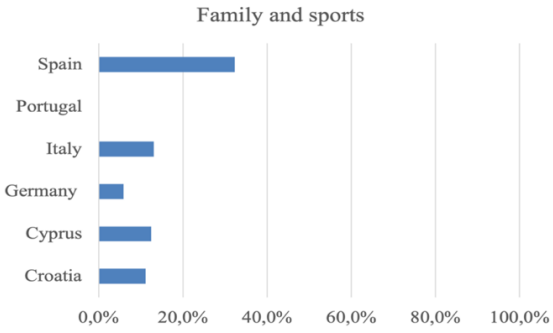


Social agents by category.

Family involvement varies significantly across countries (Figure 4). In Spain, over 30% of programmes highlight the role of families. In contrast, countries like Germany and Portugal report less than 7%. Italy, Cyprus, and Croatia show moderate figures of around 12–13%. These numbers suggest that Spain maintains a stronger cultural connection between family life and sport, while other nations may delegate value transmission more to institutions or organized sports systems.

Figure 4.

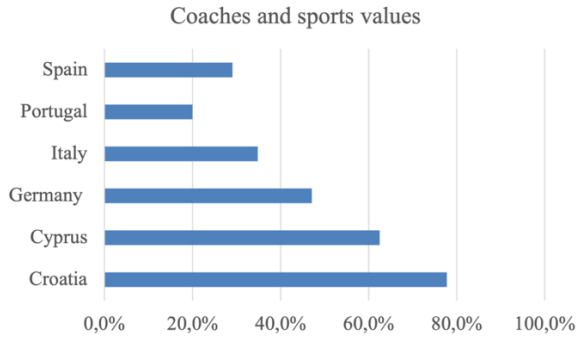
Family involvement in sports programs by country.



The role of coaches also differs by country (Figure 5). Coaches are most valued in Croatia and Cyprus, where their influence is cited in nearly 80% and 62% of programmes respectively. Germany places them at 48%, with Italy and Spain recognizing them in about 30–35% of cases. Portugal records the lowest figure at just 20%. These differences likely reflect national sports structures and perceptions of the coach's role in character development.

Figure 5.

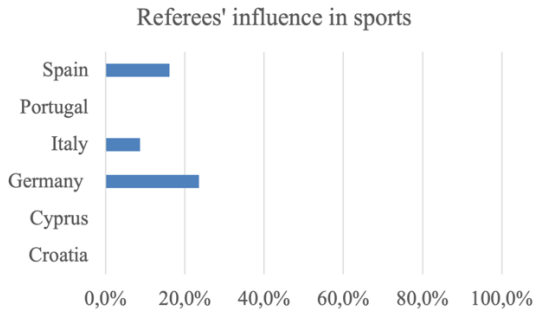
Coaches as promoters of sports values in selected European countries.



Recognition of referees is highest in Germany, where close to 24% of programmes emphasize their role. Spain follows with 16%, and Italy includes referees in only 9% of programmes. Portugal, Cyprus, and Croatia report negligible recognition (Figure 6). This could indicates that only in a few countries are referees seen as important figures in transmitting values such as fairness and integrity within the sporting context.

Figure 6.

Referees' influence in sports programs by country.



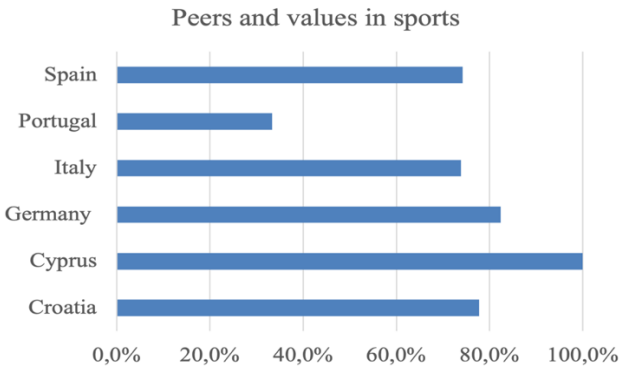
Additionally, the percentage of influence peers have in promoting values through sports across six european countries is presented in Figure 7. Cyprus shows the highest level of peer influence, reaching 100%, followed closely by Germany (around 85%), Croatia (approximately 80%), and both Spain and Italy (about 78%). In contrast, Portugal displays a considerably lower percentage, just above 30%. This distribution highlights significant differences between countries, suggesting that in Cyprus, Germany, and Croatia, peer interactions are perceived as highly important for transmitting values in sports, while in Portugal peers play a relatively minor role compared to other social agents. Such variation may reflect cultural differences in how sports are organized and the extent to which peer groups are recognized as vehicles for social learning and value formation.

Figure 7.

Peer's influence in sports values by country.

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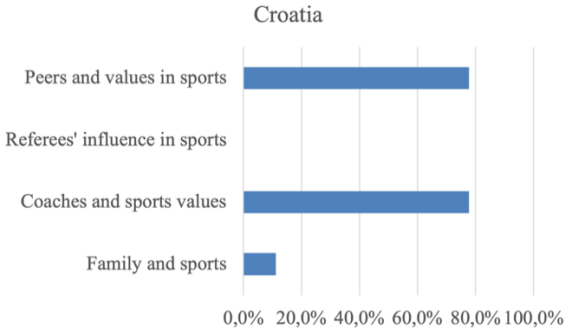


Social agents by country

Figure 8 illustrates the distribution of social agents involved in sports programmes in Croatia. Peers and coaches emerge as the dominant figures, each appearing in nearly 80% of the programmes. This highlights their central role in promoting values through sport. In contrast, referees are entirely absent, and family participation is minimal, accounting for less than 10%. These findings suggest that in Croatia, value education in sport is largely driven by peer interactions and coaching. The limited involvement of families and referees may reflect a more institutionalized, sport-centered approach to value transmission, where informal or peripheral agents play a marginal role.

Figure 8.

Social agents in sports programs in Croatia.



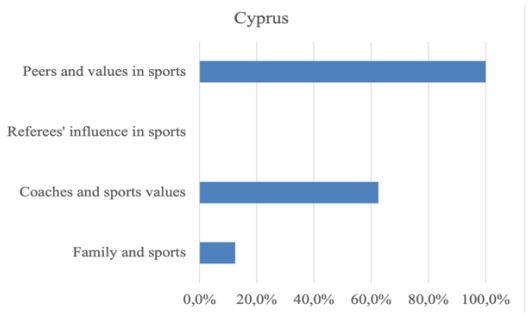
Furtheremore, Figure 9 displays the distribution of social agents involved in sports programmes in Cyprus, emphasizing their relative roles in promoting values. Peers are identified as the most influential group, appearing in 100% of the programmes, followed by coaches at approximately 65%. In contrast, family involvement is limited to under 15%, and referees are not represented at all. This pattern indicates that in Cyprus, value transmission in sports is primarily facilitated through peer interaction and coaching support. The marginal roles of families and referees suggest a system where formal sport environments, rather than broader social influences, serve as the main vehicles for value education. This may reflect the cultural and institutional configuration of sports within the country.

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Figure 9.

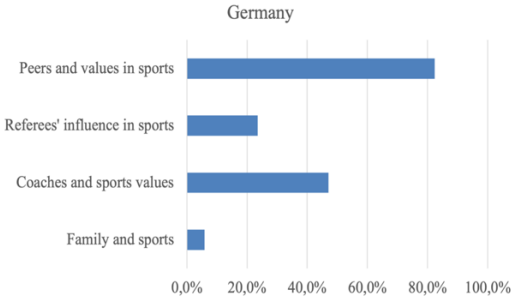
Social agents in sports programs in Cyprus.



Additionally, Figure 10 illustrates the distribution of social agents involved in sports programmes in Germany, expressed as percentages. Peers emerge as the most influential group, cited in over 80% of the programmes, followed by coaches, who are referenced in approximately 50%. Referees hold a secondary role, appearing in about 25% of the cases, while family involvement is minimal, reported in fewer than 10% of the programmes. This distribution indicates that in Germany, value transmission in sports is primarily shaped through peer interaction and coaching. The limited presence of referees and families suggests a system where formal sporting relationships take precedence over peripheral social influences, highlighting a structured and performance-oriented approach to value education.

Figure 10.

Social agents in sports programs in Germany.



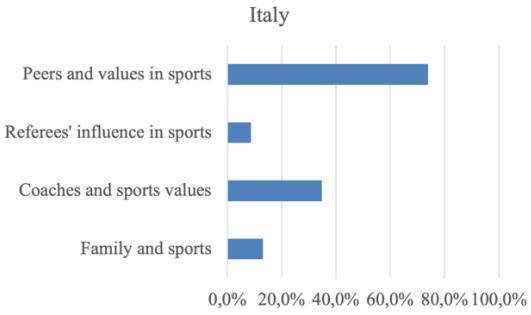
Moreover, Figure 11 presents the distribution of social agents involved in sports programmes in Italy, with a focus on their role in value transmission. Peers are identified as the most influential group, cited in nearly 70% of responses. Coaches follow, with approximately 35–40% recognition. In contrast, families are mentioned in only around 15% of programmes, while referees are the least represented, appearing in fewer than 10%. This distribution suggests that in Italy, the development of values in sports is predominantly driven by peer interactions, underscoring the importance of group dynamics and teamwork. The limited involvement of families and referees implies that sports values are perceived as being cultivated within the immediate sporting context, rather than through broader social or institutional influences.

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Figure 11.

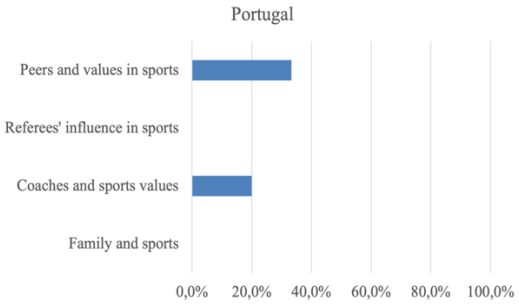
Social agents in sports programs in Italy.



The distribution of social agents involved in sports programmes in Portugal is presented in Figure 12. The data show that peers associated with value transmission in sports are the most prominently featured, comprising approximately 40 percent of the responses. Coaches follow with around 20 percent. In contrast, referees and families are not represented at all. This distribution suggests that Portuguese sports programmes place primary emphasis on peer interaction and coaching in fostering values. The absence of referees and family members indicates a limited recognition of external or peripheral social agents. This pattern reflects a likely institutional focus on direct relationships within the sporting environment, particularly those involving teamwork and mentorship, rather than on broader societal or familial influences in value development.

Figure 12.

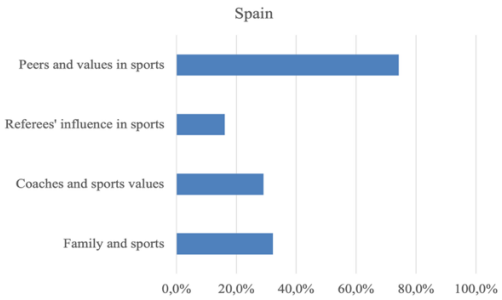
Social agents in sports programs in Portugal.



Also, the distribution of social agents involved in sports programmes in Spain is illustrated in Figure 13. The data indicate that peers play the most prominent role, with nearly 75% of responses attributing value transmission to this group. Families and coaches follow with approximately 35-30%, respectively. In contrast, referees are identified as having a limited role, with less than 20% representation. This distribution suggests that in Spain, peer interaction is viewed as the most influential mechanism for promoting values in sport. The comparatively greater emphasis on peers, families, and coaches highlights a preference for relational and participatory environments in value education. The minimal role attributed to referees implies that their function is perceived as more administrative or regulatory, rather than educational or socially formative.

Figure 13.

Social agents in sports programs in Spain.



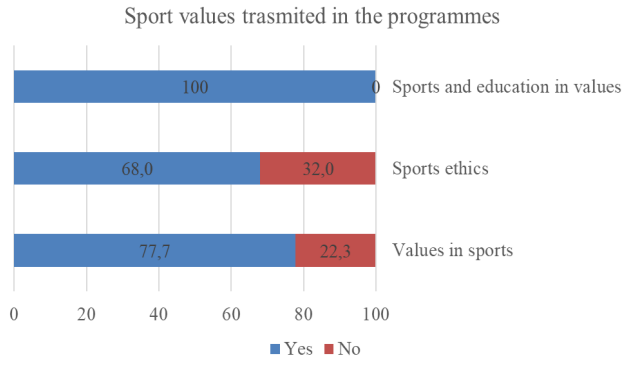
2.2.3. Information related to sport values in applied programmes.

The role of values in promoting sports values

Figure 14 illustrates the extent to which different dimensions of values are incorporated into sports programmes. The data show that "sports and education in values" is fully integrated, with 100% of programmes including it. In contrast, "sports ethics" registers lower inclusion, with 68% of programmes transmitting these values, while 32% do not so. Similarly, "values in sports" are addressed in 77.7% of cases, leaving 22.3% without explicit transmission. These results suggest that while education in values through sports is universally recognised and systematically implemented, aspects such as ethics and broader values still present gaps. This indicates that sports initiatives strongly prioritise general value-based education but may need to reinforce ethical dimensions and specific value transmission to achieve a more holistic approach.

Figure 14.

Sport values included in programmes.



Values by category

The percentage of programs addressing sports values across the six European countries is presented below (Figure 15). Italy shows the highest emphasis, with around 90% of programs incorporating values, followed by Spain (approximately 85%) and Croatia (nearly 80%). Germany (about 70%) and Portugal (60%) occupy intermediate positions, while Cyprus records the lowest proportion, just above 50%. These differences suggest varying degrees of prioritization of value-based education

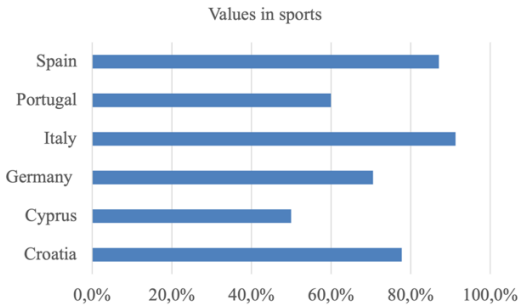
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through sports, with Southern European countries such as Italy, Spain, and Croatia placing stronger emphasis compared to Cyprus, where value integration appears less central. This pattern may reflect distinct national policies or cultural traditions in linking sports with broader social and educational objectives.

Figure 15.

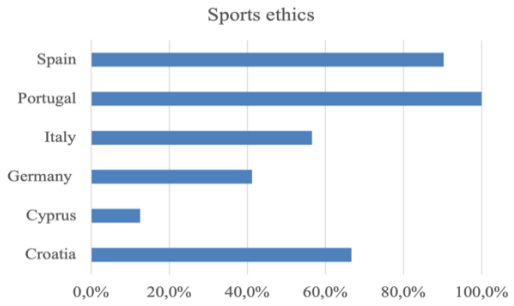
Sports programs promoting values by country.



Additionally, Figure 16 illustrates the percentage of programs related to sports ethics across the six european countries. Portugal (100%) and Spain (90%) show the highest emphasis on ethical aspects in sports programs, followed by Croatia (70%) and Italy (57%). Germany stands at a moderate level (42%), while Cyprus (12%) registers the lowest rate. This distribution highlights significant differences in how countries integrate ethical considerations into their sports initiatives. Southern European countries, particularly Portugal and Spain, appear to prioritize sports ethics as a central component of their programs, suggesting a cultural and institutional emphasis on fairness and integrity, while other regions display less systematic engagement.

Figure 16.

Emphasis on sports ethics in programs across european countries.



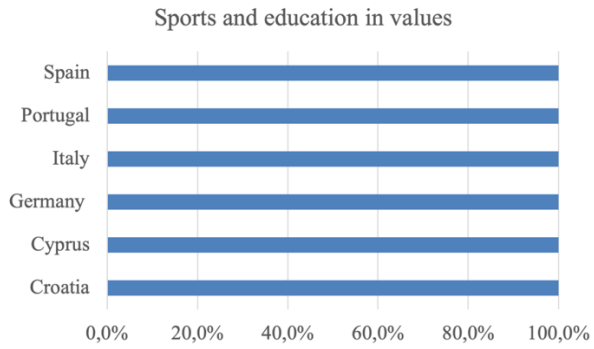
Also, Figure 17 compares the six countries under study regarding the role of sports programs in fostering value-based education. The data show uniform results, with all countries reaching the maximum score of 100%. This suggests a shared consensus across these contexts that sports are strongly associated with the promotion of educational values. From an interpretative perspective, the complete alignment indicates that integrating values education into sports is not only a recognized priority but also a systematically implemented practice across diverse European nations, reflecting the importance attributed to sport as a tool for social and moral development.

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Figure 17.

Sports and education in values across countries.

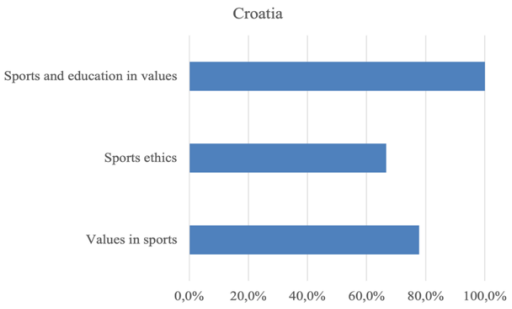


Sports values by country.

Figure 18 depicts how sports programmes in Croatia incorporate different dimensions of value education within the sporting context. Specifically, it shows that "sports and education in values" reaches the highest proportion, with 100% of programs addressing this dimension. "Values in sports" also receives substantial attention, being integrated into approximately 80% of the programs, while "sports ethics" is present in about 65%. This distribution suggests that Croatian sports initiatives place a particularly strong emphasis on linking sports with broader educational values, positioning sport as a tool for character and civic development. At the same time, although ethics and general values in sport are also well represented, their comparatively lower percentages indicate that educational integration is the primary focus of sports programs in the country.

Figure 18.

Sports values in Croatia.



In addition, the distribution of sports programs in Cyprus according to their focus on values is presented (Figure 19). The data reveal that "sports and education in values" dominates overwhelmingly, accounting for nearly 100% of the programs, followed by "values in sports" with around 50%, while "sports ethics" is only marginally

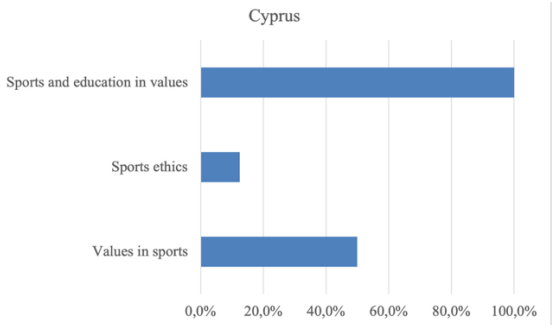
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represented, at about 10%. This distribution suggests that in Cyprus, the primary emphasis of sports programming is on linking sports with education and the transmission of values, indicating a strong pedagogical orientation. However, the limited focus on ethics points to a potential gap in addressing the moral dimensions of sport, which could limit a more holistic approach to value-based education in sporting contexts.

Figure 19.

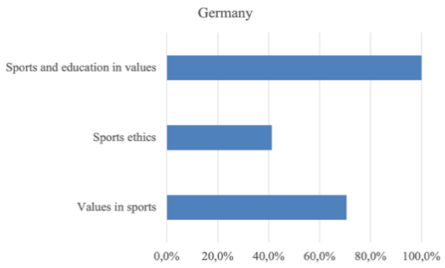
Sports values in Cyprus.



Moreover, Figure 20 illustrates the distribution of sports programs in Germany according to three main themes. The data show that the largest proportion of programs (100%) are dedicated to “sports and education in values”, highlighting a strong emphasis on integrating moral and educational principles into sports. This is followed by “values in sports” (around 70%), which also receives considerable attention, while “sports ethics” appears less frequently, accounting for only about 45% of the programs. The interpretation of these results suggests that Germany prioritizes the role of sports as an educational tool to transmit values to younger generations, while ethical issues, though present, receive comparatively less focus. This distribution reflects a tendency to frame sports not only as physical activity but also as a means for social and moral development.

Figure 20.

Sports values in Germany.



Focusing on the same three categories, Figure 21 presents data on the representation of sports values in Italian sports programs. The results show that

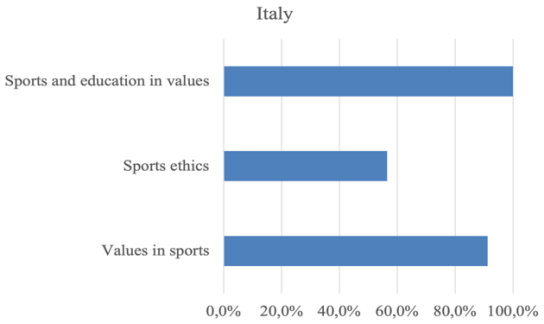
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"sports and education in values" holds the highest presence, reaching 100%, followed closely by "values in sports" at approximately 90%. In contrast, "sports ethics" appears significantly less emphasized, with around 60%. This distribution suggests that Italian sports programs place strong importance on the role of sports as an educational tool and on transmitting general values, while the more specific domain of ethics in sports receives comparatively less attention. This could indicate a prioritization of broader value-based education over detailed ethical considerations in the Italian sports media landscape.

Figure 21.

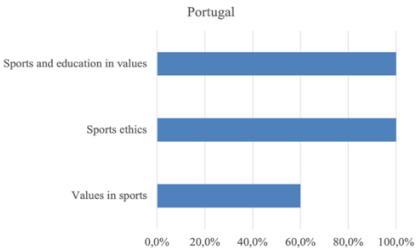
Sports values in Italy.



Furtheremore, Figure 22 presents data on the promotion of sports values in programs on sports in Portugal. Both "sports and education in values" and "sports ethics" reach the maximum level of 100%, while "values in sports" registers a slightly lower percentage, around 60%. This distribution highlights that Portuguese sports programs place strong emphasis on the ethical dimension of sports and on the educational role of sports in transmitting values. However, the comparatively lower representation of "Values in sports" suggests that while ethics and educational aspects are consistently integrated, broader reflections on values embedded in sports practice may receive relatively less direct attention.

Figure 22.

Sports values in Portugal.



Finally, the distribution of sport values emphasized in programs on sports in Spain is presented in Figure 23. The data indicate that "sports and education in values" is

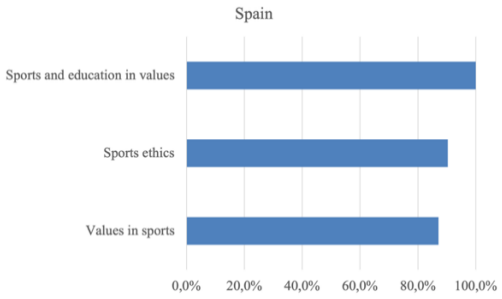
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the most prominent category, reaching nearly 100%. Both “sports ethics” and “values in sports” also show high representation, each above 85%. This suggests that sports programs in Spain place strong emphasis not only on teaching ethical principles and instilling values within sports practice but also on linking these values directly with education. The prominence of “sports and education in values” highlights the role of sport as a pedagogical tool, underlining its importance in character formation and broader educational objectives.

Figure 23.

Sports values in Spain.



Values addressed in the different intervention programmes

Values addressed in the different intervention programmes (Table 4) are so diverse across the six countries under analysis. Overall, social values are more prominently emphasised than general or sport-specific values, with Spain and Germany standing out for their particularly high promotion of social dimension (see respect, inclusion, and tolerance). Interestingly, Spain records the highest figures in respect (21) and empathy (5), suggesting a strong orientation toward interpersonal and community-oriented education. In contrast, Germany shows a balanced presence across multiple categories, with notable attention to solidarity and community engagement. Italy and Portugal also display significant promotion of values, though with greater emphasis on inclusion, respect, and fair play. By comparison, Cyprus and Croatia show a more limited distribution, focusing on a narrower range of values. Sport values such as fair play, teamwork, and cooperation are especially visible in Spain and Portugal, reflecting their integration of sport as a tool for education in values. These patterns indicate that while all countries use social programmes to foster key values, the cultural and institutional priorities vary, reflecting broader societal orientations.

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Table 4.

Values promoted in sport-based programmes across countries.

Values	Italy	Cyprus	Croatia	Portugal	Germany	Spain
Values in general	**5**	**3**	**1**	**6**	**2**	**0**
Social values	**32**	**8**	**19**	**23**	**39**	**56**
Active/healthy lifestyle	6	4	5	1	3	3
Equality	2	0	3	0	0	0
Self-control	1	0	0	0	1	3
Responsability	1	1	2	3	1	2
Not discrimination/integration/inclusion	11	1	6	1	12	7
Respect	5	0	2	7	2	21
Socialization/social skills	3	1	0	1	3	3
Tolerance	1	0	0	1	0	5
Friendship	0	0	0	2	0	0
Honesty/integrity	0	0	0	2	3	2
Loyalty	0	0	0	3	3	1
Conflict resolution	0	0	0	1	1	0
Community engagement	1	0	0	0	5	0
Empathy	0	0	0	0	0	5
Solidarity	1	1	1	1	5	4
Sport values	**12**	**2**	**9**	**19**	**2**	**33**
Fairplay	3	0	4	8	0	14
Teamwork	4	0	3	0	1	8
Cooperation	4	0	0	2	0	2
No violence	1	0	1	1	0	0
Discipline	0	1	1	1	0	3
Passion for sport	0	1	0	0	0	0
Persistence/effort	0	0	0	3	0	3
Sportmanship	0	0	0	4	0	2
Resilience	0	0	0	0	1	1

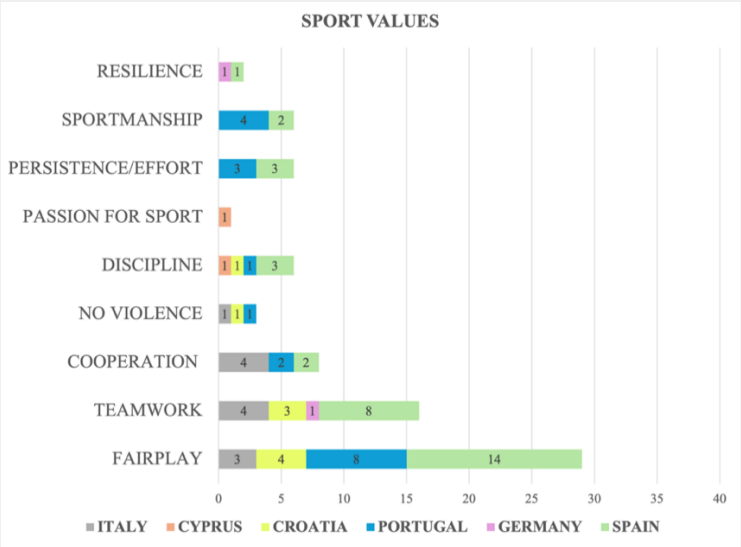
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Moreover, Figure 24 illustrates the distribution of sport values emphasized in social programmes across the six countries under study. The data reveal that fair play is the most frequently highlighted value, particularly in Spain, where it reaches its highest representation, followed by Portugal and Cyprus. Teamwork also emerges as a central value, especially in Spain, while cooperation shows a more balanced presence across countries such as Italy, Portugal, and Spain. In contrast, values like resilience, passion for sport, and no violence are less frequently addressed, suggesting that programmes tend to prioritise collective and ethical aspects of sport (e.g., fair play, teamwork, cooperation) over individual or socio-emotional dimensions. These findings point to a dominant orientation towards fostering collaborative and moral values in sports education, while aspects related to personal growth and emotional resilience receive comparatively limited attention.

Figure 24.

Sport values promoted in sport-based programmes across countries.



Additionally, Figure 25 shows the distribution of social values promoted through sport-based social programmes in the six European countries under analysis. The most prominent value is respect, particularly in Spain, where its frequency far

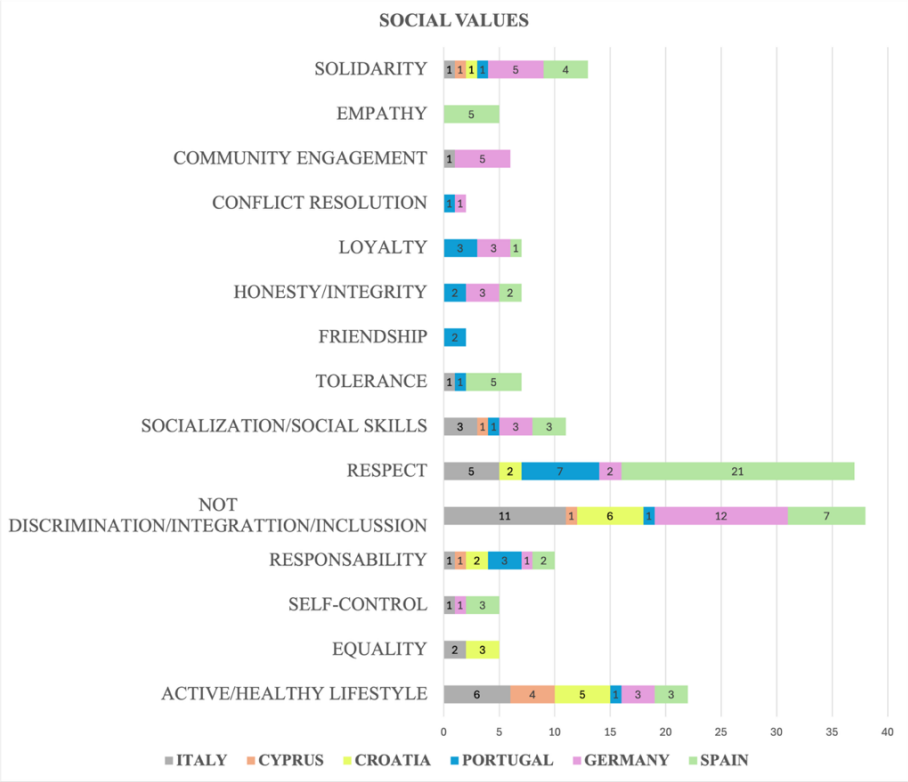
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exceeds that of other countries. This suggests a strong commitment to fostering coexistence, discipline, and fair play. Non-discrimination, integration, and inclusion also emerge as central themes, especially in Germany, Italy, and Spain, aligning with European priorities of social cohesion. Active and healthy lifestyle is highly represented in Italy and Cyprus, reflecting a more health-oriented use of sport. In contrast, values such as empathy, friendship, and conflict resolution are scarcely present, indicating underexplored dimensions. Countries also diverge in their secondary emphases: Portugal highlights honesty and loyalty, while Germany stresses solidarity and socialization. These variations suggest that cultural and policy contexts shape the orientation of programmes. Overall, the figure illustrates a shared prioritisation of universal values but also reveals gaps in socio-emotional aspects. This invites reflection on the need to integrate less represented values more systematically into sports-based interventions.

Figure 25.

Social values promoted in sport-based programmes across countries.



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3. Findings from Focus Groups.

3.1. Report on logistical and methodological difficulties encountered.

The implementation of 54 focus groups -nine in each of five participating countries, with 5 to 8 participants per group- presents substantial methodological and logistical challenges. Focus groups are a widely recognized qualitative research technique designed to elicit in-depth insights into attitudes, perceptions, and experiences through interactive discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Morgan, 1997). However, their effective execution requires rigorous planning, specialized expertise, and significant resource allocation.

Logistical and Organizational Challenges

Organizing multiple focus groups across different countries entails complex coordination. Each session demands careful participant recruitment, scheduling, and provision of suitable venues that ensure confidentiality and comfort. In different contexts, these tasks can be complicated by greater cultural diversity, the heterogeneity of the composition of each focus group, compliance with local regulations (ethical and personal data protection), as well as the difficulty of bringing together different people with different work, family and personal situations at the same time and place. Furthermore, logistical considerations such as transportation, technical equipment (audio/video recording devices), and transcription services increase both costs and operational risks (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2011).

Requirement for Specialized Training

Conducting focus groups is not a straightforward endeavor; it necessitates specialized training in several domains:

- Research Design: Developing clear objectives, constructing thematic guides, and establishing participant selection criteria aligned with the study's aims (Prieto & March, 2002; Yapu & Iñiguez, 2014).
- Moderation Skills: Moderators must possess advanced interpersonal and facilitation skills to foster balanced participation, manage group dynamics, and minimize bias (Escobar & Bonilla-Jiménez, 2020).
- Qualitative Data Analysis: The interpretation of focus group data requires proficiency in systematic coding and thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saldanha et al., 2015).

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- Reporting for Non-Expert Audiences: Translating complex qualitative findings into accessible reports for stakeholders without research backgrounds demands clarity, conciseness, and strategic communication.

These competencies are rarely concentrated in a single individual, necessitating a multidisciplinary team and thereby increasing coordination complexity. It is also difficult to find personnel outside the academic sphere who specialise in this type of work. The University of Seville provided guidelines and materials for carrying out the work and conducted a training session on the subject, but acquiring and mastering these skills takes time.

Data Management and Analytical Complexity

The data generated by 45 focus groups is voluminous. Each session typically produces hours of recordings and extensive transcripts, which must be systematically coded and analyzed using -in better cases- specialized software such as ATLAS.ti or MAXQDA (Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2020), or an analogue development of that work, which would take longer than with the assistance of specialised software. Comparative analysis across five countries introduces additional methodological challenges, including the need to account for cultural and linguistic variations to avoid erroneous generalizations.

Practical Considerations

From a pragmatic standpoint, the scale of this undertaking is considerable. Coordinating approximately 225 participants across five countries, managing scheduling, and ensuring quality control represent significant time and resource commitments. Assuming each group yields approximately 20 pages of transcription, the project would generate nearly 900 pages of qualitative data, requiring extensive analysis and synthesis. Failure to allocate sufficient resources for training, supervision, and quality assurance could compromise the validity and reliability of findings, undermining the project's objectives.

Conclusion

The execution of 45 focus groups across five countries is a complex, resource-intensive process that demands meticulous planning, specialized expertise, and robust analytical frameworks. The logistical challenges, training requirements, and analytical demands fully justify the allocation of substantial time and budgetary resources to this component of the project. As the literature underscores, while focus groups are a powerful tool for generating rich qualitative insights, their successful implementation hinges on methodological rigor and adequate investment (Rodas & Pacheco, 2020; López, 2022).

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3.2. National reports.

The objective of this phase is to gather qualitative data on the influence of social agents (family, peers, referees, and coaches) in shaping and transmitting sports values in children.

Focus groups are a valuable qualitative research method for exploring complex social situations because they allow researchers to capture diverse perspectives and social dynamics in a natural, interactive setting. By facilitating discussion among participants, focus groups uncover collective meanings, shared experiences, and points of contention that may not emerge in individual interviews or surveys. This method is especially useful for understanding how people construct meaning, negotiate social norms, and respond to sensitive or ambiguous issues ina group context.

Below are the field research reports (Focus grous) from the different countries participating in the consortium. In Table 5 a summary is exposed.

Table 5.
Suma of the status of the Focus Groups at the finalization os the work period.

	Interviews + Transcriptions	Report
CUS Palermo	5/5	Done
FEDERAZIO PALAVOLO	4/5	Done
NGO NEST BERLIN	2/9	Done
ASSOCIACAO DE FUTEBOL DE BRAGANCA	5/9	Done
CSI Cyprus	9/9	Done
Croatian Voley Federation	4/9	Done
US	9/9	Done
IFSO	9/9	Done

3.2.1. Spain.

This work includes the results derived from nine focus groups, in which 37 people participated, most of whom were male (28).

This study identified 11 key themes related to the educational potential of sport, based on the perspectives of coaches, referees, players, and families. The most prominent value was companionship, reflecting the importance of empathy, mutual support, and teamwork in both individual and collective sports. Other positive values included respect, personal improvement, obedience, and integrity, often reinforced through daily routines and interpersonal interactions. Among the most effective practices, structured routines—such as greetings, punctuality, and shared responsibilities—were highlighted as essential for promoting respectful behavior. On the other hand, the most significant obstacle was the lack of value-based training for adults, followed by the dominance of a result-oriented culture and poor coordination among educational agents.

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The findings confirm that sport can be a powerful educational tool when supported by intentional, coordinated efforts among all involved agents. Coaches play a central role as behavioral models and emotional guides, while referees are increasingly recognized as educators who promote fairness and emotional regulation. Families, although sometimes sources of pressure, can also be key allies when aligned with the club's values. However, the presence of contradictory messages, competitive excess, and insufficient adult training can undermine the educational impact of sport. Strengthening inter-agent communication, promoting shared routines, and investing in ethical training are essential to ensure that sport truly becomes a space for value formation.

Methodology

Ethics and Permissions

Approval by the Ethics Committee of the University of Seville was required and obtained for this study. It received at its meeting on 30 April (Minutes: 04/2025). The reference code of the protocol is 2025-1214. The opinion confirms that the protocol meets the necessary suitability requirements in relation to the objectives of the study and complies with the ethical principles applicable to this type of study and set out in the Declaration of Helsinki.

The processing of participants' personal data complies with the provisions of Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016, and Organic Law 3/2018 of 5 December on the Protection of Personal Data and Guarantee of Digital Rights.

Participants.

The sample was specifically structured to include families, coaches, players and referees, all divided into subgroups participating in team or individual sports. This dual segmentation was key to exploring possible differences in the perception and experience of values depending on the nature of the sport. In total, the research involved 37 participants, ensuring a varied representation of profiles, although with a clear majority of male participants in almost all groups, a trend that was more pronounced in the coach groups (Table 6).

Table 6
Description of the Focus Groups participants.

Focus Group	Profile	No. Participants	Gender Breakdown	Duration (minutes)	Notes
FG1	Families	5	1F / 4M	38	Collective sports
FG2	Families	5	3F / 2M	25	Individual sports
FG3	Coaches	5	5M	30	Collective sports
FG4	Coaches	4	4M	39	Individual sports
FG5	Minors	5	1F/ 4M	33	Collective sports
FG6	Minors	5	2F / 3M	30	Individual sports
FG7	Referees	4	1F / 3M	31	Collective sports
FG8	Referees	4	1F / 3M	36	Individual sports
FG9	Miscellaneous*	7	2F / 5M	19	4 individual sports

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					3 individual sports

*1 minor male individual sport,1 relative female individual sport,1 relative male collective sport,1 coach male individual sport, 1 coach male collective sport,1 referee male individual sport,1 referee male collective sport.

Logistics.

The focus groups with young players were conducted in person. However, the rest of the groups were conducted online, mainly due to the significant scheduling conflicts experienced by the participants.

Each session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Teams was used for data collection, supplemented with 360-degree camera devices to ensure complete documentation. No specific observations or notes were recorded regarding the environment, accessibility, or environmental considerations during the sessions.

Thematic Analysis.

Familiarization with data.

The data was transcribed by one of the members of the work team. Subsequently, with all the data in Word format, another member of the team coded it with the help of the code list and the Atlas-Ti qualitative analysis program. This same researcher then prepared reports for each of the codes, which were subsequently analyzed and interpreted.

Coding Process.

The code generation process was carried out using Atlas.ti software. To establish the framework for analysis, a deductive approach was taken, using the preliminary codes proposed by the University of Seville. However, an inductive-deductive process was applied to refine and adapt these codes to the reality of the data, ensuring that only those codes that were truly significant were retained. This iterative process of analysis allowed for the emergence of various key themes. Examples of the key codes developed include:

- A1. Coach role. Emotional and sport support.
- A2. Family role. Emotional support.
- E2. Obstacles. Results-oriented culture.

Theme Development

Theme 1: The Value of Willingness to Help - Team Spirit

All participating groups (coaches, families, referees, and players) consistently identified willingness to help and team spirit as the main values most present in their respective sports disciplines.

“It is very important for children to feel part of a group, to understand that they must help one another, and that without the support of their teammates, it is difficult to achieve any goal.” (Coach, Team Sport 1)

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“I always say that even if a teammate makes a mistake, it doesn’t matter. They will always have their teammates there to encourage them.” (Player, Team Sport 3)

“In my sport, what stands out the most is camaraderie.” (Player, Individual Sport 4)

“One of the things I like the most is the sense of camaraderie. On the tatami, they are rivals and compete against each other, but afterwards, they laugh together—even if one is from Almería and the other from Seville.” (Family Member, Individual Sport 2)

“Team spirit is highly promoted, even in an individual sport, since the team environment and mutual support among swimmers are very important.” (Referee, Individual Sport 2)

“My daughter competes alone, yes, but the mutual support is very strong. The camaraderie in the relays or at training is what keeps her coming back. Without that team spirit in the pool, she would feel alone. They correct each other and encourage each other on the sidelines. Emotional support is key, even if they don't play together. (Family Member Individual Sport, Miscellaneous)

Theme 2: Obedience

The value of obedience, understood as respect for rules, authority figures, and the acceptance of decisions without questioning, is manifested across all participant groups, albeit with nuances. Coaches and referees in team sports emphasize the acceptance of refereeing decisions as an expression of discipline and respect. Families and athletes involved in individual sports, in turn, highlight obedience as a component of emotional regulation, personal discipline, and respect for the coach or referee. In general, individual sports tend to associate obedience with the internal development of character, whereas team sports relate it more to coexistence and group functioning.

“I have been practicing judo for many years, and I always observe respect toward the instructor and fellow practitioners. No one argues with the referee’s decisions.” (Family Member, Individual Sport 1)

“Boys and girls who accept the referee’s decisions, even when they disagree, demonstrate respect and discipline. That is fundamental to athletic development.” (Referee, Team Sport 3)

"In soccer, obedience to the whistle is the first rule. If they see that the referee explains why he blows it, they accept it, even if they disagree. That's basic discipline." (Referee Team Sport, Miscellaneous)

Theme 3: Self-Improvement

The value of self-improvement, understood as the will to progress through effort and perseverance, emerges strongly in individual sports, where it is linked to personal discipline, emotional regulation, and the internal struggle against frustration. Coaches, referees, and individual athletes emphasize the importance of facing oneself, persevering, and striving to surpass personal bests. In team sports, self-improvement is more closely associated with responsibility toward the group: making an effort for the team and not letting one’s teammates down. Thus, while in individual sports self-improvement is introspective and formative, in team sports it is functional and oriented toward collective performance.

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“Individual sports, and swimming in particular, have a unique nature: you are in the water with yourself, unable to talk to anyone. Swimming back and forth in a 25-meter lane develops valuable mental, psychological, and social skills for life. Perseverance, dedication, and the ability to be alone with yourself during long training sessions are key.” (Coach, Individual Sport 4)

" For me, the key value is personal improvement, which goes beyond whether you win or lose the basketball game. In the stands, I focus on my son giving his best. I don't ask him if he won, but if he tried hard, if he learned something, and if he improved on that difficult pass. Personal improvement, individual progress, is the only real victory and what will serve him for life, not the score. (Family member Team Sport, Miscellaneous)

Theme 4: Fulfilling Agreements and Integrity

The value of integrity, understood as respect for established rules, commitments, and agreements, is reflected across all participant groups, though with different emphases. Coaches in team sports stress the importance of punctuality, adherence to rules, and respectful behavior in daily interactions. Individual athletes associate integrity with accepting results and maintaining ethical conduct in the face of defeat. Families of individual athletes highlight respect for the practice environment and rituals such as greeting, which reinforce commitment to both context and rules. In team sports, families value gestures such as attending matches even when not selected to play, as this reflects a strong sense of belonging and commitment to the team.

“Discipline and responsibility are fundamental: following the rules, respecting schedules, arriving early, and greeting teammates. These daily gestures reflect commitment to both the team and the sporting environment.” (Coach, Team Sport 2)

“In contact sports, respect is also expressed through care for the environment and personal hygiene. Greeting when entering or leaving the tatami is like knocking on the door before entering a room: it is a demonstration of integrity that is cultivated in every training session.” (Family Member, Individual Sport 3)

"Integrity begins with punctuality and greeting. If you consistently arrive late or leave without greeting your teammate or coach, you're already violating the principle of respect. It's the foundation for everything in an individual sport.” (Coach Individual Sport, Miscellaneous)

Theme 5: Unsportsmanlike Conduct and Foul Play

The most frequently mentioned lack of values among all participants, particularly in team sports, was unsportsmanlike conduct, understood as behaviors such as cheating, provoking, insulting, or deceiving. These actions were critically perceived by all groups. Team players and referees pointed out behaviors such as excessive protests, violent tackles, or provocations as indicators of foul play, often influenced by adult or media role models. Families also warned about the pressure to achieve results and the imitation of negative attitudes seen in professional football, which can distort the educational spirit of sport. In individual sports, this perception is almost nonexistent.

“Sometimes we observe negative behaviors such as insults, intentional fouls, or peer pressure, especially when adults project excessive expectations. From the stands, you can

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also hear phrases like 'Hit the other one hard!' or 'You have to win no matter what!', which foster foul play and disrespect." (Referee, Team Sport 2)

"Some professional football models transmit attitudes that are far from exemplary. There are children who imitate defiant celebrations or confrontations with referees, losing sight of the value of teamwork." (Family Member, Team Sport 4)

" As long as television and the media only celebrate the winner and set a poor example of fair play, it will be very difficult for us to educate. Society must change its mindset and prioritize ethics over spectacle." (Referee Team Sport, Miscellaneous)

Theme 6: Rule Violations

Rule violations, understood as a lack of respect for rules, agreements, or ethical behavior, are perceived as a problem particularly in team sports. In fact, they represent the second most frequently cited lack of value among participants. Team players and referees reported behaviors such as repeated protests, foul play, aggression, or attempts to deceive referees. Families also highlighted excessive pressure to win, which may lead children to adopt unsportsmanlike attitudes. In individual sports, although less common, serious cases such as institutionalized cheating were mentioned, which call into question the integrity of the system. Overall, all groups agreed that such behaviors distort the educational purpose of sport and negatively affect the playing environment.

"There are times when we see a lack of respect toward opponents, attempts to deceive referees, and aggressive behaviors. These attitudes, often fueled by external pressure, deteriorate the sporting atmosphere and hinder the learning of values." (Referee, Team Sport 1)

"Yes, I was robbed of a championship. Some riders had better bikes because their teams paid the Federation to cheat. It was a very unfair experience that made me question the real value of effort." (Player, Individual Sport 2)

" We've had cases where parents suggest we cheat on registrations or age to win a tournament. That's an institutional violation of the rules that destroys all the values we try to teach at the club. It's a terrible message of double standards." (Coach Team Sport, Miscellaneous)

Theme 7: The Role of the Coach

Behavior modeling by the coach is the most frequently mentioned and valued role across all participant groups. Families, particularly in individual sports, emphasized that the coach has even greater influence than parents themselves, serving as an almost unquestionable figure who transmits values through every gesture and decision. Coaches reinforced this view, noting that values are taught daily, not only through words but through consistent and coherent actions. Referees and players also acknowledged that the coach's example—how they behave, communicate, and handle situations—has a direct impact on athletes' ethical learning. Overall, the coach is perceived as a key reference figure whose conduct shapes the group's character and attitude.

"For my son, the coach is more important than I am. If the coach says they must be there at a certain time or do something, it is followed without question. It is a figure that commands

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deep respect and often transmits values more strongly than parents do." (Family Member, Individual Sport 4)

"Although families spend more time with the children, we become their role models. Many of them reproduce our behaviors, which is why it is essential that we set an example. We are usually their main source of support." (Coach, Team Sport 5)

" My coach teaches me not to get angry if I lose a tie-break point and to take responsibility for my mistakes, instead of blaming the wind or the racket. He influences me more than my parents on the court because he's there, in the moment of truth of the competition." (Minor Individual Sport, Miscellaneous)

In addition to this exemplary role, the coach also fulfills a key function as a source of emotional and sporting support. Their presence not only guides technical development but also provides accompaniment during difficult moments, helps channel frustration, and fosters reflection. Families particularly value their ability to intervene sensitively in situations of defeat or tension, helping athletes take responsibility and grow from experience. This type of support leaves a lasting impression and strengthens the bond between coach and athlete.

"We are not an organization focused on immediate results, but on patience, commitment, and teamwork. We avoid comparisons and teach that value lies not only in performance, but in the process itself." (Coach, Individual Sport 4)

"In a recent match, after a close defeat, the coach gathered the team to reflect. When some players started blaming the referee, he interrupted them and said: 'You cannot control what others do. What you must understand is that you are responsible for what is within your own hands.' That kind of support leaves a lasting mark." (Family Member, Team Sport 1)

"Parental pressure is palpable. I see mothers who are more nervous than their child before a game. They project their expectations of success onto the child, and that ends up being a burden." (Coach Team Sport, Miscellaneous)

Theme 8: The Role of Families: Expectations vs. Pressure

The role of families in children's sports lies on a delicate balance between fostering positive development and generating excessive pressure. Coaches and referees in team sports agree that many families project onto their children an obsession with immediate results, influenced by media models that prioritize individual success. This pressure manifests through attitudes such as demanding more playing time or creating rivalries among parents. In contrast, other families promote a healthier perspective on sport, focused on enjoyment, effort, and respect. Within individual sports, the importance of family support without imposing expectations is also emphasized, viewing sport as an educational rather than a purely competitive tool.

"I try not to pressure them about the result, but about their attitude. I teach them to enjoy themselves, to respect their opponents, and to value effort. After matches, I don't ask if they won—I ask if they had fun and gave their best." (Family Member, Team Sport 5)

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"Many parents impose on very young children the need to obtain immediate results: how many points they scored, how many minutes they played... This constant pressure is one of the factors that most conditions their sporting experience." (Coach, Team Sport 3)

Theme 9: The Role of the Referee as an Educational Figure

The role of the referee as an educational figure—beyond their regulatory function—is emphasized exclusively by the referees themselves, which is notable given the absence of references to this role from other groups. Both team and individual referees agree that their role extends beyond rule enforcement: it also involves teaching respect, managing conflicts, and fostering learning through experience. Reported actions include explaining decisions, intervening in disputes, using dialogue as a pedagogical tool, or even pausing play to defuse tensions. This vision of the referee as an educator contrasts with the traditional perception of an authoritarian figure and reflects a commitment to humanizing their role and positioning them as formative agents within sport.

"I try to apply the rules fairly and explain my decisions so that players learn to respect both opponents and referees. In conflict situations, I intervene to teach them how to calm down and resolve issues peacefully. Sometimes I even stop the match for a few minutes so they can regroup and resume play with a positive attitude." (Referee, Team Sport 2)

"In my role as a referee, I try to maintain an impartial and respectful attitude, conveying calmness and confidence to the swimmers. When disqualifications occur, I explain them patiently—especially to younger athletes—so that they understand them as learning opportunities rather than punishment. I believe we should foster communication that teaches respect for rules and tolerance toward mistakes." (Referee, Individual Sport 4)

Theme 10: Facilitating Practices, routines that promote Respect

These actions constitute systematic practices that consolidate values such as punctuality, greeting, hygiene, cooperation, and communication. This category, identified as the second most frequent in the study, appears across all participant groups, with particular emphasis among coaches. In team sports, common routines include pre- and post-session talks, equipment collection, mandatory greetings, and collective session closure. In individual sports, institutional coherence, alignment between coaches and administrators, and family involvement in workshops and communications are valued. Players and families also recognize the importance of daily gestures such as arriving on time, greeting others, taking care of uniforms, and respecting training spaces. Referees reinforce this perspective by proposing pre-match talks and reminding athletes of the importance of empathy and respect as part of the sport's unwritten rules.

"At the start of each session, we usually hold a short talk to explain the plan for the day. At the end, we have another brief reflection. Players also collect the equipment, shower, and say goodbye. For us, it is essential that they learn to greet and say farewell—not only to the coaches but also to their teammates. They can't just leave: there must be a collective closure." (Coach, Team Sport 4)

"In this sport, greeting and punctuality are fundamental. There is always an initial greeting, and those who arrive late feel uncomfortable. We also take care of the judogi—wearing it

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properly conveys respect for the sport. You can't practice carelessly." (Family Member, Individual Sport 2)

"In judo, the routine of taking care of the *judogi*, wearing it properly, and bowing when entering the tatami, conveys respect for the discipline. These are gestures that become automatic." (Referee Individual Sport, Miscellaneous)

Theme 11: Hindering Practices

The lack of value-based education among adults—particularly coaches, families, and referees—is perceived as one of the main barriers to ethical development in children's sports. Team coaches note that although the environment has a strong influence, the absence of specific training in values limits educational coherence among stakeholders. They stress the need to align messages across clubs, families, and schools, and to strengthen professional training to prevent unqualified practice. Families acknowledge that they are often unaware of the pressure they exert and propose courses or workshops to improve their engagement. Referees also highlight the importance of training all agents in sports ethics, suggesting spaces for reflection and programs that prioritize learning over results. Overall, there is a clear demand for professionalization and awareness-raising to ensure that sport fulfills its educational function.

"It would be essential to include more training in sports values for coaches, parents, and referees." (Referee, Individual Sport 5)

"All agents must complement one another. To achieve this, greater training requirements for coaches are necessary, along with regulation that recognizes their work. Right now, anyone can lead a group of children with little to no preparation. It would also be important to extend this training to families so they understand that, at these ages, results should not take precedence over everything else." (Coach, Team Sport 2)

The culture of results, understood as the predominant focus on winning, ranking, or standing out above the formative process, is identified as a dynamic that hinders the development of values in sport. Team coaches report that although effort and learning are promoted within clubs, this message is weakened by external pressures—particularly from families and the media—that idolize individual success. Families also recognize that when mistakes are penalized or only the "best" are prioritized, it creates fear of failure and distorts the educational meaning of sport. Players and referees agree that this obsession with winning generates excessive rivalry, anxiety, and frustration. Overall, there is a clear need to balance the competitive focus with a more pedagogical and emotional approach.

"Weekend matches are where all this is most tested. Sometimes parents in the stands shout excessively, creating unnecessary pressure. I've seen teams where the message is 'you must win at all costs,' and witnessing how opponents are humiliated without anyone intervening is truly disappointing." (Family Member, Team Sport 1)

The third barrier identified is the lack of coordination among coaches, families, referees, and clubs. Coaches in both team and individual sports noted that although positive messages are reinforced within clubs, these can be undermined if contradictory messages are sent at home. It is also emphasized that the three pillars—club, family, and school environment—must be aligned. Families acknowledge their active role in supporting

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children but also the difficulty of coordinating schedules and maintaining fluid communication. Referees propose greater family involvement and the creation of shared spaces for reflection. Altogether, it is evident that without a cohesive educational network, the formative impact of sport is significantly weakened.

“We spend the week reinforcing the idea that results are not what matters—that effort and positivity must be valued. But if the message at home is the opposite, learning becomes very limited. Coordination with families is essential.” (Coach, Team Sport 5)

“We could create spaces for reflection within clubs, where young athletes can talk about what they feel and learn through sport. Without coordination among all agents, the educational message becomes fragmented and loses strength.” (Referee, Individual Sport 2)

"We insist that effort comes first. But if the message they receive at home or in other environments is 'win at all costs,' our message gets fragmented and loses all its educational force." (Coach Individual Sport, Miscellaneous).

Key findings.

Role of Social Agents.

The study highlights the distinct roles of coaches, referees, families, and peers in value transmission. Coaches emerge as central figures, not only for their technical guidance but also for their behavioral modeling and emotional support. Referees are increasingly seen as educators who promote fairness and emotional regulation, especially when they communicate decisions with clarity and respect. Families play a dual role: they can reinforce positive values when aligned with the club’s philosophy but may also exert pressure when overly focused on results. Peers, especially in team sports, contribute to the development of companionship, empathy, and mutual responsibility.

Barriers and Facilitators to Value-Based Sports.

Three major barriers were identified: Lack of value-based training for adults, Result-oriented culture, Poor coordination among agents.

These structural and cultural challenges weaken the educational potential of sport. On the other hand, facilitators include the use of structured routines (e.g., greetings, punctuality, shared responsibilities), clear communication, and alignment between families and clubs, all of which help reinforce respect, responsibility, and emotional growth.

Cross-group comparisons.

Notable differences emerged between individual and team sports. In team sports, values like companionship and cooperation were more prominent, while individual sports emphasized discipline, self-improvement, and emotional regulation. Across all groups, coaches were consistently recognized as the most influential agents. Families in individual sports tended to show higher levels of involvement and respect for routines, while in team sports, issues like rivalry and pressure from the stands were more frequently mentioned. Despite these differences, the need for coherence, training, and shared values was a common thread across all contexts.

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Conclusions and Recommendations.

Spectrum of Values

The analysis reveals that team spirit is the most prominent value in participants' discourse, with 35 mentions, confirming its central role in educational sport. This value is expressed through mutual support, empathy toward mistakes, and group cohesion—particularly in team sports, but also within individual disciplines. Other key positive values identified include respect, personal growth, discipline, and integrity, all of which are linked to everyday gestures, routines, and attitudes that reinforce ethical learning.

In contrast, the absence of values or specific deficiencies also emerge, such as unsporting behavior, rule-breaking, and result-oriented pressure, which distort the educational meaning of sport. These behaviors are associated with provocations, cheating, protests, and aggressive attitudes, often influenced by media models or by environments lacking ethical awareness.

Roles of Educational Agents

The three main agents—coaches, referees, and families—play complementary roles in values education through sport. The coach is perceived as a key reference figure, both through behavioral modeling and emotional or athletic support. In some contexts, their influence even surpasses that of families, as their daily example shapes attitudes and values among athletes.

The referee, traditionally viewed as a merely normative authority, reclaims their role as an educational agent, especially when acting with respect, explaining decisions, and managing conflicts with pedagogical intent.

Families, in turn, play an ambivalent role: they can be strong allies in transmitting values, yet may also create undue pressure if not aligned with the club's educational approach. Despite this, it is noteworthy that the influence of peers was not mentioned as a relevant factor.

Facilitating Practices and Hindering Dynamics

Among the facilitating practices, the most prominent is the use of routines that promote respect, identified as the second most frequent code in the study. These include greeting rituals, punctuality, pre- and post-session discussions, and the care of equipment and facilities, all gestures that naturally and effectively consolidate values.

However, participants identified a greater number of hindering dynamics, such as the lack of training in values education for adults (the third most cited code), the dominance of a results-oriented culture, and poor coordination among educational agents.

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Undoubtedly, these barriers demonstrate that sport does not educate on its own: it requires prepared, interconnected, and committed environments. Without proper training, coherence among messages, and a pedagogical focus that transcends mere victory, the educational potential of sport is seriously constrained.

3.2.2. Italy (CUS Palermo).

This national report has been prepared under the coordination of the University Sports Center of Palermo (CUS) as part of the MENTORS project (Task 2.3 – Focus Group).

Between September and October 2025, five focus groups were conducted in the metropolitan city of Palermo, involving a total of 28 participants. The groups represented the main categories of stakeholders defined by the Project and specifically:

- Families / Parents: Group 1 (5 participants)
- Referees: Group 1 (6 participants)
- Coaches and athletic trainers: Group 1 (8 participants)
- Youth and children: Group 1 (5 participants)
- Various profiles/ mixed group: Group 1 (4 participants)

Each session was conducted by two local moderators and in particular by project managers of CUS Palermo. One person was in charge of moderating the focus group while the other was in charge of recording the session and taking notes and ensuring consistency, neutrality and methodological rigor. Each participant was put at ease during the interviews and informed about the aims of the Project, as well as about the anonymity of the information released. Informed consents were read and signed before each session began.

All sessions were recorded, transcribed, anonymized and coded and analyzed according to the official coding framework of the Mentors (values, actors, obstacles, resources and proposals).

The Italian focus groups provided rich, diversified and converging insights in some categories. Values such as respect, teamwork, resilience, discipline and the possibility of seeing sport as fun also emerged. In particular, parents and trainers emphasized the educational and social dimension of sport as a "school of life", which helps young people to develop emotional control, perseverance and civic behavior.

Based on the interviews conducted with the Children, Families, Coaches, Referees and the Mixed Group, the following main themes can be identified:

The central themes that emerged in all the discussion groups revolve around three main areas:

1. The Values Promoted by Sport: What principles are learned.

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2. Risk Factors (or Antivalues): What hinders the transmission of these principles.
3. The Role of Social Agents and the Resources Needed: The influence of reference figures and suggestions for improvement.

1. All the groups agree in recognizing a core of essential values promoted by the practice of sport:

- Respect: Universally recognized as the main value. It includes respect for teammates, opponents, coaches and, above all, for referees, respect for the rules and decision-making authority.
- Collaboration and Team Spirit: A key value for children, families and coaches, who see it as essential for success and group growth (e.g. "trusting teammates" in rowing, "passing the ball" in basketball).
- Resilience and Commitment: Understood as discipline, perseverance and the ability not to give up in the face of difficulties or difficult training, or to get up after failure.
- Training and Personal Growth: Sport is defined as a "philosophy of life" that aims not only at athletic results, but at character growth and socialization/aggregation.

2. On the other hand, the strongest and most transversal critical element that emerged from the analysis of the focus groups is the excessive competitive pressure and the spasmodic search for victory at all costs, especially at a young age.

In particular, as can be seen from some statements, Coaches and Families see this emphasis on the result as the main cause that ruins the true spirit of sport, transforming it from a growth experience to a source of anxiety and frustration, which can lead to early abandonment.

"T1: The value of sport is lost when the meaning of sport itself is misinterpreted. Especially at an amateur level, sport should be fun, health and physical well-being and a positive experience for each of us. Often, unfortunately, these values are ruined by the excessive continuous search for victory at any cost that ruins their true value."

"F5: Well, let's say that if one only sees sport as one wants to become an established footballer already at these tender ages, it is already a technically wrong thought because sport would fail. So, the role of the coach but also of the parents is to make the child understand, especially that it is a moment of fun, of psychomotor growth even a moment of fun. Then, if one day he wants to continue practicing this sport at other levels, he can do it."

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3. While children and parents are asking for a practical and educational change within the system (training for all, more spontaneous play, inclusion), access to courses and facilities even to those who, having economic difficulties, could not afford it.

Overall, the Italian focus groups show that the transmission of values through sport is shared, essential and fundamental. The results underline the importance of strengthening the training of trainers, safeguarding a climate of respect in competitions, recognising the essential role of volunteers and referees as educators in fair play, and implementing resources for sports facilities by public administrations.

Methodology

Ethics and Permissions

Under Italian law, no formal submission to an ethics committee was required for this type of qualitative and quantitative study. However, CUS Palermo has adopted strict ethical standards throughout the process to ensure transparency, participant protection, and voluntary commitment.

Before conducting the focus groups, participants were contacted and informed about methodological neutrality, data confidentiality and participant consent procedures. All participants were clearly informed of the purpose of the discussion, the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to refuse or withdraw at any time without consequences.

For focus groups involving minors, parents were present at the meeting so that they could listen to the discussion without influencing their children's responses. This logistical choice ensured both the safety of the minors and supervision, while preserving the authenticity of the opinions of the young participants.

All sessions were in line with the Erasmus Data Protection Guide, which requires that participants' personal data be processed in accordance with the **GDPR** (General Data Protection Regulation).

Participants.

The sample of participants included families, coaches, referees and children who play team or individual sports (Table 7). This subdivision was key to exploring possible differences in the perception of the nature of sport. In total, the research involved 28 participants, a clear majority of male participants in almost all groups. Age range from 8 to 58 years. No particular cultural differences were found, more than anything else cultural and social homogeneities.

Table 7

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Composition of the Focus Groups.

Focus Group	Profile	Not. Participants	Gender Breakdown	Notes
FG1	Families	5	3F/2M	Parents of children involved In football
FG2	Referees	6	6M	Experienced referees from AIA Palermo
FG3	Coaches	8	8M	Coaches in team and individual sports
FG4	Minors	5	2F/3M	Children aged 8/ 12
FG5	Miscellaneous	4	1F/3M	Mixed group: parentes,children, coaches,eferees

Logistics.

All focus groups were conducted in presence within local sports facilities made available by CUS Palermo. The sessions took place in accessible and familiar environments, such as club meeting rooms or rooms adjacent to sports facilities, ensuring comfort and spontaneity among participants and quick accessibility.

Only the focus group of referees was conducted at the AIA (Italian Referees Association) section territorial headquarters of Palermo to facilitate the presence of referees at the session.

The moderators had initially planned for the sessions to last between 45 and 60 minutes, but in practice most discussions lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

Each session was recorded with a mobile device integrated by the use of microphones with which the participants and moderator were equipped. Microsoft Word Online was used for the transcription and finally translated into English, preserving the original files in Italian. The recordings were deleted once the transcripts were verified and validated.

The moderators facilitated the discussion carefully, making sure that all participants, including those who were more reserved or less accustomed to speaking in similar contexts, could express themselves freely.

Overall, the logistical organization balanced the methodology with accessibility to all participants, creating inclusive conditions that encouraged a favorable climate throughout the duration of the interviews.

Thematic Analysis.

Familiarization with data.

The data were transcribed by one of the members of the CUS Palermo working group. Subsequently, with all the data in Word format, they were encoded with the

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help of the list of codes provided in the project's Gdrive and the Atlas-Ti qualitative analysis program. For each of the focus groups, a report was prepared using the codes, which were subsequently analyzed and interpreted.

Coding Process.

Data interpretation combined qualitative thematic analysis and frequency mapping of recurring codes to identify convergences between groups.

All transcripts were fully anonymized prior to analysis, and no personal or sensitive data was retained.

Theme Development.

The thematic analysis of the interviews with the focus groups (Children, Families, Coaches, Referees, Mixed) was conducted on the basis of the codes and themes provided in the excel file "Sport Values Coding". Below is a summary of the results, including direct references to the participants' statements.

Despite the different roles and experiences, participants described sport as a "training ground for life", an authentic educational environment in which values are learned, tested and shared. The main results are summarized below through qualitative and quantitative analysis, in three macro areas:

- Perceived and practiced sports values (THEME 1)
- Socializing agents and the transmission of values (THEME 2)
- Environmental conditions (THEME 3)

1. Perceived and Practiced Sports Values (Theme 1)

Participants from all groups identified a number of key values promoted by sport, while highlighting the dynamics that determine its absence or contradiction.

V1. Promotion of Positive Values.

The Table 8 shows the relation between codes, themes and relevant quotes for the promotion of positive values.

Table 8.
Codes, themes and relevant quotes.

Code	Theme and Description	Relevant Quotes (Quotes)	Groups Involved
V1.5. Sportspersonship / Fair play	Act with respect towards rules, opponents and referees.	"Mutual respect"[1]. " the importance of not arguing with opponents"[2]. " certainly the main value is that of compliance with the rules"[3].	Trainers, Children, Referees

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Code	Theme and Description	Relevant Quotes (Quotes)	Groups Involved
V1.2. Willingness to help / Altruism	Selfless support for teammates, altruism, and teamwork.	"helping one's partner"[4]. " Collaboration" [5], "helping teammates if they make mistakes, and sharing the ball"[6].	Trainers, Families, Children
V1.6. Achievement / Sforzo	Effort, perseverance and sacrifice to achieve goals.	"the spirit of sacrifice to achieve goals"[7]. "The weight room helped me a lot, teaching me values such as perseverance and sacrifice"[8].	Trainer
V1.8. Competence / Individual improvement	Active involvement in continuous improvement.	The satisfaction I feel when I can improve my time" [9] and "the challenge of surpassing myself and trying to beat my records"[10].	Children
V1.4. Obedience / Discipline	Follow instructions, rules and authority figures.	"discipline"[11]. " living, being disciplined"[12].	Trainer
V1.3. Keeping agreements / Integrity	Respect for established rules and commitments.	"The key values are absolutely loyalty"[13].	Trainer

V2. Absence of Values and V3. Contradictions

The Table 9 shows the relation between codes, themes and relevant quotes for the absence of values.

Table 9.
Codes, themes and relevant quotes.

Code	Theme and Description	Relevant Quotes (Quotes)	Groups Involved
V2.12. Results-Oriented Culture	Excessive emphasis on winning and achieving at all costs.	The "negative drift that sport is taking, which is increasingly interested exclusively in the positive result, to be achieved at any cost, and only in the economic aspect"[14].	Trainer
V2.5. Unsportsmanlike conduct	Unsportsmanlike behavior or non-acceptance of the outcome.	"not accepting the result of a competition by getting angry with judges or teammates"[15]. " if a player makes fun of an opponent, he must be immediately expelled" (proposal)[16].	Coach, Bambini

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Code	Theme and Description	Relevant Quotes (Quotes)	Groups Involved
V2.2. Selfishness / Lack of cooperation	Individualistic and prevaricating behavior.	"The stronger teammate tends to outperform the weaker teammate"[17].	Trainer
V3.1. Contradictions	Contrast between the values promoted and the observed behavior.	Sometimes spurring the child is confused with "a real pressure, excessive"[18].	Families

2. Socializing Agents and Transmission of Values (Theme 2)

All participants recognize the crucial importance of the reference adults (coaches and parents) and the referee in the educational process. See Table 10 for more details.

Table 10.
Codes, themes and relevant quotes.

Code	Theme and Description	Relevant Quotes (Quotes)	Groups Involved
A1.1. Behavior modeling	The conduct of the coach as a reference model.	The coach is "above all that of educator and reference model for the little ones"[19].	Trainer
A1.2. Formative / corrective feedback	Use of corrections and discipline as a training tool.	The role of the coach is to punish, trying to make the lesson understood by the "phenomenon of the team"[20].	Trainer
A1.3. Emotional and Sport Support	Emotional and technical support for personal development.	The coach teaches that "the mistake is not a failure, but an opportunity for improvement"[21].	Trainer
A2.1. Emotional/Logistical Support	The emotional and practical support of the family.	"It's fundamental... participation by parents" [22], because the child "will be more incentivised"[23].	Trainers, Families
A2.2. Expectations vs. Pressure	The distinction between support and excessive parental pressure.	The parent must give emotional support, which translates into "not yelling at the child who makes a mistake"[24].	Families
A3. Other Agents (Arbitrators)	The formative and character role of the referee.	The refereeing activity is "an association that grows over time" and forms "on a character level"[25]. The referee is the champion of respect for the rules26.	Referees

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3. Environmental conditions (Theme 3)

Environmental conditions are perceived as essential, with a strong demand for adult training and state intervention.

Despite the different roles and experiences, participants described sport as an authentic educational environment where values are learned, challenged and shared. The following five thematic dimensions summarise the main findings.

E1. Favorable practices. See Table 11 for more details.

Table 11.
Codes, themes and relevant quotes.

Code	Practice and Description	Relevant Quotes (Quotes)	Groups Involved
E1.1. Routines that promote respect	Systematic practices to strengthen respect and coexistence.	"Continuity in training is necessary... three times a week, they are essential to try to convey social values to the group"[27].	Trainer
E1.2. Recognition of values rather than just performance	Strategies that enhance prosocial behavior.	Games and exercises can be "structured in such a way that success depends on the contribution of all"[28].	Trainer

E2. Obstructive Dynamics and Need for Support. See Table 12 for more details.

Table 12.
Codes, themes and relevant quotes.

Code	Dynamics and Description	Relevant Quotes (Quotes)	Groups Involved
E2.1. Results-oriented culture	The focus on winning and the standings hindering learning.	The focus on competitive performance hinders values. "We only think about preparing for the next race"[29]. A "general culture, which puts the well-being of the child before the performance" is necessary30.	Mixed
E2.2. Poor coordination between agents	Lack of institutional support and coordination among adults.	They criticize the "lack of support and interest from the institutions"[31]. "The State must intervene... and to help a lot those who have to invest in young people"[32].	Trainers, Families
E2.3. Lack of values training for adults	Lack of preparation in adults on value teaching (solution proposal).	"I would like specific training on the topics of emotional education and group management. I am not only a technician, but an educator"[33]. Maybe courses for	Mixed, Children

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Code	Dynamics and Description	Relevant Quotes (Quotes)	Groups Involved
		parents on how to behave during competitions" (proposal)[34].	
Dynamic Added (Kids)	Demand for greater fairness in participation in the game.	I would like the coach to make everyone play the same time35.	Mixed

Key findings.

Role of social agents.

The study highlights the distinct roles of coaches, referees, families and peers in the transmission of values. Coaches emerge as central figures, not only for their perception as a technical figure, but also for their behavioral model of reference and their emotional support.

Referees are increasingly seen as educators who promote fairness especially when they communicate decisions with clarity and respect.

Families play a dual role: they can reinforce positive values, but they can also exert pressure when they are overly focused on their children's achievements.

Peers, especially in team sports, contribute to the development of team spirit and mutual help and socialization.

Conclusions and Recommendations.

Through the focus groups – which involved coaches, referees, parents, young athletes and participants from different sectors – the Italian contribution offers a rich and coherent overview of how values are transmitted, questioned and strengthened through sport in daily practice.

Sport has been unanimously described as a powerful educational tool, in which respect, teamwork, resilience, fairness and fun are learned not through theory, but through lived experience and the example of coaches.

There is unanimous agreement among all groups (especially Coaches and Children) that sport is an essential vehicle of positive values.

The values most cited and recognized as central are Mutual Respect (towards rules, referees and opponents), Cooperation/Altruism (teamwork and help to teammates), and Commitment/Perseverance (spirit of sacrifice and individual improvement). The strongest and most transversal conclusion is that the negative drift of sport, defined as the excessive obsession with winning at any cost, is the

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main factor that cancels out positive values. Coaches denounce that this emphasis on the result leads to incorrect behavior and generates anxiety in young people.

Adults (Coaches, Parents, Referees) are seen as the most influential socializing agents, but also those with the greatest need for support and training.

The Coach is universally recognized as the central figure, not only a technician but above all an educator and reference model. He takes responsibility for using corrective feedback to teach that "error is not a failure, but an opportunity for improvement." On the other hand, parents are crucial for emotional support and to encourage participation. However, they are also identified as the main source of excessive pressure, often yelling on the sidelines or not managing expectations properly. A clear demand for Specific Training for Adults therefore emerges.

Another fact that emerges are external factors, in particular institutional support. The need for institutional structures and support is emphasized. Families and Coaches harshly criticize the lack of support and interest from the Institutions and the State. Greater investment in the facilities and accessibility of sport is considered key to harnessing the potential of sport as a positive alternative to social problems (such as drugs and alcohol), particularly in disadvantaged contexts.

A significant change requires intervention at the level of sports culture and a greater institutional commitment to training and structures.

3.2.3. Italy (FIPAV)

This report contains the results of five focus groups conducted with teachers, sports coaches, young athletes, parents, and referees, in which the importance of combining the efforts of families, coaches, and referees to maximize the educational role of sport on children and young people was discussed.

The focus groups paint a very consistent picture: grassroots sport is perceived as a real school of life, capable of teaching respect, friendship, discipline, how to deal with victory and defeat, inclusion, and acceptance of diversity. However, coaches, parents, and young people insist that this only happens when sport is “done right”: the focus is on fun, participation, and growth for all, not on results at any cost. The coach is seen as a full-fledged educator, called upon to set an example, manage emotions and conflicts, explain technical choices, and collaborate with families. Parents are also recognized as co-educators: they can support the club's project and help their children see defeat and being benched as opportunities for growth, but a vocal minority risks ruining the atmosphere with protests and aggression towards referees and children. Referees are considered potentially educational figures, but they are often poorly trained and inadequately protected. Alongside the critical issues (‘dangerous’ parents, early selection, negative media role models, family fragility), good practices also emerge: third half, meetings with families,

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meetings with referees, use of sport to include everyone. Everyone agrees on the need for a stable educational alliance between sports clubs, families, schools, referees and institutions.

In summary, the focus groups show that grassroots sport is recognized as a real educational agency, but its effectiveness depends on how it is organized and experienced. It is educational when the focus is on fun, inclusion, participation by all, respect for rules and people, and when victories and defeats are used as opportunities for growth. It becomes counter-educational when results at all costs, early selection, cunning, and aggression on the part of adults prevail. Coaches, parents, and referees are identified as an "educational triad" that must work in alliance, with clear roles and consistent messages. There is a strong need for pedagogical and relational training for coaches and referees, and for support from educators/psychologists. Existing good practices (third half, meetings with families, activities with referees, inclusive club policies) indicate that "well-done" sport is possible if supported by a shared educational network.

Methodology

Ethics and Permissions

Approval from an ethics committee was not required. No personal or sensitive data was collected from the participants in the focus groups. In the focus group with minors, verbal permission was requested and obtained from the parents, who had participated in the previous focus group.

Participants

Sports teachers, sports coaches, young athletes (aged 12-14), and parents were involved (see Table 13). The sports represented were soccer, volleyball, and track and field, which together account for the sports practiced by the vast majority of young people.

It should be noted that there was some difficulty in involving young girls: on the one hand, in soccer (the most widely practiced sport), the participation of girls, especially at a young age, is marginal and almost completely absent in some areas; secondly, in our efforts to find young female athletes to involve, we experienced firsthand the gender gap in sports, where girls still participate in smaller numbers than boys.

At the same time, the composition of the group of parents shows that the role of managing children, even in the case of sports activities, is mostly entrusted to mothers rather than fathers. In this area too, we have experienced gender inequality firsthand.

Table 13.

Profile of Focus Groups´s participants.

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Focus Group	Profile	No. Participants	Gender Breakdown	Notes
FG1	Sport Teachers	3	1F / 2M	Collective / individual sports
FG2	Sport Coaches	5	5M	Collective sports
FG3	Parents	8	6F / 2M	Collective sports
FG4	Children	10	10M	Collective sports
FG5	Referees	6	6M	Collective sports

Logistics

All focus groups were conducted online via Zoom and lasted between 38 and 49 minutes. The focus group with minors lasted just 20 minutes: due to connection issues, the recording was interrupted at some point without us noticing, but the session lasted a total of 42 minutes.

Thematic Analysis

The Focus Group recordings were transcribed using Google Pinpoint. The transcripts were then analyzed manually to identify cross-cutting themes. An analysis of the selected themes was then carried out, and these were reduced and selected. The transcripts were then sorted by theme. Finally, a general summary was produced, sorted by theme, which includes some significant quotes that emerged during the Focus Groups.

1. The educational role of sport

The focus groups revealed a very consistent picture: for coaches, parents, and children, sport is never just "physical activity," but a complex educational context, a real school of life where you grow as a person and as a member of a community.

Coaches, in particular, talk about sport in an almost 'pedagogical' tone: they explicitly define it as 'an educational tool superior to all other activities' because, if used well, it allows them to transmit values, confidence, points of reference and skills that are often lacking in today's young people. Sport is described as something that runs through life: it is an outlet, a source of comfort, something that "is life" in every sense, for children, adolescents, and adults.

This idea is also reflected in the way coaches interpret team play: the team is seen as a metaphor for existence, a small world in which cooperation, responsibility, frustration, conflict, success, and failure are experienced. One coach clearly states that team sports are "a metaphor for life, for our very existence," emphasizing that the dynamics on the field mirror the challenges of everyday life.

In concrete terms, coaches and parents agree that sport helps children and young people to develop key values: respect for themselves and others, social skills, acceptance of diversity, discipline, education, friendship, and sharing. Coaches

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observe that those who play sports "have an edge": they are more aware, more responsible, more adaptable, and more willing to help their teammates. Parents, for their part, recognize that their children learn to relate to others, manage conflicts with their peers, and apply these lessons at school or in other contexts.

A central aspect of the educational role of sport is dealing with defeat. Coaches and parents insist on this point: learning to lose without drama, turning mistakes into opportunities for growth, understanding that "sometimes you win, sometimes you draw, and sometimes you lose." Here, sport becomes an emotional laboratory: children who initially react with tears and tantrums learn over time to put the result into perspective, to prioritize fun, being together, and improving rather than winning at all costs. Parents say that it is often their children themselves who, after losing a game, teach adults a "life lesson" with their ability to move on.

From the point of view of social growth, sport is presented as a privileged space for inclusion. Coaches describe the soccer school as a small community where children of different origins (Italian, Senegalese, Chinese, etc.), different faiths, and even children with vulnerabilities or special needs live together. The stated goal is not to select 'the best', but to include: no one is , the 'best' children are chosen, everyone is made to feel at ease, provided they accept the common rules of behavior. Even the children in the focus group focus on loyalty, honesty, respect, and teamwork, showing that they have internalized a language of values that goes far beyond playing technique.

In fact, coaches define themselves as educators and trainers first and foremost, with the technical aspect coming "after." From this perspective, sport has an almost 'compensatory' function: in a social context perceived as competitive, individualistic and sometimes characterized by dysfunctional or troubled families (separations, post-Covid problems, lack of boundaries), the playing field becomes a place where clear rules, boundaries, responsibilities and mutual respect are rebuilt.

At the same time, coaches insist on a crucial distinction between 'sport done well' and 'sport done badly'. Sport is a powerful educational tool only if it is organized in a way that is consistent with its stated values. When the logic of results prevails—coaches who only play the strongest players, parents who protest about their children's playing time, unfair behavior encouraged in order to win—sport not only loses its educational function, but also risks becoming a vehicle for negative values (cunning, unfairness, exclusion of the most vulnerable). Several concrete examples show how result-oriented technical choices can lead young people to abandon sports at the very moment when they need it most to grow.

According to referees, sport plays a central educational role because it offers young people a protected environment in which to experience shared rules, responsibility, and mutual respect. The game becomes a small training ground for life where

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mistakes, defeats, and conflicts are reworked, thanks in part to the mediation of adults, as opportunities to learn how to manage frustration, limitations, and relationships with others. When all those involved work together, the sporting experience truly supports the overall growth of young people, strengthening their self-esteem and confidence.

Overall, the transcripts reveal a strong and shared idea: sport is a privileged educational context, but not a neutral one. It can become an extraordinary school of life and citizenship—developing respect, loyalty, inclusion, and resilience—or it can be distorted in the opposite direction. The dividing line lies in the daily choices made by coaches, parents, referees, and sports clubs.

"I really believe in sport. I believe that sport is a superior educational tool to all other activities and therefore I believe that by using sport well, we can [...] transmit values, certainties, security..." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sport coaches)

"For me [...] it's an outlet and a source of comfort [...] For me, it's life. As they say, sport is life in every sense." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sport coaches)

"Sport [...] teaches respect for others, for oneself, [...] socializing, accepting diversity. In short, sport helps you grow in a more complete way. Those who play sports probably have an extra gear [...] they are more aware, more responsible, they have a motivation to move forward, they are able to adapt..." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"We need to work on this [defeat], it's not easy, but in the end I'm satisfied that many children [...] have managed to understand that fun comes first, being together comes first [...] defeat then helps you grow, it helps you improve." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"The context of the soccer school is one in which values translate into respect for rules: [...] if a child is unruly at home or at school, at least when they come here they have to understand that [...] to stay here with us [...] they have to do so on our terms." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"For me, sport is first and foremost an educational environment: results come and go, but the way children learn to follow the rules stays with them for life." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

2. Values transmitted by sport

For everyone - coaches, parents, and kids - youth sports are first and foremost a place for teaching values. The keywords that come up most often are the ones you listed: respect, friendship/team spirit, discipline and responsibility, dealing with winning and losing, inclusion, and acceptance of diversity.

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Respect is the value that cuts across all focus groups: respect for oneself, for others, for the rules, for opponents, and for referees.

Coaches describe sport as a "school of respect": respect for others, for oneself, for the rules of the game, but also for those who are different in character, ability, and background. From this perspective, respect is not just about avoiding insults, but learning to recognize others as people and as part of the game.

Parents confirm that they see this respect "in action": they notice it in the way their children do not celebrate provocatively when they win, try not to use bad language, and learn to manage relationships with teammates and opponents correctly.

When asked about values, the children spontaneously mention "respect, honesty, loyalty," and above all explain that respect is necessary to have "a good attitude on the field": being fair to teammates, opponents, and rules is perceived as a condition for playing well.

Respect for referees is also discussed: coaches and parents emphasize the need to educate children and adults to see the referee as part of the game – "one of us" – who can make mistakes like the players and who must be respected as a person as well as an authority figure.

A second strong theme concerns friendship, collaboration, and "teamwork."

Coaches often point to friendship and sharing as the primary values that sport conveys in youth sectors. The field is described as a space where you learn to socialize, experience empathy, support each other, and recognize the importance of every role, even those with less technical talent.

The young people recount very concrete episodes: for example, an important match "against Cagliari" in which, when someone made a mistake, their teammates encouraged them ("Come on, you can do better") instead of insulting them. Here, friendship becomes a form of emotional support, especially at crucial moments.

The theme of sharing and teamwork also appears among parents, who observe how their children experience matches not only as "competitions" but as opportunities to be together. A very powerful symbolic practice is the "third half": after the game, the teams get together for a snack with their opponents, coaches, and parents, transforming the match into a moment of socializing and dialogue that reinforces the idea of community and friendship, even between "opposing teams."

Discipline is understood in an educational, not punitive, way. Coaches explicitly define themselves as "educators and trainers first and foremost, rather than technicians" and see the sports club as a context in which values are translated into shared rules: to be part of the team, children must respect instructions, commitments, schedules, and understand that certain consequences (such as playing less) result from their commitment to training.

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Parents and coaches explain that the coach's technical choices are used as a tool for empowerment: if a child trains little or does not respect the rules, they may play less, and this is clearly explained to the children so that they understand the link between commitment, responsibility, and playing time. Accepting the coach's decisions also becomes a "rule of the game" and a step in their growth.

In the view of some coaches, those who play sports "have an edge" at school and in life because they learn to be more responsible, motivated, adaptable, and able to carry out commitments over time.

Dealing with results - victory, draw, defeat - is seen as one of the most delicate and important educational aspects.

One coach recounts witnessing "hysterical crises, crying, and various outbursts" over a lost game; for this reason, she considers teaching acceptance of defeat a central goal. Over time, this educational work leads children to understand that fun, being together, and playing come before results, and that defeat can help them grow and improve.

In another focus, a coach insists on the key message they try to convey to children and parents: "sometimes you win, sometimes you draw, sometimes you lose." The club's task is to ensure that defeat is not experienced as a tragedy, but as a natural part of sport, preventing the result from becoming a pretext for verbal aggression towards referees, opponents, or the children themselves.

Referees point out that the values conveyed by sport do not depend solely on the rules, but above all on the daily behavior of the adults involved. When coaches, parents, and referees show consistency, respect for the rules, the ability to accept mistakes, and recognize the merits of their opponents, young people internalize loyalty, self-control, and team spirit. If, on the other hand, protests and accusations prevail, sport risks teaching the search for excuses, aggression, and shifting responsibility onto others, even off the field.

Parents, for their part, recognize that it is often adults who struggle the most: while some children, after losing a game, leave the locker room calmly saying, "Never mind, we made mistakes, we understand," it is the parents who remain most disturbed by the result. Some talk about real "life lessons" learned by their children in the way they process defeat calmly and with self-criticism.

Finally, the dimension of diversity and inclusion, both cultural and personal, is very present.

Coaches describe their sports teams as mixed communities, with children "of other races," from other countries and continents, often with different religions. The soccer school is seen as one of the few places where these children meet as equals, play together, and experience diversity in a concrete way.

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The stated choice is not to select only the best players, but to guarantee playing space for everyone ('everyone must be able to play'), even by setting up second and third teams, precisely so as not to exclude those who are less technically gifted. Inclusion, here, is both a stated value and a concrete organizational practice.

The inclusion of children with difficulties or disorders, sometimes not even disclosed by their parents, is also mentioned: the sports club organizes itself to create conditions in which these children can train and play, and families recognize this as a "great gift" because they notice improvements in their children's behavior and well-being.

In one of the focus groups, a coach sums up this vision well: youth sport 'helps children grow in a more complete way' and helps them to accept diversity, giving those who play sport an extra edge in terms of awareness, responsibility, and the ability to get along with others.

"They have to understand that the coach makes choices for a reason. It's a rule, it's part of the game too."

(MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"I think accepting defeat is one of the main things we need to work on... in the end, they managed to understand that fun comes first, being together comes first... defeat then helps you grow, it helps you improve."

(MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

“They told us: ‘You are giving us a huge gift because since he has been coming with you, this boy has improved a lot’.”

(MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

“On the field, I see that sport truly conveys respect, responsibility, and self-control only when all the adults present, including us, put these values into practice, not just in words.” (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

3. Sport "done right" vs. sport "done wrong"

Overall, a very clear line emerges from the Focus Groups: the same sport can educate or miseducate, depending on how it is organized, experienced, and communicated by adults. Coaches in particular, but also parents and children, make a continuous distinction between "sport done well" and "sport done badly," which spans three main dimensions: what is really taught (values or "cunning"), how important the result is, and what atmosphere is created around the children.

For many coaches, sport is a powerful educational tool 'if done well': when the focus is on the children's journey, sport teaches respect, collaboration, the ability to

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manage frustration and to be part of a group. However, when the logic changes, that same tool bends and becomes something else.

One coach puts it explicitly: sport ceases to be educational when it no longer conveys values, but instead conveys distorted models. This gives rise to the key formula: "sport done well" is sport that focuses on fun, inclusion, and growth; "sport done badly" is sport that teaches cheating, being "smarter than others," and considering unfairness acceptable if it leads to winning.

This drift can be seen, for example, in youth soccer leagues: instead of teaching children to play and have fun, in some contexts (even at the age of 7–8) the focus is on the idea of "winning the game at all costs." Children thus learn that it is normal to seek a side foul when the ball has gone out of play on the other side, to exaggerate contact, and to protest systematically: the implicit educational message is that the end (the result) justifies the means.

Parents also report incidents of "bad sportsmanship": coaches who justify aggressive behavior on the field "because that's how you win," parents who, from the stands, insult referees and opponents in front of their children. In these cases, sport not only fails to educate, but becomes a training ground for negative values: intolerance, poor self-control, and disrespect for the rules.

Referees clearly distinguish between "well-played" and "poorly played" sports. In the first case, the focus is on the child's development, serenity, respect for roles, and the possibility of making mistakes without being humiliated. In the second case, the result becomes the only goal and justifies shouting, pressure, and accusations against opponents or referees. This difference has a profound impact on the educational experience of young people, their motivation to continue, and the overall atmosphere of games and training sessions.

The second axis of distinction is the culture of results. From the perspective of coaches who are more attentive to the educational aspect, youth sport should be focused on fun, participation, and learning. Competition and results have a role to play, but they cannot be the dominant criterion, especially in the younger age groups.

When results become the main measure, however, sport is transformed. Coaches describe situations in which, even at youth level, the most talented children play every game in its entirety, while those who are less skilled remain permanently on the bench. One parent describes the case of their child giving up soccer precisely because of a coach who "only let those with superior skills play for 90 minutes." Here, "bad" sport leads to exclusion and abandonment: the message is that if you are not among the best, there is no place for you.

On the contrary, in "well-run" sport, the logic is the opposite: clubs look for solutions (second, third teams, rotation of substitutes) to ensure that everyone can play and

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have their own space. Winning games is not denied as a goal, but it is placed after the growth of the group. In this perspective, the educational criterion is not "who makes us win today," but "what do the kids learn through this experience."

Even the management of playing time becomes an indicator: where sport is well thought out, adults make sure that everyone plays at least a little, explaining the reasons for certain choices to the kids if necessary; where it is poorly thought out, the field is reserved for the strongest players and the rest of the team becomes a paying audience.

The third element that distinguishes sport that educates from sport that miseducates is the atmosphere: language, behavior, and relationships on and off the field.

In the context of 'well-run' sport, the atmosphere is described as:

- based on mutual respect (between teammates, towards opponents, and towards the referee);
- characterized by emotional support in difficult moments (encouraging each other instead of blaming each other);
- fueled by third-half practices, moments of post-game socializing with opponents and families, which lower tension and humanize "the other team."

On the contrary, "bad" sport is where an explosive atmosphere is created: parents shouting from the sidelines, insulting the referee or the players, coaches who do not intervene (or even fuel the conflict), players who internalize this style and replicate it with heavy teasing, provocation, or brawls. In these situations, the field becomes a place where aggression, contempt for the opponent, and continuous delegitimization of refereeing decisions are legitimized.

From the players' perspective, the difference is very noticeable: when teammates and adults encourage them after a mistake, they feel supported and are able to play better; when they are insulted or experience a tense atmosphere, "it's not fun to play," anger increases, and the desire to stay decreases.

In summary, in the words of the participants, "well-done" sport is one in which declared values, concrete choices, and the daily atmosphere are consistent; "poorly done" sport is one in which education is talked about, but results at any cost, cunning, and aggression are practiced as legitimate tools.

"My son gave up soccer because of a bad coach. Those who were better played the whole 90 minutes, while those who he didn't think were good enough stayed on the bench." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"Everyone should be able to play. [...] Play and have fun. [...] If we say right away that we want the best players because they always have to win games, we are

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already classifying them in the wrong way." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"When we made mistakes, we encouraged each other to get through a tournament... it's important when your teammate encourages you instead of saying 'you suck', they say 'come on, you can do better'." (MENTORS Focus Group 4 - Young Players)

"There are fields where you see parents who, as soon as the referee blows the whistle against them, start shouting and insulting... in the end, children learn what they see from adults." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"You can recognize good sportsmanship when a child leaves the field calm even when they lose; you can recognize bad sportsmanship when they leave angry, humiliated, or guilty." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

4. Fun vs. competition

A very clear tension emerges: everyone says "fun is the basis," but the sports system - especially in soccer - often tends to push kids toward excessive competition and early selection. Coaches, parents, and kids therefore describe a delicate balance: on the one hand, the need to play, laugh, and learn; on the other, the (very real) desire to win, which if poorly managed can lead to frustration, being benched, and even quitting.

Coaches are fairly unanimous: with young children, the priority is fun. In one of the focus groups, a coach puts it explicitly: the basis of the activity "must be that children are carefree, that they play," because "play helps them grow in every way." The idea is that the field is a place to run, experiment, make mistakes, and try again, without the burden of results weighing on them.

Parents, especially those of 6-7-year-olds, also report that the club made it clear from the outset that sport is "for fun, not for winning." This message is reinforced at home: if a child comes home sad because they didn't score or because they lost, the parent tries to shift the focus to "being together and having fun" rather than on the score.

However, this focus on fun does not mean that children are not competitive. One coach notes that children always want to win, even at the most trivial games ("flag tag," "paper balls in the basket"); their desire to win should be recognized and channeled with clear and fair rules, not ignored. If the instructor "lets those who shouldn't win win," for example, it sends a distorted message and undermines trust in the rules of the game.

In summary: in the basic categories, fun and play are central, but no one denies that competition exists; the educational task is to prevent it from taking over.

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The problem, according to many coaches, is that the soccer system often anticipates and distorts competition. One coach talks about "bad sport" when, at the age of 7-8, the implicit message is no longer "play and have fun," but "win at all costs."

The examples are concrete: children pushed to seek a side foul even though they know they have kicked the ball out of bounds, young players accustomed to 'being smarter than the others', adults who legitimize unfair play if it helps to win. The coach describes this as an educational reversal of values: children learn that winning is more important than commitment and fair play, and that "you can win by cheating."

For referees, fun and competition are not opposites, but must remain in balance to maintain the educational value of sports. Competition is considered educational when children strive to win but retain the pleasure of playing, experimenting, and being together, feeling free to try. When, on the other hand, the pursuit of results wipes the smile off their faces, generates fear of making mistakes, and causes constant conflict, sport becomes a source of frustration and early abandonment, especially among young people.

On the parents' side, some recognize that in other contexts - or in what they see on TV - there is a climate of "extreme competition": exaggerated results, aggression, pressure. Their positive experience with the current club is often recounted in contrast to this dominant model of "screaming soccer," where defeat is experienced as a tragedy and not as part of the game.

However, there are also virtuous examples: one mother says that, in her 13-year-old son's club, losing is experienced 'very calmly'. The boys are disappointed, but for them defeat is 'a starting point': they analyze their mistakes, leave the changing rooms calmly and say 'we understand where we went wrong'. Often, it is they who teach the more nervous parents a lesson in balance.

In these situations, competition is not denied – "you want to get results" – but it is framed within an atmosphere where you can lose without feeling like a failure.

The point where fun and competition really come into conflict is selection: who plays, how much they play, who stays on the bench.

In a very powerful passage, a coach (who is also a mother) tells the story of her son: he started playing soccer when he was little and enjoyed it, even though he wasn't particularly talented. With the arrival of a new coach, the logic changed: the boys with "superior qualities" stayed on the field for 90 minutes, while the others remained on the bench. Her son ended up giving up soccer, and "the same thing is happening to her second son." For her, this way of managing a youth team is unacceptable: she understands that not everyone can always play, but she insists that "you don't make him play for 90 minutes, but you do make him play."

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Here, selection is no longer seen as a stimulus, but as a message of exclusion: if you are not among the best, there is no place for you. The educational risk is very high, especially for adolescents for whom two hours of sport can represent "an important opportunity to get them out of particular situations."

In another focus group, coaches from a sports club explain their strategy for avoiding these outcomes: the rule is that "everyone must be able to play, to play and have fun." To do this, they organize second and third teams, so that no one who pays the fee is told "your child is clumsy, he doesn't play." This does not eliminate the dimension of technical merit - which comes into play more in the higher categories - but it delays and mitigates selection in order to preserve the spirit of participation and the pleasure of playing.

Parents also notice the difference between clubs that manage substitutions in a transparent and educational way (explaining to the kids why they have played little, linking playing time to commitment in training) and contexts where choices appear arbitrary and focused solely on results. In the first case, the child learns to question their own commitment and to accept decisions as part of the rules of the game; in the second, they often feel victimized by injustice and lose motivation.

In conclusion, a clear message emerges from the focus groups:

- Educational sport for young people puts fun and participation first,
- introduces competition gradually and in a healthy way,
- and rejects the logic of 'winning at all costs' and early selection, because this leads to empty benches and, in the long run, dropouts.

"Everyone must be able to play. [...] Play and have fun. [...] As they grow up, we try to ensure that everyone can play by creating a second and even a third team. [...] If we say right away that we want the best players because they always have to win games, we are not part of that group." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"When a kid doesn't play much, the coach always explains why. [...] Maybe the kid hasn't trained as much as the other, so he doesn't play. [...] It's also a learning process: they have to understand that the coach makes choices for a reason. It's a rule, it's part of the game too." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"Competition is only healthy if it doesn't take away the fun: when the kids stop smiling, we as adults have already lost, whatever the score." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

5. Role and responsibilities of coaches

The four focus groups paint a very consistent picture of the coach: they are a central figure in the kids' growth process, going far beyond the role of a "technician" who teaches strategies and tactics. Coaches, parents, and kids recognize that on the field, the coach is, in fact, an educator who guides young people in managing their emotions, conflicts, rules, and relationship with winning and losing. At the same

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time, everyone emphasizes how much more complex this role has become: today, it is not enough to "know about sports" to coach; psychological, communication, and interpersonal skills are also needed, especially in dealing with families.

Coaches explicitly define themselves as educators and trainers: their main task is not to win, but to ensure that sport is an 'educational tool'. Their daily work is described as an investment in values (respect, sharing, empathy, acceptance of diversity) that are passed on through the concrete experience of training and playing.

On the parents' side, there is strong alignment: especially in the lower age groups, the coach is compared to primary school teachers, with a 'carrot and stick' function that channels children's growth, helps them mature and, over time, becomes a point of reference even when difficulties concern aspects of life outside sport.

At the same time, coaches reiterate that the social context is more complex than in the past: fragile families, separated parents, children with disorders that are not always declared, young people who come to sport with little experience of free play. All this makes their educational role even more delicate: you can no longer 'improvise' as a coach, but you need specific training to manage emotional, family, and social dynamics.

A recurring point is the idea that education comes first and foremost through example. Coaches point out that if sport is practiced 'badly' – for example, by teaching children to cheat, to win at all costs or to insult their opponents – it loses its educational value and becomes a vehicle for negative values. Hence the insistence on consistent behavior: applauding even the opponent's point, not inciting protests against referees and other players, and being fair to everyone.

Parents also confirm how decisive the coach's behavioral model is: if he is the first to accuse the referee or fuel tensions, it becomes almost inevitable that the children will imitate those reactions. Conversely, if the coach maintains self-control, explains the referee's decisions, and encourages respect, he creates a climate that encourages young people to adopt more mature and sporting attitudes.

The educational role of the coach is strongly expressed in the management of group dynamics. Coaches say they have to transform training and matches into contexts where young people learn clear rules (which are fundamental because children "want to play seriously"), learn to manage frustration and anger, and deal with defeat and conflict.

Much attention is devoted to the theme of accepting defeat: coaches describe crying fits and "hysterical scenes" of children who cannot accept losing, and the patient work involved in helping them understand that fun, being together, and the opportunity to improve are more important than the result. Over time, this work

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produces changes: several children learn to accept defeat calmly, as an opportunity for growth.

The complexity of the group also emerges in episodes of physical conflict between teammates or opponents, in which the children recount the coach's intervention to quell fights and restore calm. In these moments, the coach becomes a regulator of emotions, a figure who reorients the group toward acceptable and cooperative behavior.

Coaches also emphasize how important it is today to manage emotions in a broader sense: not only those of the children, but also those of the parents in the stands. It is often necessary to "restrain" overly involved adults, who risk ruining the atmosphere of the game and the educational work done in training.

Referees recognize that coaches play a decisive role in providing educational guidance in sport, because they are the most stable point of reference for young athletes. Their words and reactions during training sessions and matches teach young people how to relate to the rules, to victory, and to defeat. A coach who accepts referees' decisions, supports their athletes even when they make mistakes, and does not take out their frustrations on others promotes a peaceful and respectful atmosphere, which helps athletes grow in a balanced way.

A sensitive issue, which the focus groups dwell on at length, is the management of technical choices: who plays, how much they play, who stays on the bench. Coaches emphasize the importance of clear criteria (attendance at training sessions, commitment, behavior, respect for the rules) and insist that every decision must be justified to the players, explained, and, ideally, supported by the family.

From the parents' point of view, it is clear that the coach's transparency makes all the difference: when the coach clearly explains why a child plays little - for example, because they have trained less or because they are "not in shape" that day - the children understand, even if they sometimes find it difficult to accept. It is precisely this difficulty that becomes part of the growth process: learning that choices are part of the game and are linked to personal responsibility.

However, there are also negative examples, provided by the coaches/parents themselves: cases in which a coach always plays only the best players, leaving the others permanently on the bench, to the point of pushing some players to abandon the sport. These stories are presented as counter-examples to the 'educational coach' : they show how the lack of balance between results and inclusion can undermine the well-being of young people and the formative function of sport.

Finally, parents and coaches agree that the educational role of the coach is strengthened when the family "endorses" his choices, rather than delegitimizing them. When a young person comes home disappointed because he has played

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little, the family can reinforce the coach's educational message by helping him reflect on his commitment, attitude, and personal responsibility, rather than taking on an uncritical defensive role.

"Without a doubt, the first thing is setting an example, because we instructors are the ones who must set a good example and teach respect, education, empathy, and sharing." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"It often happens that the first to accuse are the parents in the audience or the coaches on the bench... the role of the coach as an example is also quite important." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"Coaching children today is no longer just about being a trainer: you have to be prepared psychologically, in terms of managing parents and emotions." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"Accepting defeat... is one of the main things we need to work on a lot." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"I'm sure every coach explains the reasons... I expect parents to endorse our choices by explaining the reasons to their children." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"They need to understand that the coach makes decisions for a reason... that's part of the game, too." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"The coach has a huge responsibility: with a single word, they can teach a child to accept a referee's decision or use that decision as an excuse to justify every defeat." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

6. Role and behavior of families

The transcripts paint a very clear picture of families as the first and fundamental educational context: "education starts first with the family, then school, and then soccer," and in this sense, parents, coaches, managers, and teachers are described as a single educational community that should share common values and language in the growth of young people's . At the same time, both coaches and parents recognize that today's families have changed a lot compared to 20-30 years ago: some coaches explicitly talk about "families no longer educating but miseducating" and an "educational emergency," with parents struggling to cope with complexity and often shifting responsibility to schools or sports clubs; Others, however, point out that many parents explicitly ask for help from educational agencies (schools, sports clubs) and seek points of reference.

Within this framework, the role of families in youth sports appears deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, when parents align themselves with the club's

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educational project, they become true co-educators: they support the coach's work, help their children make sense of technical choices (why they played less, why they were substituted), encourage them to see sport as a growth experience and not just as a result, and help them interpret defeats as learning stages and not as failures.

Some mothers say they call the coaches directly when they see difficulties in their children's behavior and that they have found in the coaches an ally with whom to "intervene together," in a logic of shared educational responsibility. Similarly, parents describe their task as bringing fun, togetherness, and serenity back to the forefront, putting disappointments over a lost game or a missed goal into perspective and engaging in "introspection" with their child to help them understand what went wrong and what can be improved.

Some coaches explicitly expect parents to "endorse" their choices and explain them in turn, turning even a bench or technical selection into an opportunity to work on commitment, respect for rules, and personal responsibility. Families also play a very practical role in the life of the sports community: they organize shared snacks in the "third half" with the opposing team, participate in tournaments, support the club in initiatives that promote sport and spread its image, thus helping to build a climate of friendship and sociability not only among children but also among adults. In some cases, parents even become 'regulators' of other adults' behavior, intervening among peers to say 'you're overdoing it' when someone crosses the line.

On the other hand, however, coaches and parents insist that it is often the families themselves who are the most critical element: 'the dangerous ones are the parents off the field,' say the coaches, pointing out that it only takes one or two parents on the sidelines to ruin the atmosphere of a game with shouting, insults, and protests that overwhelm referees, coaches, and sometimes the children themselves. Some mothers recount particularly serious incidents, such as adults heavily insulting a 16-year-old female referee, to the point of calling for those who engage in such behavior to be removed from the fields.

Coaches confirm that, out of large numbers (tens or hundreds of members), there are few truly "problematic" parents, but they have a very strong impact on the atmosphere and image of the club. Added to this is another recurring element: when the coach makes unpopular decisions (a child not being selected, limited playing time, transfer to the second team), 'the first person to knock on the door is the parent', and the conflict often arises from the fact that the adult only sees their own child and struggles to consider the overall team project or the educational needs behind the technical decisions.

This attitude is paralleled in school dynamics: just as some parents contest teachers' grades instead of using them to educate their children, in sports they protest to the coach instead of turning the situation into a lesson in responsibility.

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Faced with these tensions, all groups agree on the importance of establishing structured channels of dialogue between clubs and families: meetings in which the president explains the "club policy" and unacceptable behavior, WhatsApp groups to share information and call out those who go too far, and the willingness of coaches and managers to talk individually with parents when problems arise. Parents who participate in these experiences report that these moments are not only useful, but also strengthen the sense of community among families and increase the group's ability to self-regulate in the stands.

In the background, coaches and parents continually emphasize the need for a common "culture" of sport and education: without a shared effort on values, educational skills, and responsibility, there is a risk that sport will reproduce or exacerbate the same toxic dynamics of society, instead of offering young people a protected environment in which to grow up "well," together with parents and adults who truly know how to work as a team.

In the perception of referees, families have a very strong impact on young people's sporting experience and on the quality of the atmosphere on the field. Respectful behavior, balanced support, and trust in the work of coaches and referees reinforce the educational dimension of sport and help young people enjoy the game with peace of mind. On the contrary, shouting from the stands, constant criticism, and excessive expectations of results generate pressure, confusion of roles, and frustration, undermining the pleasure of playing and motivation.

Education starts with the family, then school, and then soccer. And we all have to be educators... First and foremost, the family... then also in soccer, we as managers and coaches have to be educators for the kids. And at the same time, we also have to educate the families." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"In my opinion, there must always be a relationship between parents and the club... when my child was young, I had some difficulties, so I picked up the phone, called the coaches, and we talked about it at ... we intervened together. In my opinion, the relationship between the family and the club is very important if you want to do a good job of developing the child as an athlete and as a person." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"But surely [our role] is to encourage them to have fun... if my son comes home complaining because he lost... we talk about how that's not the most important thing, that the important thing is being together, having fun... they take it very calmly... sometimes more so than the parents, who say, 'Oh, man, not again'. They go out and teach us a lesson in life." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"We have to work to make them understand that sometimes you win, sometimes you draw, and sometimes you lose... in every category, one or two parents are the ones who somehow force us to argue, sometimes to curb behavior, because even

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in young children we have seen people who have not behaved as they should." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"Sometimes parents in the stands destroy the educational work done by coaches and referees in five minutes: they yell at everyone, and the message to their children is that it's always someone else's fault." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

7. Role of referees

The transcripts reveal a shared idea: the referee is the figure who enforces the rules, potentially a true educator on the field, but today he or she is a fragile link in the sports "educating community."

Referees describe their role as delicate and often exposed, but potentially very educational for young people. The referee is not only an enforcer of rules, but also a figure who can guarantee fairness, contain conflicts, and represent a model of firmness combined with a willingness to engage in dialogue. When their authority is recognized and supported by clubs, coaches, and families, it becomes easier to create a climate of mutual respect and trust in the grassroots sports system.

Coaches and parents recognize that the referee's primary task is to ensure compliance with the rules and allow the game to take place - without a referee, "the game would not be played at all" - and for this reason, the role is considered fundamental. In some clubs, especially in the grassroots categories, formal refereeing does not yet exist (it is referred to as self-refereeing), and it is the coaches who teach the children to decide honestly who committed the foul or who touched the ball last.

In competitive categories, on the other hand, real referees take to the field, and here their potential educational role is clear: parents tell of more experienced referees explaining to the children the reason for the foul, turning the penalty into a learning opportunity; Coaches describe initiatives in which the regional referee manager shows a series of actions on video, asks the children to raise a yellow or red card, and helps them understand how difficult it is to make decisions 'in real time'. The proposal is to go beyond individual initiatives, imagining referees who come to train with the kids during the week and are perceived as 'one of us', with the same right to make mistakes as someone who misses a penalty.

In this perspective, several coaches explicitly state that referees should be trained as educators, able not only to apply the rules but also to create, from the pre-match recognition, a peaceful and respectful atmosphere in which the kids can have fun and grow.

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Alongside this ideal vision, however, everyday reality is described as problematic. Coaches talk about a "referee problem": the role is "very, very difficult" because, in a social context where respect for authority figures is weakened, many referees find themselves having to think about their own personal safety as well as enforcing the rules. The shortage of referees often leads to sending young people of the same age as the players (16-18 years old) onto the field for their "first experiences," sometimes insecure and not fully familiar with the rules, sent "into the fray" in a tense environment.

Technicians say that these young referees can be afraid to blow the whistle, hesitate over decisions, and struggle to handle the emotional pressure. On the other hand, society as a whole treats them as if they could never make a mistake: a contested decision triggers a feeling of being "robbed," disproportionate reactions on the field, and above all, a climate of "madness" in the stands, fueled by parents and sometimes coaches who insult and delegitimize them. Emblematic is the scene, recounted by a mother, of a 16-year-old girl refereeing her first games and being sworn at by 50-year-old adults: an example of how this environment makes it almost impossible for young referees to 'grow and mature' in their own right. This is why many operators talk about referees being 'downgraded', no longer having an authoritative voice, crushed between often insufficient training and a football culture that sees them as a target rather than a resource.

In response, some clubs are trying to work on a culture of respect: coaches go into the locker rooms to tell the kids that no protests against the referee are allowed, reminding them that "he's a kid like you and without him you couldn't play"; meetings with referee managers to show the difficulty of their job; and explicit messages that refereeing errors are as much a part of the game as a missed goal. Parents and coaches agree that a profound cultural change is needed - in families, clubs, and refereeing institutions - to ensure that referees are recognized not only as "rule enforcers" but also as full-fledged educators, integrated into the educational planning of sports clubs. In summary, in the participants' voices, the referee appears as a potentially key figure in the sports education of young people, but one who today lives in a sort of paradox: he must guarantee rules and values within an environment that often does not respect him and does not prepare him sufficiently to perform his educational function.

"The referee acts as an educator, as someone who tells you what is right and what is wrong, and unfortunately there is a general situation that we are all familiar with... they find themselves having to be careful about their own personal safety, not just being able to effectively enforce the rules. So the referee has a fundamental role, but at the moment, in my opinion, it has been downgraded to the nth degree; they no longer have a say." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"The other day I went into the locker room and told the boys that I would not allow any protests against the referee, who was a guy like them, who could make

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mistakes like them, and that it made no sense to go against him, also because without him they would not be able to play." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"Those who train referees should prepare them to be educators because the referee is a very important educator... he is the one who makes certain things happen, he is the one who sanctions, he is the one who calls the captain... but does the referee know what to do? Often the referee does not know what to do." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"I recently saw a game refereed by a 16-year-old girl, who I think was refereeing her fifth or sixth game, being sworn at by adults from outside the field... that person should be grabbed by the collar and taken away and never allowed back on a soccer field. That girl will never be able to grow and mature like that." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"We are committed to creating the conditions for people to understand that the referee is one of us... the referee makes mistakes just like a player misses a penalty kick, period. It's not that we have to slaughter him because he made a mistake. It's a cultural issue." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"We referees are often seen only as judges, but we could also be educators: the tone with which we explain a decision can teach kids how to manage conflict." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

8. Collaboration between coaches, families, and referees

The five Focus Groups strongly reinforce the idea that the educational quality of sport depends on the ability of coaches, families, and referees to work together as a team, not just with the kids. Everyone recognizes that sport alone is not enough: for it to truly become a "school of life," a real educational alliance is needed between the adults involved in the field. Parents emphasize that "education starts first with the family, then school, and then soccer": coaches, managers, teachers, and referees are called upon to share a common project, avoiding sending contradictory messages to children.

When this happens, sport becomes a powerful context: some parents say they have called the coaches directly when their children were experiencing difficulties, finding allies in the coaches with whom they could "intervene together" to manage problematic behavior. In these situations, the relationship between the family and the sports club is not only logistical (taking the child to training), but also educational: they work together on what to say to the child, how to interpret a defeat, a place on the bench, or a technical decision.

Coaches also expect this kind of collaboration: they explicitly state that when they make difficult decisions (a child who plays less, one moved to another team), their desire is for parents to 'endorse' the choice and turn it into an opportunity for

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reflection, rather than just showing up to protest: the ideal message is 'at home, we also tell you that you have to accept the rules, commitment, and respect for decisions', so that the child perceives consistency.

Against this backdrop, many episodes show how collaboration translates into concrete practices: the 'third half' with a shared snack after the game, where coaches, families, and even referees, when possible, stop to chat with the opposing teams; meetings at the beginning of the year where the president clearly sets out values, rules, and behaviors that will not be tolerated; groups of parents who self-regulate ("you're overreacting, calm down") to protect the atmosphere of the game and the work of the coaches. The basic idea is that the sports club should become a sort of extended educational community, where parents are not just "customers," coaches are not just "service providers," and referees are not just "targets," but everyone has a share of responsibility in the growth of the children.

The discussion on collaboration increasingly includes referees. From the referees' point of view, collaboration between coaches, families, and match officials is key to enhancing the educational function of sport. Discussions before and after matches, shared rules of conduct in the stands and on the bench, and clear communication in sensitive situations reduce tension and misunderstandings. Young people thus perceive that adults are acting as a single team and not as opposing groups, promoting emotional security, trust, and serenity in competitions.

Coaches and parents recount highly appreciated experiences in which the regional referee manager came to meet with young players: videos of fouls were shown, and the kids held yellow and red cards and were asked to decide in real time whether the action deserved a penalty. The result was a "carnival of interpretations," which helped everyone understand how difficult it is to decide in the moment and how easy it is to judge from the outside: a virtuous example of educational collaboration between sports clubs and the sector.

Some parents also appreciate the referees who, during matches, take the time to explain to the children why they have called a foul: the penalty thus becomes a learning moment, not just a punishment. For their part, several coaches argue that those who train referees should explicitly train them to be educators: figures capable of communicating, explaining, and managing conflict calmly, not just "enforcers of the rules."

At the same time, everyone recognizes how fragile this alliance is. Coaches talk about "dangerous parents" who, with shouting and insults, can ruin the work of many and turn the referee into the scapegoat for all their frustrations. Parents themselves recount scenes of very young referees being sworn at by adults, recognizing that in these contexts it is impossible to build real collaboration. Some coaches admit that even their colleagues sometimes do not help: if the coach on the bench is the first to protest and delegitimize the referee, it is difficult to ask

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parents to remain calm. This is precisely why many say they go to the locker room before games to openly declare to the kids that no protests to the referee, "a kid like you" without whom the game would not even exist, will be tolerated.

The general feeling is that, where communication, mutual trust, and consistency of message can be built between coaches, families, and referees, sport truly becomes a laboratory of citizenship: the kids feel that the adults are "rowing in the same direction" and can internalize respect, responsibility, and the ability to manage conflict and defeat in a more stable way. Where, on the other hand, everyone goes their own way - the parent who only defends their child, the coach who only thinks about the result, the isolated referee under attack - the educational function of sport is greatly weakened and risks being replaced by aggressive and competitive models that children learn, despite themselves, to imitate.

"The last time the regional referee manager came, he did an exercise where he gave everyone a red card and a yellow card... he showed a whole series of fouls in real time and then in slow motion... everyone had their say, it was absolute carnival. This shows how difficult it is to make the right decision in real time." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"Over the years, yes, I have seen some referees explain why they blew the whistle for that foul and explain the reason to the kids. It's mainly the older, more experienced referees who do this." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"Those who train referees should prepare them to be educators, because referees are very important educators... they are the ones who make certain things happen, they are the ones who penalize, they are the ones who call the captain... but do referees know what to do? Often referees don't know what to do." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"Parents are dangerous. It only takes two parents to ruin the atmosphere of a soccer game." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"The other day I went into the locker room and told the boys that I would not allow any protests against the referee, that he was a boy like them, that he could make mistakes like them, and that it made no sense to go against him, also because without him they would not be able to play." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"When coaches, families, and referees talk to each other before and after games, the atmosphere changes: the kids feel that the adults are a team, not enemies lined up on opposite sides." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

9. Existing positive practices

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The transcripts reveal a core of existing positive practices that embody the idea of sport as a shared educational experience. The most frequently mentioned is the so-called "third half": after the game, the home team invites the opponents over, the teams get together and have a snack together, involving not only the kids but also coaches, parents, and managers. This informal moment has a strong educational value: it helps to ease tensions, transform opponents into interlocutors, create bonds between families and staff, and shift the focus from the result to the relationship. Coaches and parents describe it as a space where people talk, joke, build friendships, and reinforce the idea that they only "play against" each other during the minutes of the game, while outside they belong to the same sports community.

Alongside the third half, another positive practice is formal meetings with parents: when problems or exaggerated behavior emerge in the stands, the club convenes category meetings in which the president presents the "club policy," explains how it works, and what attitudes are not tolerated. These meetings are perceived by parents as useful, both because they clarify the rules of the game off the field and because they strengthen the sense of community among families, to the point that it is often the parents themselves who call each other out when someone is "exaggerating" during games. Finally, a very significant strand concerns training initiatives related to referees: some coaches recount meetings in which the regional referee manager worked with the children, showing them videos of fouls first in real time and then in slow motion, asking them to raise a yellow or red card . The effect was a 'carnival of interpretations' that highlighted how difficult it is to make decisions in a fraction of a second and fostered empathy towards the role of the referee.

Added to this are the examples set by the parents of more experienced referees who take the time on the field to explain to the kids the reason for the foul, turning the penalty into an educational opportunity. In summary, third halves, meetings with families, and initiatives with referees are perceived as practices that work: they create dialogue, align values, and allow sport to be experienced not only as competition but as a structured space for coexistence and shared learning.

Referees recognize the existence of positive practices already in place: clubs that promote collective greetings at the end of the game, coaches who openly thank referees and opponents, parents involved in training sessions on the educational role of sport. These experiences show that an alliance between the various figures is possible and has a visible effect on the behavior of young people, who are more inclined towards fair play, respect for the rules, and self-control, even in moments of high tension.

"After the games, there's always the 'third half.'"

"With the opponents too?"

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"Yes, with our opponents. After the game, the host team invites everyone over, and the teams get together and have a snack together. The coaches, parents, and managers are also involved." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"We almost always involve parents during games, in the sense that in addition to the two regular halves of the game, in the younger age groups there are sometimes three. At the end of the game, the parents collaborate to provide a snack together with the opposing team. On this occasion, we try to encourage dialogue between the parents of our children and the parents of the other children, in short, to create friendships. We end up having a snack together." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"After an incident of rudeness by a parent during a game, a meeting was held between the managers and the families. The club explained how it works and that certain things are not allowed. There is a lot of attention paid to this, and if there are any problems, they are highlighted immediately." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"I have refereed clubs where, at the end of the game, the coach and captain greet the referee in front of everyone and thank the opponent: in those moments, you can really see that sport educates." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

10. Problems and critical issues in the sporting context

The Focus Groups paint a very clear picture: grassroots sport is perceived as a powerful educational context, but it is fraught with critical issues that risk undermining its potential, mainly due to the behavior of adults and a football culture marked by competition and aggression. Coaches and parents emphasize that, numerically, problems often arise from a small minority of adults, but this is enough to "ruin the atmosphere" of a match and convey messages to children that are contrary to the values declared by the clubs. In the stands, 'dangerous parents' are described as those who get heated easily, shout at referees and coaches, are obsessed with the result, and turn a youth game into a tense environment: coaches say that out of 180 members, "one, maybe two parents" are the ones who force them to intervene, but they are enough to create chaos, affect the atmosphere, and damage the image of the entire club. Many parents confirm this perception: they talk about situations in which "the first to accuse are the parents in the stands or the coaches on the bench," pointing out that children often experience the game with more serenity than adults, while it is mom and dad who come out angry because "we lost again."

Added to this is the influence of role models from professional soccer and the media. Some parents say they were initially skeptical about enrolling their children in soccer precisely because, "just by turning on the TV," they see an atmosphere of

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intense competition, constant controversy, and verbal and physical aggression related to the games. The basketball environment is cited in contrast: there, "it's a pleasure to watch the games," while in soccer, "many times you want to leave the stands" because your child is on the field to grow, not to feel surrounded by insults, protests, and aggressive attitudes. Some coaches also link the shortage of youth referees to what "you always hear on television": episodes of violence and exasperated protests that normalize the idea that the referee is an enemy to be attacked, not a figure to be respected.

The concrete effects of this climate emerge in numerous accounts of aggressive incidents and violent language. Parents describe scenes in which a 16-year-old female referee, new to the job, is "sworn at" by adults in their fifties, to the point that some say that these people "should be grabbed by the collar and not allowed back on the soccer field," because in such conditions that girl "will never be able to grow and mature." The young people themselves recount episodes of "mini brawls" in youth tournaments: opponents pushing and shoving, teammates physically intervening to "defend" their friend, until the coach steps in to stop the situation, often in contexts without a formal referee. Coaches and parents explicitly talk about "madness" and "insanity" to describe what sometimes happens in a simple under-15 or under-17 game, with players feeling "robbed" by a referee's decision and parents reacting as if something vital were at stake. The result is an environment where children not only learn the language of the field, but also risk internalizing models of conflict management based on shouting, accusations, and, in the worst cases, physical violence.

The referees' accounts reveal numerous problems in the grassroots sports context: excessive pressure on results even at youth level, lack of respect for referees, and frequent conflicts between adults that affect the children. Aggressive language, exaggerated competitive models, and a lack of recognition of the educational function of sport are also reported, factors that limit the possibility of experiencing sport as a formative, inclusive, and truly accessible experience for all.

Another very serious issue concerns the risk of exclusion and demotivation of some children, linked to both technical dynamics and the emotional context. In a focus group, a parent/coach recounts the personal story of their children: after years of playing happily, with satisfaction commensurate with their abilities, the arrival of a new coach who always played only the strongest players for 90 minutes, constantly leaving those he considered 'less talented' on the bench, led the eldest son to give up soccer 'thanks to this coach', and the second son is now experiencing the same situation. It is emphasized that, in non-professional categories, this approach "should be abolished" because it is better for kids to "be on the field than on the street doing worse things": demotivating a 16-year-old who may be experiencing difficult situations off the field means taking away an important space for well-being and protection. Coaches and managers confirm that there is a constant tension

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between the desire to win and the need to include: they try to guarantee playing time for everyone, even by creating second and third teams, but they complain that not all clubs work this way and that a certain type of sports culture pushes towards early selection, implicit exclusion of those with less talent, and the use of results as the sole criterion of value. At the same time, there is a reported risk that parents will use soccer as a 'punishment' (I won't take you to training), depriving their children of a space that, for many, is one of the few contexts in which they can feel good and find balance, especially after Covid.

In summary, the focus groups describe a youth sports context in which problems and critical issues stem not so much from the sport itself as from the culture surrounding it: parents who lose control, coaches who are not trained in the educational dimension, young referees exposed to verbal abuse, television models that normalize fights and protests, and technical selections that crush inclusion. However, everyone recognizes that these critical issues are the flip side of great potential: if addressed with awareness, training, and shared rules, the same field that today sees fights, shouting, and abandonment can be transformed into a space where even the most fragile children find opportunities for growth, belonging, and resilience.

"My son quit soccer because of a coach who only lets the best players play, and my second son is doing the same. In my opinion, this should be abolished in the lower leagues, partly because we need to get kids out of difficult situations, and it's better for them to be on the field than on the streets doing much worse things."
(MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"We have to work to make people understand that sometimes you win, sometimes you draw, and sometimes you lose... in every category, one or two parents are the ones who somehow force us to argue, sometimes to curb behavior, because even in young children we have seen people who have not behaved as they should."
(MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"There was a mini brawl on the field... the opponent started pushing and hitting our outside player. At that point, our teammate arrived and started this brawl... then the goalkeeper got in the middle..." (MENTORS Focus Group 4 - Young Players)

"I was personally very skeptical about letting my son join a soccer team. I think the world of soccer is quite difficult from this point of view." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"The biggest problem I see is the early pressure to perform: 10-year-olds treated like professionals, with exaggerated reactions to a foul or a mistake." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

11. Family fragility and the "educational emergency"

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The responses from the four focus groups seem to reveal the perception of a real "educational emergency" affecting families and, consequently, the entire system surrounding children. Coaches say that the role of the family has changed profoundly compared to the past: where once the home environment was considered the primary place for rules, limits, and responsibilities, today it is often described as fragile, disoriented, and sometimes even "miseducational." Several comments explicitly mention parents who struggle to stand their ground, who find it difficult to say no, who oscillate between overprotection and delegation, and who in many cases feel overwhelmed by their children's emotional and educational problems, exacerbated by the post-COVID period: children who are more closed off, more fragile, more dependent on screens and social media, and less accustomed to free play and autonomous conflict management. In this context, coaches and parents describe a school-family-sport triangle in which responsibilities easily shift from one corner to another: schools complain about the lack of basic education, families ask schools and sports clubs to 'fix' their children, and clubs find themselves faced with demands that go far beyond their technical mandate.

Several coaches clearly state that today, in order to coach, it is no longer enough to 'know about soccer': you need psychological tools, listening skills, and educational skills to manage children who arrive with complex family situations, conflictual separations, behavioral difficulties, or disorders that are not always declared. Some define this scenario as an 'educational emergency' precisely because they perceive a void: families who are less present or less authoritative, overburdened schools, and sports called upon to act as a buffer and educational safeguard without always having adequate resources, training, and recognition.

At the same time, it is not only negative judgments that emerge: some parents say they are aware of their difficulties and actively seek alliances with coaches and clubs, "picking up the phone" to ask for a meeting when their child shows signs of distress. In these cases, family fragility translates into a request for collaboration: parents do not expect sports and school to "replace" the family, but ask to share tools and perspectives, recognizing that they can no longer manage on their own. However, coaches point out that this is not yet a widespread model: too often, when problems arise (lack of commitment, poor grades, benching, or unwelcome technical decisions), the reaction of some adults is to oppose other educational agencies, defending the child "no matter what" and shifting responsibility onto teachers or coaches.

Referees link many tensions on the field to family fragility and a broader educational emergency affecting the area. They observe young people who struggle to recognize limits, rules, and frustration, and who sometimes use sport as their only outlet for emotional release. In the absence of cohesive and aware adults, the field risks amplifying these difficulties, instead of transforming them into opportunities to

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develop self-control, respect, responsibility, and the ability to engage in constructive confrontation.

The feeling that runs through all the focus groups is therefore twofold: on the one hand, a structural change in families, which are more fragile and disoriented, and on the other, an urgent need to redefine the collaboration between home, school, and sports, because if everyone continues to shift the educational center of gravity onto others, young people risk being left without clear points of reference at the very moment when they need them most.

"In my opinion, there should always be a relationship between parents and society. When my child was young, I encountered some difficulties: I picked up the phone, called the coaches, and we talked about it. We intervened together." (MENTORS Focus Group 3 - Parents)

"I expect parents to endorse our choices... and take advantage of the situation to further teach their children about values, respect, right and wrong, rather than coming to protest." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"In many aggressive behaviors on the field, I see a reflection of the educational emergency outside: kids who don't have clear boundaries at home look for a place to explode on the field." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

12. Training needs and professional support

The responses strongly suggest that, in order to be truly educational, sport can no longer rely solely on the goodwill of coaches and managers, but needs both serious investment in training for all those involved and the structural contribution of education professionals (psychologists, pedagogists, educators). Coaches describe a profoundly changed context: more fragile families, traditional educational agencies in crisis, young people who arrive at the field with "a lot of problems," accentuated by the post-COVID period. In this scenario, they recognize that they do not have all the skills they need to deal with issues such as psychological distress, extreme emotions, and conflicts with parents and children. Hence the explicit request for external figures: not only psychologists (who are "much talked about"), but also educators and pedagogues, seen as perhaps even more central to maintaining the promise of sport as a space for growth and not just performance.

At the same time, coaches complain about the poor quality of the training courses available to them: they talk about 'coach cards' and 'referee courses' that are too formal and rushed, and do not really prepare them to deal with the social and emotional complexity of today's young people. For them, "coaching children" today means knowing how to manage psychological dynamics, relationships with very demanding or intrusive parents, conflicts on the field and in the stands, and more

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generally the whole world of children's emotions. Improvising in this role, without adequate preparation, is perceived as potentially harmful. The desired training is not technical (schemes, tactics), but above all educational and relational: effective communication with children and parents, conflict management, the ability to contain and channel emotions, and reading the signs of distress. Some coaches extend this argument to all 'educational agencies': schools, sports clubs, federations, managers... 'culture' and cross-disciplinary training are needed, otherwise even increasing the number of hours of sport is not enough.

Another key point explicitly concerns referees: coaches define them as potentially "very important educators," but complain that they are often not trained to be so. The courses, they say, are limited to handing out cards and sending very young people to referee matches without adequate relational skills, exposing them to conflict with parents and players and preventing them from creating the peaceful atmosphere that is essential for learning. For this reason, they propose specific training courses for referees on group management, communication, and emotions on the field ( ), as well as opportunities for referees themselves to train with teams or explain to young people, in protected contexts, the complexity of their role and their mistakes. At the same time, institutions (the state, regions, federations) are asked to provide financial support for both the inclusion of external professionals and structured training courses for all those involved in sports clubs.

For their part, referees express a strong need for training and professional support not only on a technical level, but also on a communicative and emotional level. Managing conflicts with coaches and families, containing the reactions of young people, and explaining difficult decisions requires specific interpersonal skills. Refresher courses shared with coaches and managers would help to build a common language, prevent misunderstandings, and strengthen the educational function of official matches and training sessions in the long term.

From the players' point of view, the picture confirms and enriches these requests: young players explicitly ask for "an educator or psychologist" to come to training sessions from time to time to work on respect, anger management, and confidence; they imagine workshops with role-playing games in which they play the referee, parent, or nervous player to "feel what it's like" to be in someone else's shoes. They also ask for concrete tools to manage fear of making mistakes, shame, and frustration over refereeing decisions they consider unfair, emphasizing that simply saying "don't protest" is not enough: they need someone to teach them how to accept decisions, perhaps discussing them calmly after the game, and practical techniques for releasing tension. The young people also confirm that they would like to see referees involved in discussions and recounting their mistakes, as this would help them to stop perceiving them as 'enemies' and recognize them as educational figures.

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In summary, on this issue, the focus groups converge on three major needs: 1) raising the level of educational and relational training for coaches, referees, and managers; 2) integrating specialized professionals (psychologists, educators, pedagogues) into grassroots sports clubs; 3) activating structural support from institutions to finance these resources and create ongoing programs, not sporadic initiatives. Only in this way, according to the participants, can sport truly live up to its ambition of being a central place for life education, and not just a context for competitive results.

"Today, to coach children, it is not enough to be a coach; you have to be prepared psychologically, in terms of managing parents and managing emotions. You can't improvise, and if you're not prepared, you can do damage." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"There should be investment in increasing training for everyone involved in a sports club, from managers to coaches to all other roles. Specific training based on the age of the young people being managed." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"Those who train referees should prepare them to be educators. Often, referees don't know what to do." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"Why don't referees come and train with our players during the week? We are committed to creating the conditions for referees to be seen as one of us, but I don't think enough is being done." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"In my opinion, we need people who can help us better connect life and sport. For example: an educator or psychologist who comes to training sessions with coaches and managers from time to time to work on respect, anger management, and trust; small workshops where we do role-playing games: one person plays the referee, one plays the parent, one plays the nervous player, and we see how it feels." (MENTORS Focus Group 4 - Young Players)

"If no one helps us manage our emotions, it's normal for us to protest or kick the post... Just saying 'don't protest' is not enough. We need to be taught how to accept decisions, perhaps by talking about them after the game." (MENTORS Focus Group 4 - Young Players)

"We referees also need psychological and educational training, not just technical training: we often find ourselves dealing with family tensions and emotional outbursts without the right tools." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

13. Role of institutions and sports clubs

The focus group responses paint a fairly clear picture of the role of institutions and sports clubs in youth sport: on the one hand, there is a perception of poor structural

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support from public institutions (municipalities, schools, federations, the state, regions), while on the other hand, there are very positive models of sports clubs which, despite limited resources, truly focus on inclusion, participation, and the well-being of young people. Some coaches say that institutions "are not very present" in promoting sports for different age groups, especially children: there is a lack of policies and resources to increase the number of people participating in sports, and access to facilities is often hampered by heavy bureaucracy in obtaining gyms and spaces managed by public bodies or high schools. At the same time, the 'high' level of organized sport is also criticized: federations and managers are described as incompetent or overly influenced by political logic, more interested in membership cards, registration cards, and contributions than in genuine educational planning. It is noted that it is possible to "give tens of thousands of euros to sports clubs" , but if the culture of sport and the way it is managed does not change, the investment risks not translating into a real educational benefit. Some coaches explicitly ask the state, regions, and federations to help them finance professionals (educators, pedagogues, psychologists) and "complementary" activities dedicated to the emotional and relational growth of young people, emphasizing that today grassroots sports find themselves managing complex issues without adequate support.

In this scenario, grassroots sports clubs appear to be the real backbone of the system: on the one hand, they try to make up for institutional shortcomings with their own resources, and on the other, they represent concrete models of good practice. The presentations cite, for example, a club such as Shalom, which uses its own resources to enable children, adolescents, adults, and even 'special kids' to play sports by organizing summer camps and inclusive activities. Another club (sports club/soccer school) is described as explicitly inclusion-oriented: it does not 'select' children based on talent, but welcomes anyone who wants to play soccer, including people from different cultural and religious backgrounds, and organizes second and third teams to ensure that 'everyone can play' and have fun, not just the strongest.

From the parents' point of view, there are very present and accessible club contexts, where there is a clear "club policy" focused on the growth of the children and the well-being of the internal climate, with tournaments designed to promote sport, active involvement of families, and the real possibility of calling coaches and managers when difficulties arise.

The children themselves confirm and enrich this picture: they imagine clubs that introduce structural rules to avoid exclusion (mandatory rotation of minutes to avoid players being 'parked' on the bench), fixed moments of 'values training' or tournaments in which fair play is rewarded as much as (if not more than) points in the standings. They also propose concrete tools that clubs and sports institutions could adopt: sports diaries that record gestures of respect, mixed post-match

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gatherings with opponents, rewards for those who respect referees and opponents, and educational materials that present the referee as a figure who teaches the rules rather than a 'match ruiner'. In summary, the voices of coaches, parents, and young people reveal a clear tension: institutions are perceived as distant and not very oriented towards grassroots youth sports, while sports clubs, when they have a strong educational vision, become real "social shock absorbers" that hold together inclusion, participation, and personal growth.

According to referees, sports institutions and clubs have a responsibility to focus on the educational dimension, providing clear rules on adult behavior, structured opportunities for discussion, and awareness-raising activities aimed at families and coaches. Consistent organizational choices, such as sanctions for unsportsmanlike behavior, rewards for good practices and visible support for match officials, can create safer, more consistent, and constructive environments for all participants, both on and off the field.

The cross-cutting request is for institutions and federations to explicitly recognize and support this role, simplifying access to facilities, investing in training and educational services, and promoting those social models that truly focus on children, not results.

"I have noticed that institutions are not very involved in promoting sport for all age groups, especially for children... There is no use of resources aimed at increasing the number of children who practice sport... even with the excessive bureaucracy involved in the release of gyms belonging to various public bodies... but then, fortunately, there are organizations such as Shalom... which manage to partially compensate for these deficits with their own resources." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

"Of course, if the institutions helped us... they need to help us promote a whole range of activities that can be defined as complementary... managing the communication of growing adolescents is not easy... if the state, the regions, and the federations could help us in some way to have people like that, it wouldn't be a bad thing." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"We try to ensure that 'everyone can play' by creating a second and even a third team. Because if they come here and pay the fee, I can't just say, 'Your son is clumsy, so he can't play.'" (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"I would like all clubs to have a set time, perhaps once a month, when they don't just do technical training, but also do an hour of 'values training': respect, anger management, teamwork. Coaches, managers, and maybe a referee talk to us... If we train on this too, not just on passing, it becomes easier to be better teammates and not explode every time something goes wrong." (MENTORS Focus Group 4 - Young Players)

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"I would change the way tournaments and rankings are managed for our age group: less importance for points and more rewards for fair play... give a prize to the team that had the fewest yellow cards, that helped their opponents, that respected the referees the most... If we started to see that those who behave well are valued, and not just those who win, we would automatically become better teammates and better rivals." (MENTORS Focus Group 4 - Young Players)

"If sports clubs and institutions really put education at the center, they would make discussions between referees, coaches, and families mandatory, not just technical courses." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

14. Relationship with schools and other educational agencies

The transcripts reveal the idea of a true "extended educational family" in which schools, families, and sports should work together, but in reality often proceed in a misaligned manner. Coaches describe a sort of "blame game": schools blame parents for children's behavior, parents blame schools, and children are "caught in the middle," exposed to contradictory messages and a sense of insecurity. In this context, school is still recognized as the place where "education professionals" should be, but many coaches complain that school management has become too bureaucratic and not very involved in the educational relationship, while young teachers, even those who are willing, are not always adequately supported. Hence the call for greater educational collaboration between schools and families, based first and foremost on mutual trust: schools should once again become a point of reference for parents seeking help, and families should recognize the authority of schools instead of delegitimizing them.

In this system, sport - and in particular soccer school - is perceived as a complement to the educational work of the school, not as an alternative. A coach, who is also a physical education teacher, states that sport is an "educational tool superior to all other activities" precisely because, when used well, it allows the transmission of values, certainties, and security that are often lacking in young people. hence the proposal to start as early as kindergarten with more hours of physical activity at school, to compensate for the disappearance of free play in the streets and support motor and emotional development from an early age. The idea is that school and sport can communicate with each other: by increasing the hours of physical education at school and at the same time ensuring that sports clubs offer 'sport done well', continuity is built between morning and afternoon, between the classroom and the playing field.

Some parents, for their part, clearly see the role of the coach as "that of elementary school teachers": in this age group, the coach is seen as an educator in every sense, a "carrot and stick" who, just like at school, helps children to follow the rules, manage arguments, and learn to get along with others. It is no coincidence that several mothers say that conflicts within the team are dealt with "a bit like at

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school": if there is an argument, it is discussed, reflected upon, and the children are reminded that problems can be solved.

Sport thus becomes a practical laboratory for what school tries to teach in theory: respect for rules, managing frustration, coexisting with authority. A soccer school coach points out that if a child is "unruly at home or at school," at least when he comes to the field, he knows that he will only get maximum attention if he respects the coaches' rules: soccer, which children care about very much, becomes an educational lever to reinforce rules that schools and families struggle to enforce. At the same time, coaches reiterate that all educational agencies must be "on the same track": school administrators, coaches, parents, social services... if everyone sends different messages or limits themselves to defending their own turf, children end up no longer understanding what their points of reference are. Hence the emphasis on 'culture' and shared educational preparation: increasing the number of hours of sport at school or investing money in sports clubs is of little use if we do not work on a common culture of values to be transmitted.

Families and young people also confirm this logic of potential synergy in their words. Some parents explicitly state that they see a strong parallel between sport and school: they help their children to see defeat, an argument, or being substituted during a game as an opportunity for introspection and growth, "a bit like what happens at school," to learn to accept the decisions of adults and to reflect on their own behavior. From the perspective of young soccer players, direct connections emerge: one boy says that having to respect the referee's decisions, even when he disagrees, also helps him at school to accept the authority of the teacher; another says that his family helps him to organize himself "between school and sports," highlighting how the consistency and respect for schedules learned on the field are skills that are also useful in his studies. In summary, in the voices of coaches, parents, and children, sport appears to be a concrete complement to school education: it can reinforce rules, values, and interpersonal skills, provided that schools, families, and sports clubs stop working in separate compartments and begin to recognize themselves as parts of the same educational network.

Referees believe that greater dialogue between the world of sport, schools, and other educational agencies in the area is important. Consistent messages about rules, respect, and conflict management could support young people in developing stable transferable skills. Shared projects, civic education courses that also value sporting experience, and opportunities for teachers, coaches, and referees to meet would strengthen the educational potential of grassroots sports and youth activities, increasing the sense of community.

"Many parents seek help from other educational agencies. The school blames the parents for the children's behavior, and the parents blame the school. And the children are caught in the middle, like predestined victims." (MENTORS Focus Group 1 - Sports coaches)

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"It is also the responsibility of the soccer school to teach principles. We don't care how the child behaves at home or at school, but when he comes to us, he must understand that he will be given the utmost attention if he respects the rules." (MENTORS Focus Group 2 - Sports coaches)

"The referees... teach me that I can't always be right, and that there is someone on the field who makes the decisions and I have to respect that. This is also useful to me outside of soccer, at school for example." (MENTORS Focus Group 4 - Young Players)

"My parents help me organize myself between school and sports and point out when I get too nervous on the field... Referees also teach me something... It's as if they were 'rules teachers' in the middle of the field." (MENTORS Focus Group 4 - Young Players)

"I would like schools and sports clubs to communicate more with each other: the same kids who struggle to follow the rules on the field often struggle to follow them in the classroom, but we adults work in silos." (MENTORS Focus Group 5 - Referees)

Key Findings

Key Finding 1 – Sport as a school of life

Focus groups confirm that grassroots sport is not "just exercise," but a structured educational context, a real school of life. On the field, children learn respect, collaboration, how to handle victory and defeat, inclusion of diversity, and a sense of responsibility. The team is seen as a metaphor for society: roles, rules, conflicts, and alliances are experienced, with sport also playing a compensatory role in relation to fragile families and a school system perceived to be under pressure. However, sport is not neutral: it can educate or miseducate depending on how it is organized and experienced by adults.

Key Finding 2 – Sport 'done well' vs sport 'done badly'

Everyone clearly distinguishes between sport 'done well', focused on fun, participation, and growth, and sport 'done badly', dominated by results at all costs. In the first case, the emphasis is on play, rotation of playing time, the right of everyone to play, and acceptance of mistakes and unfavorable outcomes. In the second case, there is early selection, fixed benches for the less talented, and encouragement of cunning and unfair play. This shift from a culture of process to a culture of performance is identified as one of the main factors in the abandonment of sport and the loss of educational value.

Key Finding 3 – Coaches as key educators

Coaches are recognized as key educational figures, comparable to primary school teachers for younger children. Their task is to set an example, manage emotions and

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conflicts, teach children to follow the rules, and help them accept technical choices, victories, and defeats. Today, their role is more complex: they need psychological, communication, and interpersonal skills, not just technical ones. Managing playing time becomes an educational tool if it is motivated and shared; on the contrary, opaque or solely results-oriented choices produce frustration and withdrawal. There is a strong need for ongoing pedagogical training for coaches.

Key Finding 4 – Families: a resource and a risk factor

Families are the first educational environment and, when they align themselves with the club's project, they become valuable co-educators: they help to interpret defeats and benching as opportunities for growth, they support respect for the rules, and they promote serenity and fun. At the same time, a vocal minority of "dangerous" parents can ruin the atmosphere with shouting, protests, and delegitimization of referees and coaches. This ambivalence makes it necessary to establish stable channels of dialogue (meetings, shared moments, rules in the stands) and build a common culture in which parents are not customers but part of the educational community.

Key Finding 5 – Referees: fragile educators of the rules

The referee is recognized as a figure of the rules and a potential educator on the field, capable of transforming fouls into learning opportunities and embodying fairness and conflict control. However, they are in a fragile position: often young, with little training in education, exposed to pressure and verbal aggression, to the point of fearing for their own safety. The dominant football culture treats them as a target rather than a resource. Participants point to the need to train referees in pedagogy and to protect them through clear rules and alliances with clubs and families.

Key Finding 6 – Positive practices and the need for systemic alliances

The material highlights practices that work: third half with opponents and families, meetings in which the club explains its values and expected behaviors, training sessions with referee managers, referees explaining their decisions to the players. These experiences create dialogue, empathy, and educational consistency. However, these often remain local, non-structural initiatives. The overall picture indicates the need for a stable alliance between sports clubs, families, schools, referees, and institutions, supported by training, dedicated educational figures, and policies that reward truly inclusive organizations focused on the growth of young people.

Conclusions and Recommendations

General conclusions

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The focus groups paint an extremely clear picture: grassroots sports, and youth soccer in particular, are recognized by coaches, parents, and children as a true educational agency. The field is not only a place for physical performance, but also a space where respect, collaboration, managing victory and defeat, coexisting with diversity, and responsibility towards oneself and others are learned. The team is experienced as a metaphor for society, in which children experiment with roles, rules, conflicts, and alliances.

However, sport is not neutral: it can educate or miseducate. On the one hand, there is sport 'done well', focused on fun, participation, and growth for all, in which technical choices are explained, playing time is distributed with educational care, and the result is important but not absolute. On the other hand, there is 'bad sport', dominated by results at all costs, early selection, systematic benching of the less gifted, 'cunning' elevated to a value, and an aggressive climate fueled mainly by adults. This drift is identified as one of the main causes of dropping out of sport and the loss of its educational function.

The figure of the coach emerges as central: he or she is perceived as an educator in all respects, comparable to primary school teachers in the younger age groups. The coach is given the task of setting an example, containing and channeling emotions, managing conflicts, explaining painful choices (benching, exclusions), and transforming victories and defeats into opportunities for growth. At the same time, coaches report a sharp increase in the complexity of their role: more fragile families, children with increased levels of emotional distress in the post-COVID era, pressure related to results, and the presence of very demanding or conflictual parents. The need for psychological, communication, and interpersonal skills, not just technical skills, is therefore evident.

Families appear to be ambivalent actors: when they align themselves with the club's educational project and collaborate with coaches and managers, they become valuable co-educators, capable of supporting educational messages, helping their children to see benches and defeats as formative steps, and bringing fun and well-being back to the forefront. However, a vocal minority of 'dangerous' parents can undermine the atmosphere: shouting from the stands, protesting against referees and coaches, putting pressure on results, systematically delegitimizing adult decisions. This makes it essential to work on shared rules of behavior and stable channels of dialogue.

Referees are recognized as figures of authority and potential educators on the field: they can explain fouls, embody fairness, and manage conflict with firmness and respect. In practice, however, they are often the weakest link in the system: young, poorly trained in education, sent to referee tense matches, and subjected to verbal abuse from adults. The dominant soccer culture treats them more as targets than as resources.

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Alongside the critical issues, positive practices are already in place: the 'third half' with opponents and families, meetings at the start of the season where the club explains its values and rules, meetings with referee managers, organizational choices (second and third teams) to allow everyone to play. These experiences show that 'well-done' sport is possible.

Finally, the contours of a broader educational emergency are emerging: families in difficulty, schools under pressure, sport called upon to fill educational gaps without always having the appropriate tools. Hence the need for a systemic alliance between sports clubs, families, schools, referees, and institutions, supported by structured training and competent professionals (educators, psychologists, pedagogues).

Recommendations

Below are some operational recommendations, organized by area, which derive directly from the results that emerged.

1. For sports clubs and coaches

- Formalize a "club education charter" that spells out values, training objectives, criteria for managing playing time, and rules of conduct for everyone (staff, children, families).
- Guarantee the right to play in the youth categories, providing for minimum playing time rotations and, where necessary, second/third teams, to avoid 'chronic bench warming' and the consequent abandonment of the sport.
- Integrate structured moments of education in values (respect, anger management, teamwork) into the season: not only technical training, but 'values training' with active methodologies.
- Invest in pedagogical and communication training for coaches and managers: conflict management, talking to parents, reading discomfort, group leadership.
- Ensure consistency between messages and behavior: coaches, as significant role models, must avoid blatant protests towards referees and opponents, instead legitimizing the sportsmanship that is required of the children.

2. For families

- Recognize yourselves as co-educators: the role of parents is not that of "customers" of the club, but of active members of the sporting community. This means supporting, in front of your children, the rules and decisions agreed upon with coaches and managers.

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- Adopt responsible behavior in the stands: avoid shouting, insults, and excessive pressure on the result; intervene among peers to reprimand those who exaggerate, contributing to a peaceful atmosphere.
- Use sports and soccer school as a space for educational dialogue: help children reflect on defeats, exclusions, and conflicts, shifting the focus from "who is to blame" to "what can I learn."
- Actively participate in meetings and shared moments, perceiving them not as formalities but as opportunities to build a common path of growth.

3. For the refereeing sector

- Integrate a pedagogical component into training courses: in addition to the rules, provide tools for communication, emotion management, and relationships with children and adults.
- Promote initiatives to bring referees and young athletes together (in training or on dedicated days): simulate game situations, explain decisions, share the difficulties of the role to increase empathy and understanding.
- Encourage the practice of explaining decisions during youth competitions, when the context allows, turning the sanction into a learning opportunity.
- Define clear protocols for the protection of referees against aggressive behavior by adults, with real penalties for those who cross the line.

4. For schools and other educational agencies

- Strengthen dialogue between schools and sports clubs, for example through common educational representatives, periodic exchanges, and shared projects on topics such as respect, citizenship, and conflict management.
- Promote physical education and sports in the early years of school, increasing opportunities for structured play and collaboration, in line with the programs offered by local sports clubs.
- Recognize and support sports organizations that have a strong educational focus, promoting synergies and best practices in the area.

5. For institutions (municipalities, regions, federations, state)

- Simplify access to sports facilities (school gyms, municipal facilities) for grassroots clubs, reducing bureaucratic barriers that hinder sports practice.
- Focus funding not only on quantity but also on educational quality: provide rewards for clubs that adopt inclusive policies, playing time rotation, and training courses for staff and families.

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- Support the inclusion of professionals (educators, psychologists, pedagogists) within clubs or networks of clubs, especially in contexts with greater social hardship.
- Promote cultural campaigns on the educational role of sport, involving local media, schools, and sports clubs, to counteract the toxic models conveyed by professional soccer and certain media narratives.

In conclusion, the focus groups clearly indicate that grassroots sport has enormous educational potential, but that this potential is not automatically realized. It requires deliberate choices, training, shared rules, and stable alliances between all the actors involved. The recommendations proposed here offer a concrete path for moving from awareness to the practical transformation of youth sport into a true training ground for life and citizenship.

3.2.4. France (IFSO).

This national report was produced under the coordination of the International Federation for Sports Officials (IFSO) within the framework of the MENTORS Project (Task 2.3 – Focus Groups).

As IFSO is an international federation without territorial presence or direct operational structures in individual countries, the implementation of the French focus groups was delegated to its national member organisation, the AFCAM (Association Française du Corps Arbitral Multisports). The activity was carried out on behalf of IFSO by the AFCAM Réunion branch, under the supervision of the national AFCAM presidency.

A total of nine focus groups were conducted on the island of La Réunion in September 2025, involving 52 participants in total. The groups represented the main categories of stakeholders defined by the project:

- Families / Parents: Group 1 (5 participants) and Group 2 (7 participants).
- Referees and Officials: Group 1 (5 participants) and Group 2 (6 participants).
- Coaches and Trainers: Group 1 (6 participants) and Group 2 (6 participants).
- Youth and Children: Group 1 (7 participants) and Group 2 (5 participants).
- Miscellaneous / Cross-sector profiles: Group 1 (5 participants).

Each session was moderated by two local moderators — the President of AFCAM Réunion and the Secretary-General of AFCAM Réunion — with the President of AFCAM France, the Vice-President, and the Head of the Training Commission acting as observers to ensure consistency, neutrality and methodological rigor.

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All sessions were recorded, transcribed, anonymised and coded according to the official Mentors coding framework (values, actors, barriers, resources, and proposals).

The French focus groups provided rich, diverse and convergent insights across all categories. Participants highlighted respect, teamwork, humility, discipline, and enjoyment as the fundamental values transmitted through sport. They stressed the educational and social dimension of sport as a "school of life," helping young people to develop emotional control, perseverance and civic behaviour.

Across groups, participants consistently identified four main actors in the transmission of values:

- Families, as the first and most influential educators;
- Coaches, as role models who must embody integrity, patience and fairness;
- Referees, as key mediators of rules, justice and emotional management;
- Clubs and communities, which provide the environment where values are learned, reinforced, or sometimes undermined.

The main barriers mentioned were parental pressure and inappropriate sideline behaviour, the shortage of volunteers and human resources, insufficient pedagogical training for coaches, and the growing influence of social media and elite-sport models promoting aggression or "win-at-all-costs" attitudes. Participants also noted a lack of institutional support and protection mechanisms for young referees and educators.

In contrast, a number of resources and solutions were proposed: pre-season meetings with parents, club charters of good conduct, joint workshops where Young people experience refereeing roles, awareness campaigns on fair play, and specific training for coaches in communication, conflict management and emotional regulation. The idea of shared responsibility between all actors- parents, educators, referees and institutions — emerged as a central recommendation.

Overall, the French contribution demonstrates that value transmission through sport is collective, experiential and relational. Beyond technical performance, it relies on coherence between messages, behaviours and environments. The findings underline the importance of reinforcing pedagogical training, safeguarding respectful climates around youth competitions, and recognising the essential role of volunteers and referees as educators of fair play.

Methodology

Ethics and Permissions

No formal submission to an ethics committee was required under French law for this type of qualitative, non-interventional study. Nevertheless, IFSO and its national

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partner AFCAM applied strict ethical standards throughout the process to ensure transparency, participant protection, and voluntary engagement.

Before conducting the focus groups, preparatory meetings were held to brief and train the two moderators — the President and the Secretary-General of AFCAM Réunion — on methodological neutrality, data confidentiality, and participant consent procedures. All participants were clearly informed of the purpose of the discussion, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to decline or withdraw at any time without consequence.

For focus groups involving minors, parents were present in the room, positioned slightly apart so they could hear the discussion without influencing their children's responses. This arrangement ensured both safety and ethical oversight while preserving the authenticity of the young participants' voices.

All sessions respected the ethical principles set out in IFSO's and AFCAM's internal charters of conduct and in line with the Erasmus+ "Research Integrity and Safeguarding Guidelines". No personal data were collected beyond basic demographic information necessary for contextual analysis, and all transcripts were fully anonymised prior to coding and analysis.

***Participants*.**

Total participants: 52.

Age range: 10 to 65 years old.

Overall gender balance: Mixed representation.

Cultural context: La Réunion Island's multicultural community, including Creole, European, and Indian-Ocean backgrounds, provided a naturally diverse sample.

Gender data were not systematically recorded in transcripts. Moderators ensured balanced and inclusive participation across all focus groups.

Nine focus groups were conducted, representing all stakeholder categories defined by the MENTORS framework.

In total, 52 participants took part in the discussions. Sessions were held on La Réunion Island (France) and reflected the island's social and cultural diversity, including representatives of both collective and individual sports, men and women, and a range of ages from children to experienced officials.

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Focus Group	Profile	No. Participants	Gender Breakdown	Notes
FG1	Families / Parents (Team sports)	5	4F / 1M	Parents of children involved mainly in handball and football
FG2	Families / Parents (Individual sports)	7	4F / 3M	Parents of children in judo, swimming, athletics
FG3	Referees / Officials (Group 1)	5	2F / 3M	Experienced referees and trainers (karate, handball, swimming)
FG4	Referees / Officials (Group 2)	6	3F / 3M	Young referees in formation (mainly handball)
FG5	Coaches / Trainers (Group 1)	6	2F / 4M	Coaches in team and individual sports (handball, judo, running)
FG6	Coaches / Trainers (Group 2)	6	3F / 3M	Club presidents and technical coaches, collective sports
FG7	Youth / Children (Group 1)	7	4F / 3M	Children aged 10–12, handball and climbing
FG8	Youth / Children (Group 2)	5	2F / 3M	Teenagers aged 13–15, judo
FG9	Miscellaneous / Cross-sector	5	2F / 3M	Mixed group (educators, parents, referees, youth leaders)

Logistics.

All nine focus groups were conducted in person on La Réunion Island (France), within Local sports facilities made available by the AFCAM Réunion and its partner clubs. The sessions took place in accessible, familiar environments such as club meeting rooms and sports halls, ensuring comfort and spontaneity among participants.

The moderators initially planned sessions to last between 45 and 60 minutes, but in practice, most discussions lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. This shorter duration reflected the participants' availability-particularly for young athletes, whose sessions were sometimes held in a judo changing room during regular training hours, as well as the practical aim of maintaining engagement without imposing excessive time constraints.

Each session was audio-recorded using a mobile device, then transcribed via Microsoft Word Online, and finally translated into English using AI-assisted translation tools to enhance linguistic accuracy while preserving the meaning and tone of participants' statements. The recordings were stored securely and deleted once the transcriptions were verified and validated.

Moderators facilitated discussion with care to ensure that all participants — including those who were more reserved or less accustomed to speaking in such settings — could express themselves freely. To foster a positive and convivial atmosphere, small symbolic gifts were offered to all participants by the Regional Association, such as whistles, pens, or training bibs printed with the slogan "No Ref, No Game."

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Overall, the logistical setup balanced methodological rigour with accessibility and ethical care, creating inclusive conditions that encouraged open dialogue across all participant groups.

Data Collection and Analysis.

All nine focus groups were audio-recorded and later transcribed in full. The transcriptions were produced in French using Microsoft Word Online, then translated into English with AI-assisted tools to ensure lexical accuracy while preserving tone and meaning. Each transcript was subsequently verified manually by the AFCAM national team before being transferred to IFSO for integration into the Mentors analytical framework.

The analysis followed the official Mentors coding grid, organised around five main dimensions:

- V – Values transmitted through sport (e.g. respect, teamwork, humility, perseverance, enjoyment).
- A – Actors involved in value transmission (families, coaches, referees, clubs, institutions).
- F – Barriers and challenges (parental pressure, social media influence, lack of volunteers, lack of training).
- R – Resources and good practices (training sessions, awareness campaigns, peer mentoring).
- P – Proposals and recommendations (educational tools, codes of conduct, safeguarding mechanisms).

Each transcript was reviewed line by line and coded according to these categories. A double reading was carried out independently by the AFCAM national coordination team and by IFSO reviewers, to ensure consistency, neutrality, and cross-validation between national and international levels. Divergences in coding were discussed and harmonised during a calibration meeting before the final consolidation.

Data interpretation combined qualitative thematic analysis and frequency mapping of recurring codes to identify convergence across groups. Specific attention was paid to cross-category insights (for instance, how parents and referees perceive each other's role in value transmission) and to intergenerational patterns between youth and adults.

All transcripts were fully anonymised before analysis, and no personal or sensitive data were retained. The resulting dataset was stored securely under IFSO supervision and will be archived solely for research and reporting purposes within the Mentors project framework.

Thematic Analysis.

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The thematic analysis of the nine focus groups conducted in France highlights a remarkable consistency across all categories of participants — coaches, referees, parents, youth, and cross-sector stakeholders.

Despite different roles and experiences, participants described sport as a genuine educational environment where values are learned, tested, and shared. The five thematic dimensions below summarise the key findings.

Values Transmitted Through Sport.

Across all groups, sport was portrayed as a "school of life."

Participants emphasised respect, teamwork, discipline, humility, fair play, and enjoyment as the core values transmitted through practice. Coaches referred to structured moral frameworks such as the judo or karate moral code (politeness, self-control, honesty). Referees associated their role with integrity and impartiality, while parents and youth mentioned pleasure, perseverance, and emotional control as essential outcomes of participation.

Young athletes highlighted that sport helps them manage frustration, build confidence, and learn to accept defeat. Adults reinforced that values must be experienced daily — through gestures, language, and attitudes — rather than taught theoretically.

In short, sport was unanimously perceived as a place where individuals learn to cooperate, respect differences, and grow as human beings.

Actors Involved in Value Transmission.

Participants identified a shared ecosystem of responsibility.

- Families were described as the first educators: their attitudes in the stands, at home, and in daily conversation shape how children behave in sport.
- Coaches were seen as pivotal role models who must combine technical expertise with emotional intelligence and pedagogical fairness.
- Referees embody justice and the rule of law in sport; by enforcing rules calmly and consistently, they teach respect and self-discipline.

Clubs and community associations provide the social context where these interactions occur and where positive or negative examples are multiplied.

Effective value transmission depends on the coherence of behaviour among all actors — when messages from parents, coaches, and referees align, children internalise values naturally.

Barriers and Challenges.

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Several recurring obstacles emerged. The most frequently cited barrier was parental pressure and inappropriate sideline behaviour — insults toward referees or excessive focus on winning.

A second barrier concerns the shortage of volunteers and overextended coaches, who often manage multiple roles at once.

Participants also pointed to the influence of social media and professional sport models, which sometimes glorify conflict and aggression.

Finally, insufficient pedagogical training for coaches and referees, and the lack of protection for young officials, were mentioned as major structural weaknesses.

These issues reveal how fragile the educational dimension of sport can be when support systems are absent.

Resources and Good Practices.

Despite the difficulties, participants identified a number of positive practices already in place or easily achievable:

- Pre-season meetings and behavioural charters signed by parents, players, and coaches.
- Awareness campaigns such as “No Ref, No Game” highlighting the role of referees.
- Opportunities for young players to act as referees, fostering empathy and understanding of the rules.
- Recognition for volunteers and the celebration of fair-play behaviour.
- Peer-learning initiatives pairing experienced and new coaches or officials.

These examples show that small, well-targeted actions can substantially improve respect and cooperation in sport settings.

Proposals and Recommendations.

Building on these findings, participants formulated several recommendations:

- Introduce mandatory pedagogical and ethical training for coaches and referees.
- Establish shared codes of conduct within clubs, signed by all stakeholders.
- Develop educational tools (booklets, posters, videos) promoting respect, inclusion, and fair play.
- Strengthen protection mechanisms for young referees, including disciplinary measures against repeated verbal abuse.
- Encourage cross-sector collaboration between families, schools, and sports clubs to harmonise educational approaches.

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All groups concluded that sustainable value transmission in sport depends on collective commitment, continuous education, and the recognition of human values over performance metrics.

Training session for partners.

The following extracts illustrate the main themes identified across the nine French focus groups. Each quotation reflects the authentic voice of participants, transcribed verbatim and anonymised according to the official coding system.

Values Transmitted Through Sport.

- "In karate, we have a moral code with very clear values: courage, friendship, sincerity, honor, modesty, respect, and self-control." (01-C, Coach)
- "Sport teaches us to respect others, even when we disagree. On the field, we learn humility, solidarity, and teamwork." (04-F, Parent)
- "For me, judo helps me control my emotions. Even when I lose, I have to stay calm and bow to my opponent." (04-Y, Youth)
- "When you referee, you have to be honest with yourself first — that's what fair play really means." (02-R, Referee).

Actors Involved in Value Transmission.

- "The family is the first model. If parents shout at the referee, the child thinks it's normal." (03-C, Coach)
- "Coaches are like teachers — they guide us not just in sport but in how we behave." (05-Y, Youth)
- "When a referee stays calm even under pressure, everyone learns from that attitude." (01-R, Referee)
- "Clubs should remind everyone — parents, players, volunteers — that we are all responsible for the values we show." (02-M, Miscellaneous).

Barriers and Challenges.

- "Parents sometimes think they're helping, but their pressure ruins the atmosphere. Kids stop enjoying sport." (06-C, Coach)
- "Social media makes things worse. People see pros arguing with referees and think it's part of the game." (05-R, Referee)
- "There are too few volunteers. We do everything — training, admin, and even cleaning the gym." (02-C, Coach)
- "Some children face discrimination because of their skin colour — that's unacceptable in sport." (05-Y, Youth).

Resources and Good Practices.

- "Before every season we hold a meeting with parents. We explain our rules, and everyone signs a good-conduct charter." (05-C, Coach)

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- "Our club has a campaign called 'No Ref, No Game'. It really helps young players understand the importance of referees." (04-M, Miscellaneous)
- "Sometimes we let the kids referee small matches. Afterwards, they respect referees much more." (01-C, Coach)
- "When you're stuck on a move and your teammate helps you — that's what sport should be about." (05-Y, Youth).

Proposals and Recommendations.

- "We should train coaches not only in tactics but in communication and emotional management." (02-C, Coach)
- "If a coach repeatedly insults referees, he shouldn't be allowed to take part in competitions." (04-Y, Youth)
- "Let's reward fair-play behaviour during tournaments, not just the winners." (06-C, Coach)
- "More cooperation between schools, clubs and families — that's how we'll make values last." (03-F, Parent).

Conclusions.

The French national contribution to the MENTORS project was coordinated by the International Federation for Sports Officials (IFSO), which acted as the official partner for this Work Package.

As IFSO is a transnational organisation without direct operational structures in individual countries, it demonstrated once again its agility and adaptability by delegating the implementation of the focus groups to its French national member, the AFCAM (Association Française du Corps Arbitral Multisports).

Through this collaboration, IFSO ensured both methodological consistency and national ownership of the process, while maintaining the international perspective central to its mission.

Across the nine focus groups – involving coaches, referees, parents, young athletes and cross-sector participants – the French contribution provides a rich and coherent overview of how values are transmitted, challenged and reinforced through sport in everyday practice.

Sport was unanimously described as a powerful educational arena, where respect,

teamwork, humility, fairness and enjoyment are learned not through theory but through lived experience and example.

The discussions revealed a shared conviction that values in sport are co-constructed among all actors: families, coaches, referees, clubs and communities. However, several challenges persist — notably parental pressure, lack of pedagogical training, volunteer shortages, and the influence of social media and elite-sport behaviours.

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Young referees, in particular, were described as vulnerable and in need of stronger institutional protection.

Despite these difficulties, the focus groups also highlighted many positive grassroots practices:

- pre-season meetings and behavioural charters involving parents, coaches
- and players,
- campaigns such as “No Ref, No Game” promoting respect for officials,
- peer learning and mentoring between experienced and new coaches,
- and symbolic recognition of fair-play and volunteer commitment.

Participants proposed to strengthen these initiatives through mandatory pedagogical and ethical training, shared codes of conduct, and formal safeguarding mechanisms for young officials.

Such measures, they agreed, would not only improve sportsmanship but also strengthen the credibility and social role of sport as a vehicle for education and citizenship.

Ultimately, the French report reaffirms that value transmission in sport is a collective, intergenerational and experiential process. By enabling its national member, the AFCAM, to conduct this research on its behalf, IFSO once again demonstrated its capacity to act as a global facilitator and connector, ensuring that the voices of local actors contribute to a broader European understanding of ethics and integrity in sport.

This collaboration perfectly illustrates IFSO’s mission: linking local expertise to international policy and ensuring that the values of refereeing and fair play are recognised as fundamental pillars of sport’s educational function.

3.2.5. Cyprus.

This National Report has been prepared by the Center for Social Innovation (CSI) within the framework of the MENTORS Project – Task 2.3. It presents and analyzes the findings derived from the Focus Groups implemented and written contributions collected in Cyprus in October and November 2025.

In total, seven (7) Focus Groups (FGs) were conducted, five in person and two online, engaging 31 participants. An additional six (6) individuals who were unable to attend the FGs, contributed through written input, ensuring their perspectives were also represented. Altogether, 37 participants (18 females and 19 males) took part in the research.

Participants represented all main stakeholder categories defined by the MENTORS project: Families C caregivers, coaches, minors, referees, and mixed stakeholders, covering both collective (e.g., basketball, football, volleyball) and individual sports (e.g., tennis, track and field)

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The analysis revealed that sport is widely perceived as a meaningful setting for children's personal and social growth, fostering values such as fairness, respect, teamwork, perseverance, and responsibility. However, participants also highlighted gaps between the values adults aim to promote and those actually practiced, often due to overemphasis on competition and performance.

Coaches were identified as key agents in value education, but expressed a need for more training in communication and emotional management. Families play a decisive role in shaping children's attitudes, with positive encouragement enhancing motivation, while excessive pressure can lead to stress. Referees also act as role models for fairness and respect, though they often feel excluded from broader educational efforts.

Overall, the findings emphasize the need for stronger cooperation, training, and alignment among all actors involved in children's sports. Promoting a shared understanding of educational values and creating supportive environments can ensure that sport continues to serve as a positive and inclusive pathway for children's holistic development.

Methodology

Ethics and Permissions

Ethics committee approval was not sought for this activity, as CSI determined that formal approval was not mandatory for this small-scale, non-invasive research. Nevertheless, CSI strictly adheres to data protection regulations, including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union, to ensure the confidentiality, security, and appropriate use of all participants' personal data, in full compliance with CSI's Privacy Policy, and safeguard of the integrity of the research and promote public trust in scientific and ethical practices.

Participants

Participants were selected through CSI's existing contact network, as well as targeted outreach to sports academies and federations representing both collective and individual sports.

Potential participants were personally invited via email and/or telephone, and were provided in advance with all relevant information about the study. A detailed explanation of the objectives, the importance of their participation, and the procedures involved was shared to ensure clarity and transparency. This information enabled participants to make an informed decision regarding their involvement and to provide their informed consent, authorizing the processing of their personal data in accordance with GDPR.

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Participants were explicitly informed that they could withdraw their consent and participation at any time without any negative consequences and that the processing of the data would be anonymized. The research facilitator remained available to address any questions or concerns throughout the process.

All adult participants completed and signed informed consent forms. In the case of underage participants, their parents or legal guardians were contacted directly and signed separate consent forms authorizing their children's participation.

Despite extensive efforts to ensure equal representation across all groups, it proved quite difficult to collect feedback by arranging focus groups from referees. As a result, the number of participants providing input in this category was relatively low compared to the others. This challenge likely resulted from their limited availability and possible concerns regarding organizational restrictions on sharing information, even in an anonymous research context.

In total, the research involved 37 participants, balancing female and male participants of age range from 7 to 70 years old. More details can be found in the table below:

Table 14

Description of the participants

Focus Group	Profile	N	Gender Breakdown	Age Range	Date of Implementation	Format and duration of the FG
FG 1 C Written Input	Families (Collective)	6	5F, 1 M	35-45	October 17th	In-person, 25 minutes
FG 2	Families (Individual)	4	0F, 4M	40-70	November 5th	In-person, 20 minutes
FG 3 C Written Input	Coaches (Collective)	5	3F, 2M	28-45	November 3rd	Online, 90 minutes
FG 4	Coaches (Individual)	3	1F/ 2M	28-38	October 21st	In-person, 20 minutes
FG 5	Minors (Collective)	5	3F/ 2M	7-9	October 17th	In-person, 20 minutes
FG 6	Minors (Individual)	5	3F/ 2M	7-11	October 21st	In-person, 20 minutes

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FG 7	Miscellaneous (3 parents/ guardi ans of children aged 8–14 years C 2 coaches of collective sports (basketball) for children aged 6–12 years)	5	4F, 2 M	40-45	November 10th	Online, 80 minutes
Written Input	Referees (Collective)	4	0 F, 4 M	30-55	N/A	N/A

Logistics

The organization and implementation of the Focus Groups in Cyprus were designed to ensure inclusivity, accessibility, and representativeness across all stakeholder categories. Efforts were made to achieve gender balance, with an almost equal distribution of female (18) and male (19) participants, and to include individuals of diverse ages (7–70 years) and sporting backgrounds.

To facilitate participation and accommodate different schedules and preferences, a hybrid approach was adopted, combining in-person and online Focus Groups. Specifically, five (5) sessions were conducted face to face, while two (2) were conducted online via a secure digital platform (Microsoft Teams). This approach allowed for the inclusion of participants from different geographical areas of Cyprus, while maintaining flexibility and convenience. In cases where participants were unable to attend a scheduled session, the research team offered the option to submit written input by responding to the same set of questions used during the Focus Groups. This measure ensured that all willing contributors had the opportunity to share their experiences and perspectives, enhancing the diversity and richness of the data collected.

Each Focus Group session was moderated by a facilitator. Sessions were conducted in a neutral, and confidential environment, whether online or offline, to promote open discussion and mutual respect among participants.

All sessions were audio-recorded (with participants' consent) to ensure accurate transcription of the discussions. The transcripts were fully anonymized prior to analysis, and no personal or sensitive data was retained. This process ensured strict adherence to data protection regulations and the ethical standards of the MENTORS project.

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Data collection and Thematic Analysis

To analyze the discussions and written input of participants and draw conclusions, CSI applied Thematic Analysis, a qualitative method used to identify, analyze, and describe patterns or themes within the data.

The thematic analysis of the focus groups and written inputs conducted in Cyprus revealed a complex but coherent picture of how sports values are perceived, practiced and transmitted within children's sporting environments. The analysis was guided by three central thematic axes:

1. Perceived and practiced sport values (V).
2. Socializing agents and Value transmission (A).
3. Environmental conditions that foster or hinder the transmission of sport values (E).

Together, these themes illustrate how values such as respect, fairness, teamwork, perseverance, and self-improvement are both cultivated and challenged across the sporting ecosystem involving children, families, coaches, and referees.

Perceived and Practiced Sport Values (V)

Across all focus groups, participants consistently highlighted that sports serve as a vital educational and socializing context for children.

Promotion of positive values (V1)

Children, parents, and coaches emphasized that fairness, teamwork, respect, and effort were central lessons learned through sports.

Young athletes (ages 7–9) often described their experience in physical and emotional terms: sports *"help you get stronger," "make you happy," and "teach you to play fairly"*.

Parents viewed sports as a medium for developing discipline, social skills, and emotional regulation, while coaches perceived their role as transmitting not only technical competence but also *"how to win with respect"*.

One coach explained that their priority was to *"build self-confidence through discipline and empathy,"* while a parent emphasized that through sports, *"children learn to respect others, to share, and to accept defeat gracefully."*

These reflections align with the project's educational goal: sports as a structured environment for cultivating civic and moral values.

Absence of values and contradictions (V2 s V3)

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Despite widespread recognition of sport's educational potential, participants across groups acknowledged frequent gaps between declared and practiced values.

Children described unfair behaviors such as "*pushing*," "*tripping*," or "*throwing the ball on purpose to hurt someone*".

Parents echoed these observations, citing instances where "*competition becomes excessive*" and "*some coaches or parents focus only on results*".

Coaches themselves admitted that while they strive to model fairness and patience, "*pressure from families and clubs sometimes undermines value-oriented training*".

This dissonance between the ideal of sportsmanship and the reality of competitive environments underscores a recurrent challenge: the instrumentalization of sport performance over moral development.

Socializing agents and value transmission (A)

The role of coaches (A1)

Coaches emerged as primary mediators of value transmission, viewed by all groups as educators beyond sport technique. They foster values through behavior modeling, motivational dialogue, and corrective feedback. Several children mentioned their coach "*teaches us not to hit or kick others, to respect rules, and to be fair*", while coaches themselves described a "*mentor role*", combining pedagogical and emotional guidance.

However, they also highlighted a need for professional development in value education, as many lack formal training in communication with parents and children. As one coach noted, "*We were trained to teach skills, not to handle emotions or parental expectations"*.

The role of families (A2)

Families were recognized as pivotal but ambivalent agents. Parents' involvement can strengthen children's motivation (e.g. many children reported practicing with their fathers or siblings at home), yet excessive pressure or contradictory messages were noted as barriers.

As one parent explained, "*Sometimes we expect too much from them; we want them to perform, but forget they're still learning*".

Referees also observed that parental behavior in competitions significantly affects the atmosphere: respectful encouragement supports fair play, while aggressive reactions can erode children's confidence and trust in authority figures.

The role of referees (A3)

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Although their direct interaction with children is limited, referees recognized their important educational role within youth sports. Many described themselves as "*guardians of justice*," emphasizing the value of impartiality, calmness, and consistent decision-making. As one referee explained, "*Even small gestures—like explaining a rule calmly instead of shouting—can teach respect and fairness better than punishment*".

Some referees noted that in developmental categories, their responsibilities extend beyond simple rule enforcement. They see themselves as "*educators first and referees second*", using clear communication, positive reinforcement, and steady behaviour to help children understand fairness in practice.

At the same time, referees highlighted significant challenges that undermine their ability to promote sports values effectively. External pressures, such as aggressive reactions from parents or the strong performance focus of some coaches, often conflict with the educational atmosphere they try to create. Some expressed a need for greater recognition of their role and closer collaboration with coaches and families to ensure consistency in the messages delivered to young athletes.

The role of peers (A4)

Peers were perceived by minors as both supportive and competitive influences. Older or more skilled teammates often acted as informal mentors ("*a friend who is 12 years old teaches me tricks and how to dribble*") yet conflicts also arose when fairness was breached ("*some don't listen to the coach or push others*").

This peer dynamic highlights the social learning dimension of sports, where values are negotiated daily through interaction and imitation.

<u>Environmental conditions that influence value education (E)</u>

Facilitating practices (E1)

Across groups, structured routines, inclusive team dynamics, and clear communication, were identified as essential for cultivating positive values.

Coaches mentioned pre-game rituals and reflection moments that help reinforce respect and teamwork. Families praised clubs that "*celebrate effort, not just trophies*", and children associated "*fun and fairness*" with supportive environments.

Obstacle dynamics (E2)

Performance-oriented sports club cultures, limited coordination between adults, and the lack of pedagogical training for coaches and referees were consistently identified as major barriers to effective value transmission. Participants expressed

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concern that "*values are often assumed, not taught*", noting that adult role models frequently "*contradict each other in front of the children*", creating confusion about what behaviours are actually expected. The absence of formal spaces for collaboration among coaches, referees, and families was seen as a missed opportunity to align educational goals and ensure consistency.

Referees further emphasized structural challenges that undermine their efforts to promote values such as fairness and respect. These include insufficient training for all adults involved — coaches, parents, and referees — on constructive communication and child-centered approaches, as well as club environments that prioritize winning over development. They also pointed out inconsistent responses to inappropriate sideline behaviour, which sends unclear signals to children about acceptable conduct.

The thematic analysis shows that while all stakeholder groups in Cyprus recognise sport as a meaningful environment for teaching and learning values, the effectiveness of this process varies significantly. Children internalize values such as fairness, teamwork, and respect most successfully when the adults around them demonstrate coherent attitudes and behaviours. Conversely, when adults focus excessively on competition or provide mixed messages, the educational potential of sports becomes considerably weaker.

Key findings.

The analysis of all focus groups and written contributions in Cyprus reveals several main findings about how sports values are understood, promoted, and challenged in children's sporting environments.

Sports as a learning space for values: Across all focus groups and written contributions, participants consistently recognized sport as an important medium for teaching and experiencing core human values. Children described learning fairness, teamwork, and perseverance through play, emphasizing that these values become meaningful when lived in real situations, such as cooperating with teammates or respecting rules. Parents and coaches viewed sports as essential to developing discipline, patience, and self-control, reinforcing the idea that sport can shape both physical abilities and moral character.

Differences between declared and practiced values: A recurrent observation across all groups was the gap between the values adults say they promote and what children actually experience during sports activities. Although adults often emphasize fairness and respect, these principles can be undermined when competition and performance take center stage. Parents and coaches noted that excessive focus on results can discourage cooperation, while referees expressed concern that negative adult behaviors — such as shouting or showing disrespect

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during matches — confuse children and diminish the credibility of positive messages. This inconsistency reveals the need for a more unified and authentic approach to value transmisión.

The central role of coaches: Coaches emerged as the primary link between educational goals and children's lived experiences in sports. Many coaches expressed pride in mentoring young athletes and guiding them toward discipline, teamwork, and resilience. However, they also acknowledged a lack of structured support and training in managing emotional and social aspects of children's development. Most coaching education remains focused on technical or tactical performance, leaving little space for pedagogical and communication skills. Strengthening coaches' capacity in these areas would enhance their ability to foster value-based learning environments.

Lack of coordination among key social actors: Referees' underscored that coaches, families, and referees often operate without a shared pedagogical approach. Each group tends to follow its own priorities, which may not always align — for example, coaches focusing on performance, parents seeking more playing time for their children, and referees prioritising emotional safety and fairness. This limited coordination results in mixed messages for children and reduces the effectiveness of value-based education within sports settings.

The influence of families: Families were identified as both a source of support and, at times, tension within the sports environment. Parents who encourage effort, enjoyment, and teamwork contribute positively to children's emotional growth and motivation. On the other hand, when parental involvement becomes too demanding or focused on winning, it generates stress and pressure for children. Many young participants indicated that they enjoy sports more when adults prioritize fun and fairness over competition. This highlights the importance of guiding families on how to maintain a constructive balance between support and expectations.

Referees as role models of fairness: Referees play a distinct yet crucial role in promoting values such as justice, respect, and self-control. Although their direct contact with children is limited compared to that of coaches or parents, their conduct during matches strongly influences how children understand fairness. Referees who remain calm and impartial help create a sense of order and safety, while inconsistent decisions or harsh reactions can undermine this. Many referees expressed a desire for stronger collaboration with coaches and families to ensure coherent messages are delivered across all adult figures in children's sports.

Environmental and structural influences: The atmosphere and organizational culture of sports clubs significantly affect how values are transmitted. Inclusive and process-oriented environments, where enjoyment and personal growth are prioritized, were associated with more positive experiences and stronger value learning. In contrast, settings that reward only success and competition often lead

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to frustration and mixed messages. Participants highlighted that better communication and cooperation among the adults involved — families, coaches, referees, and administrators — are essential to creating consistent, supportive, and value-rich sporting environments.

Conclussions and recommendations

The findings from Cyprus confirm that children's sport can serve as a powerful arena for teaching social and moral values, provided that all adults involved share a clear and common understanding of their educational roles. When coaches, families, and referees collaborate and communicate effectively, children experience sport as a safe and inspiring environment where they can grow both as athletes and as individuals.

Despite the evident commitment of all stakeholder groups, the transmission of values remains inconsistent. Competitive pressures, contradictory adult behaviour, and limited pedagogical training often weaken the educational potential of sport. Coaches frequently feel unsupported in managing emotional or behavioural challenges, referees report feeling isolated from the broader educational process, and families sometimes struggle to balance encouragement with realistic expectations. These challenges highlight the need for a more coordinated and intentional approach to value education in children's sports.

The importance of developing a shared framework that aligns expectations and practices across all key actors is commonly mentioned. Referees stressed that meaningful improvements require not only technical knowledge but also common guidelines on communication, behaviour management, and child-centred pedagogy. They also emphasized that protecting the joy of the game is essential: when children feel safe, respected, and happy, positive values emerge naturally. For this reason, keeping enjoyment at the centre of youth sport should be a guiding principle for all adults involved.

To achieve these goals, capacity building and collaboration must become central priorities. Coaches and referees would benefit from structured training on child communication, emotional regulation, and the integration of value education into regular practice. Families should be offered guidance on supportive and non-pressuring involvement. Creating regular opportunities for dialogue between coaches, referees, and parents would help align expectations, reduce misunderstandings, and ensure coherent messages regarding fairness, respect, and teamwork.

At the institutional level, sports clubs and organizations are encouraged to promote cultures that reward effort, cooperation, and respectful behaviour rather than focusing solely on performance outcomes. Simple practices, such as brief post-game reflections or discussions on fair play, can have long-lasting educational

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impact. Referees should be recognized as educators and equipped with tools that enable constructive interactions with young athletes.

The national and European context of the MENTORS Project provides a valuable platform for linking local initiatives with broader educational objectives. Policymakers and sports authorities in Cyprus could support this direction by embedding value education into sports development programmes and fostering partnerships among clubs, schools, and families.

Overall, the results of this research highlight the strong need to promote a more inclusive, respectful, and educational sports culture in Cyprus. By fostering cooperation, continuous training, and shared responsibility among all key actors, sport can continue to serve as a meaningful pathway for children's physical, emotional, and moral growth.

3.2.6. Germany.

This National Report has been prepared by NGO Nest Berlin within the framework of the MENTORS Project – Task 2.3. It presents and analyzes findings derived from the Focus Groups and written contributions collected in Germany in November 2025.

Three Focus Groups were conducted online on 21st November 2025, involving 1 minor, 6 coaches of collective and individual sports, and 2 parents. Additional written input was collected from minors who could not attend live. Altogether, 11 participants contributed to the research.

Participants represented both collective sports (e.g. ballet dancing, football) and individual sports (e.g. tennis, circus training, swimming), offering a diverse perspective on value transmission in children's sport.

Across groups, sport was widely perceived as a constructive space for social, emotional and moral development. Children emphasized respect, fairness, patience, teamwork, and the pleasure of "getting stronger." Parents described sport as essential for discipline, emotional regulation and coping with defeat. Coaches stressed that transmitting values such as empathy, discipline, self-confidence and fair play is integral to their role, though often challenged by performance expectations or inconsistent adult behavior.

Participants highlighted gaps between intended and practiced values: competition, pressure, communication issues and uneven coaching preparation sometimes hinder the educational potential of sport. Parents also noted that overly demanding or inadequately trained coaches can unintentionally undermine teamwork, patience and mutual respect.

The minor involved through written input valued teamwork and friend-making, while identifying competition and lack of empathy as areas needing improvement.

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Overall, findings emphasize the need for stronger cooperation among parents, coaches and schools, supported by better communication, emotional awareness and child-centered pedagogy. Creating consistent and supportive environments is essential for ensuring that sport in Germany continues to foster children's holistic development.

Methodology

Ethics and permissions

No formal ethics committee approval was required for this small-scale, non-invasive research activity. NGO Nest Berlin ensured full compliance with European data protection regulations.

All participants received detailed information about the aims and procedures of the study, were informed of their rights including withdrawal at any time. Participants were also provided with informed consent for the processing of anonymized data.

For minors, separate consent forms were signed by their parents or legal guardians. All recordings and transcripts were anonymized prior to analysis. No sensitive personal data was stored.

Participants

Participants were recruited through NGO Nest Berlin's established network, as well as direct outreach to sports academies and local clubs in Germany. Stakeholders invited included families and coaches from both collective and individual sports.

All participants were contacted individually by email or telephone and received clear explanations about the study before providing consent. They were informed of the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality of all information shared. To ensure inclusivity, minors and individuals who could not attend the FG online meeting provided written responses. Despite extensive efforts to ensure equal representation across all groups, it proved quite difficult to collect feedback by arranging focus groups from referees.

In total, the research involved 11 participants of age range from 7 to 50 years old (Table 15).

Table 15

Description of the participants.

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Focus Group	Profile	N	Gender Breakdown	Age Range	Date of the implementation of the FG	Format and duration of the FG
FG 1 Written Input	Minors	1	2F	13	November 19th	Online
FG 2 Written Input	Parents	1	1 M	40-45	November 22nd	Online
FG 3	Miscellaneous (parents of children aged 6–13 years old and coach of collective (football) and individual sports (tennis) for children aged 6–12 years).	7	7 M	30-55	November 21st	Online, 90 minutes

Logistics

The organization and implementation of the Focus Groups in Germany were designed to ensure inclusivity, accessibility, and representativeness across all stakeholder categories and to include individuals of diverse ages and sporting backgrounds. However, there were difficulties to achieve gender balance, with mostly male participants.

Focus Groups were held online via Google Meet to ensure accessibility and flexibility for participants across different regions of Germany. Written input was offered as an alternative for those unable to attend live sessions, ensuring that all perspectives were represented. The Focus Group session was moderated by a facilitator.

The session took place in a neutral and confidential environment to promote open discussion. With consent, it was audio-recorded and later transcribed. All transcripts were fully anonymized and processed exclusively for research purposes in accordance with GDPR.

Data collection and thematic analysis

To analyze the discussions and written input of participants and draw conclusions, NGO Nest Berlin transcribed the Focus Group recordings using Google Pinpoint. The transcripts were then analyzed to identify cross-cutting themes. Finally, a general summary was produced, also including relevant quotes that emerged during the Focus Groups.

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The research team conducted a thematic analysis, identifying patterns and themes across all focus groups in alignment with the MENTORS analytical framework:

- Perceived and practiced sport values (V)
- Socializing agents and value transmission (A)
- Environmental conditions influencing value education (E)

This approach allowed for a detailed understanding of value learning in children's sports in Germany and how these values are reinforced or challenged by different stakeholders.

Perceived and Practiced Sport Values (V)

Across all focus groups, participants consistently highlighted that sports serve as a vital educational and socializing context for children.

Promotion of positive values (V1)

Participants consistently affirmed that sport provides essential learning opportunities for values such as teamwork, respect and empathy of children towards their teammates. They also agreed that sport was a constructive channel for developing personal qualities such as coordination, self-confidence, patience and resilience towards new challenges. Sport activities were generally highlighted during the session as a positive way to channel energy, educate in non-formal ways and bring together communities.

Other good values were related to giving children a way to convey their energy, learn about discipline and sportsmanship. One coach highlighted that sport for him was "*my first tool to understand citizenship, taking care of myself and resilience*".

Minors (child aged 13) described sport as a way to "*try her best*", "*learn new things*" and "*make new friends*". Her written input was particularly focused on the social aspects of sports -ballet dancing in her case- such as cooperation, following the rules and being helpful with each other.

Parents perceived sport as a pathway to developing discipline, empathy, social competence and the ability to cope with frustration or failure. Other positive values associated with sports were "*discipline*", "*cooperation*" and "*self-awareness*" for one of the parents interviewed.

On the other hand, coaches and parents also agreed in describing sport as a way to develop a "*growth mindset*" which is linked to the ability to not stop at one's limitation but trying harder to get through them. Parents highlighted the importance of discipline, cooperation and self-awareness.

One parent also described the coach figure as an essential role model for children, as the coach "*objectively address weaknesses and limitations*" as an external actor

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to the family. However, coaches were also criticized for being "*severe*" or "*strict*" when there was no need for it or it was not useful for learning. Overall, parents thought that communication between families and trainers should be improved in order to promote positive values in children. Moreover, more systemic resources were requested in order to make sport activities financially sustainable.

Coaches highlighted value-based learning as integral to their work. One explained that their goal is to "*establish a human connection with the* children" while another coach emphasized the importance of sport as a vector to teaching values to children. In general, coaches believe sports have also an impact on children's opportunities to understand their bodies, communicate with each other and have a connection with nature. Managing stress and failure was identified as a key competence that sports help children develop. Alongside competition, playfulness, enjoyment and commitment were considered central elements of practice.

These reflections align with the project's aim of understanding sport as a structured environment for cultivating civic and moral values.

Absence of values and contradictions (V2 s V3)

Despite widespread recognition of sport's educational potential, participants across groups acknowledged frequent gaps between declared and practiced values. Some contradictions regarded the roles and responsibilities of the adult agents involved in educating children -both families and coaches- while others were mostly related to the ways these agents interact with each other. These discrepancies also stemmed from conflicting expectations and socio-economic disparities (e.g., the accessibility of sports like tennis).

Children described unfair behaviors such as rule-breaking, rudeness and lack of mutual help.

Parents involved in the interview admitted that is often hard know how to balance "support" and "encouragement". One parent also expressed the need for tips or courses on how to best support their child during practice, in order not to put too much pressure on them. The themes of behaving under pressure, educating parents and ability to manage competition emerged in the discussion with coaches as well. Parents also noted the need for a cultural shift toward more supportive, less hierarchical coaching approaches.

Coaches pointed out that excessive pressure—whether self-imposed or driven by parents—can harm children, especially in competitive individual sports. Parents' presence during training, inconsistent behaviors or incorrect encouragement was seen as potentially distracting and detrimental to performance.

This gap between the good values transmitted during practice and the reality of managing the competition is perceived as "too big" by one of the coaches. A

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recurrent challenge is balancing between the development of good moral qualities and the hardship of sport performance.

Moreover, sports such as football are identified as places where adults show their "worst behavior", actually imparting children's bad examples by shouting at referees and children as well. One coach identified the necessity to better educate the parents about the actual objective of sports, which "is not about scoring the most goals, but reinforcing good behaviors", such as shaking hands after the game and not screaming or pretending to be kicked.

Socializing agents and value transmission (A)

The role of coaches (A1)

Coaches were unanimously identified as the main value transmitters in sports, but parents and other family figures are also identified as important when it comes to influencing children's behaviors. The minor involved noted that coaches help children "*focus on goals… support us and reward us when we do things well.*"

According to coaches themselves, they teach children to "*to become resilient in life and to handle misunderstandings and things not going your way*". One participant noted that a coach can "*put you on a real track of life*", meaning that he is an essential figure in children's development.

However, this role seems to be demanding significant responsibility. Parents acknowledged coaches' ability to provide objective guidance but highlighted the need for stronger communication.

Coaches and parents noted that the lack of communication between adult figures involved in teaching children positive values through sport can hinder their ability to effectively do so. The lack of correct educational training was noted by parents and related to dysfunctional training of children, described as "*unintentionally promoting the wrong attitudes*". Their unawareness regarding the "*educational methods suited for children*" was considered detrimental to the correct development of values.

The role of families (A2)

Families were recognized as highly influential factors in children's development. At the same time, their role is perceived as ambivalent. In fact, parents are responsible for motivating children as well as influencing them with bad behaviors -such as "*screaming*"- or "putting too much pressure on them". Parents themselves acknowledged this tension and openly described their struggle to balance ambition

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with understanding or changing coaches when receiving critical feedback. As one parent explained, "My difficulty is finding the right balance between pushing to do more and comforting my children". This conflict was a recurring theme during the conversation, which may be directly linked to the high levels of competition required by individual sports such as tennis.

The need for being "*educated on how to be supportive*" was expressed during the conversation as well. One parent noted that it is "*hard*" to be "*supportive*" and "*a good sport coach*" and he expressed the necessity of "*courses or tips to parents on how to be supportive*". Overinvolved behaviors, also referred to as "*helicopter-parenting*" as one of the coaches who was interviewed noted, often distort learning for children. Examples offered of these bad teachings were parents who live "*their football dreams through children*" and "*switch coach when they are criticized*". Also parental sideline behavior was a recurring concern, particularly in football: "Football has the worst parental behavior… shouting at referees and even other children."

The role of referees (A3)

Although their direct interaction with children is limited, coaches themselves recognized the important educational role referees have within youth sport. One football coach described the practice of letting children be their own referees to teach them to behave on the field. This was helpful because it teaches them responsibility, honesty and general moral qualities without other adults getting involved. It was not possible to collect answers from referee themselves.

The role of peers (A4)

Peers were perceived as highly influential by the participating minor. She reported that teammates could either contribute positively or negatively, depending on their empathy and behavior. Mutual support was described as essential during competitions, highlighting the importance of "*helping each other*" in order to win.

<u>Environmental conditions that influence value education (E)</u>

Facilitating practices (E1)

Across groups, clear communication was identified as one of the main resources that can help children develop good values and are associated with positive attitudes. However, it was also noted by three different participants (one parent and two coaches) that communication needs to be better implemented both in schools, sports clubs and among families. A facilitating practice which was noted during the conversation was picking out the most well-behaved player every week, to effectively promote good behavior among children and reward their effort to show sportsmanship on the field which was unrelated to their results in the match itself.

Obstacle dynamics (E2)

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Performance-oriented sports club cultures, limited coordination between adults, meaning coaches and families, and the insufficient coordination among the different stakeholders were individuated as the most hindering dynamics to develop healthy and positive values. As two different coaches noted, the lack of frequent sports practice in school can also prevent children from developing a routine associated with physical practice. Also parents noted that regular practice reinforces discipline, patience and helps children to regulate frustration.

Participants emphasized the need to integrate sports into daily school routines, ensure access to facilities and support children from underserved backgrounds.

Moreover, the rise of digital communication and the use of cellphones also during sports practice were identified (both with body language and spoken confirmation) as three different coaches and one parent as another factor that can obstacle children in developing discipline, empathize with each other and improve their relational skills. The major barriers that were identified as reducing children's ability to internalize values effectively were mainly associated with a lack of structured support systems for both families and sports professionals.

Other than pedagogical training for coaches and parents to better support children, some of the participants also noted that the performance-oriented cultures related to sports such as tennis and the economic barriers within these elite sports hinder the opportunities of children and adults alike.

Moreover, digital habits such as "scrolling" are identifies as the reason why many children cannot commit to practice and demonstrate a reduced tolerance for effort, required by sports such as tennis.

Key findings

All stakeholders recognize sport as more than just physical activity; it is a space where children can develop crucial values such as perseverance, fairness, empathy, teamwork and discipline. Coaches and parents emphasized that sports teach children how to navigate challenges, manage frustration and understand the connection between effort and progress. One coach noted that without a focus on growth, children risk wasting their potential, highlighting the importance of consistent practice and a so-called "*growth mindset*".

Parents and coaches play a pivotal role in shaping how children internalize these values. The presence and behavior of parents during training can either support or hinder development, as children often mirror adult behavior. Coaches stressed the importance of having a "single leader" during training to avoid unnecessary stress. In general, coaches were described as essential figures, literal "role models", who can provide objective feedback and encouragement beyond what parents can offer.

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Competition introduces both opportunities and challenges. While it can motivate children, it can also create pressure that conflicts with the development of values such as fair play and personal growth. Participants discussed strategies to reinforce values, such as allowing children to referee themselves or recognizing fair play, which help children develop autonomy and ethical behavior. Furthermore, the social and cultural context of sports significantly shapes children's experiences. Differences in sports culture, such as football versus tennis, demonstrate how organizational structures and parental attitudes influence children's value formation.

Accessibility and infrastructure emerged as significant barriers. Limited access to facilities, financial constraints and insufficient school sports programs restricts opportunities for children to practice and internalize values.

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of integrating sports into daily school routines and ensuring access to equipped sporting facilities and proper nutrition. According to the participants, children from underserved social backgrounds face compounded challenges, underlining the need for systemic support.

The broader social environment, including schools, clubs and families' example also contribute to value formation. Coordinated efforts between these actors can reinforce positive behaviors and ensure consistency across different contexts. Developing values requires clear communication, consistency and a process-oriented approach. What was mainly highlighted during the conversation was the opportunity for children to learn how to experience success, understand failure and build resilience through sports – essential qualities that will help children also navigate adult life.

Modern social trends, such as short attention spans influenced by social media, make guided support from adults even more critical, as both coaches and parents noted.

All participants highlighted the necessity for a better integrated educational system involving coaches, parents and teachers in order to successfully transmit and/or reinforce positive values and attitudes in children.

General Conclusions

Findings from Germany confirm that sport is a powerful environment for developing both personal and social values in children—ranging from resilience and self-confidence to empathy and teamwork. However, the transmission of these values is inconsistent. Coaches feel constrained by parental overinvolvement or unclear expectations, while parents often feel unprepared to support their children without

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adding pressure. Broader structural factors—limited access to facilities, reduced school-based sport and the influence of digital habits—further complicate value development.

Adults repeatedly expressed the need for better communication and clearer alignment of expectations. Consistency across home, school and club environments appears essential for reinforcing values meaningfully.

Conclusions and recommendations

Stakeholders in Germany agree that sports are a multifaceted tool for children's development, not merely a physical activity but a platform where values such as perseverance, empathy, discipline, and teamwork can be nurtured.

Across all perspectives, there is a clear consensus that these values are best developed in environments that combine structured guidance with opportunities for autonomy. The balance between encouragement, constructive feedback and leaving them the freedom to make decisions is essential for children to internalize positive values effectively. One respondent's reflections highlight the need for a cultural shift in youth sport: moving away from hierarchical models and toward inclusive, reflective, child-centered environments.

The findings also highlight significant barriers to the consistent promotion of sports values. Parental pressure, lack of access to quality facilities, inconsistent infrastructure in schools and clubs and broader social inequalities can all limit children's ability to benefit fully from sports. Furthermore, modern challenges such as reduced attention spans influenced by social media, and the overemphasis on immediate results, make it increasingly important to cultivate a growth mindset, patience, and persistence among young athletes.

Parents should be educated on their critical role in modeling behavior, supporting autonomy and avoiding excessive pressure during both training and competition. As well as coaches, who should receive a more in-depth child-centered training.

Fostering collaboration and on-going communication between families, schools, clubs and communities is essential to create an environment where values learned in sports are consistently reinforced, allowing children to develop holistically as athletes and as individuals.

Finally, stakeholders should ensure that sports programs are accessible to children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, providing necessary resources such as facilities, equipment, coaching, and nutritional support.

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3.2.7. Portugal.

In Portugal we had only 5 focus groups on team sports: Coaches, Parents, Children, Referees and Mixed Group. The Total number of participants on our focus groups was 21 persons.

Summary of key themes and findings in our country: on the Portuguese focus groups, we "explore" how different stakeholders in youth sports: coaches, referees, parents, and children perceive the role of values, social agents, and the sporting environment in children's development.

The participants widely agree that team sports promote key social and personal values. Coaches emphasise respect, responsibility, teamwork, and fair play, noting that sports help prepare young people for life. Referees observe significant improvement in children's behaviour and respect over recent years, crediting clubs, coaches, and families. Parents highlight companionship, team spirit, and learning to cope with winning and losing. Children themselves identify values such as competitiveness, self-esteem, and team spirit. Examples of positive values in action include clubs showing fair play by helping opponents, while negative examples involve inappropriate parental behaviour at matches.

The coaches and parents are seen as the most influential agents in children's sporting experiences. Coaches note that schools do not yet fulfil their potential role and that some families struggle to manage routines. Referees report issues such as overly competitive coaches and dissatisfied parents withdrawing children from clubs. Children clearly identify parents and coaches as their main sources of support.

A positive environment is linked to coaches serving as role models and consistently reinforcing values. Parents believe sports help children develop responsibility and time management. Clubs implement rules to model appropriate behaviour, such as prohibiting smoking in front of players. Challenges remain in correcting poor adult behaviour, particularly from some parents. To improve value transmission, coaches request greater professionalisation, better pay, and clearer internal guidelines. Parents suggest resources such as brochures, apps, and educational workshops. Referees and parents advocate for compulsory training sessions on ethics and fair play for adults. Despite clear progress in coaching quality, club leadership, and parental knowledge, participants agree that there is still room for improvement, especially regarding adult behaviour and structural support.

Methodology

Ethics and permissions

We don't have an ethics committee approval because we don't have it in our Regional Football Association, all the people involved on the focus groups are staff of clubs that are members of our association, parents of players of our association,

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referees of the association form football, futsal and beach soccer or players from our local clubs. The board of directors of Bragança FA adopt the decision from the ethics committee of the project coordinator institution.

Participants

Table 16

Participants of Focus Groups in Portugal

Focus Group	Profile	No. Participants	Gender Breakd own	Notes
FG1	Children (Team)	4	2F / 2M	Collective sports
FG5	Coaches (Team)	6	1F / 5M	Collective sports
FG4	Referees (Team)	4	0F / 4M	Collective sports
FG3	Famili/Parents (Team)	3	0F / 3M	Collective sports
FG2	Mixed (Team)	4	1F / 3M*	Collective sports
*one of them a children				

Logistics

The location was online, because after many phones call, we realize that was impossible for us to have all people needed at the same time in our headquarters. That's why we decide to do the focus groups online.

The duration was around 60 minutes each session, some of them where a bit longer. The focus group was recorded in zoon calls with video.

We have support of the staff of the Bragança FA on the organization, but the notes have been taken by the moderator.

Our transcription was made manually; we did not have any technologic tool or device except listening the recorded focus group on zoom and then translate the ideas of each one of the participants to the document in word.

Data collection and Thematic Analysis

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Values present in sports practice

The coaches agree in most of the values present in sports, the coach T4 said that "*Fundamentally I believe that sports promote social dynamics like the group dynamics, know how to respect others, not only colleagues, but also all the people involved in sports, there's also a part related with the responsibility on the game tasks. I believe that it's easier for us coaching staff to pass them these values, rules and dynamics than for other people… because they are in sports because they like it*".

The referees agreed that we had a great evolution on the last years in terms of values, the referee R2 said "*I notice that we had a great evolution in terms of values in football since the day that I start to refereeing, I think this credit goes to the clubs and coaches on our region but also to the parents at home. Kids have much more respect today, with their colleagues, the referees, the coaches and the opponents…there was a big evolution I think all of them are doing a good job*".

The parents also recognise that there are important values on sports, the parent F3 said "*I think one of the most important things it's the companion and the group spirit that they get from being involve in these activities, deal with winning and losing it's also very important because can bring some life lessons for them*".

The children show they understand what sport values are and one of them, the C3, said "*I think I learn to be more competitive, have a team spirit and have better self-esteem" when she gets involved in sports*". The coach from the mixed group, M3, also said: "*the values that I think the players get are fundamentally at human level and social level, I think sport help them to get ready for life…because we know that at our level of work, we will contribute more to produce better men and women for tomorrow society than professional football players. Respect and Fair-Play are to core values for us at our club but also friendship and team spirit are very important*".

Related with the values in action, all people involved in the focus groups provide us some good stories, the coach M3 from the mixed focus group provide us with a nice situation related with values in sports: "*last season we have a match at home, but the opponent team did not bring the official uniform to play, we borrow them the alternative uniform from our club and this way they were able to dispute the match against us. We could win easily without playing, but for us to have a chance to play was more important than the result of the match. I think this is a good way of showing Fair-Play*".

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There are also stories of negative situations like the one from the coach T3: "*At club level last season I have a few situations with parents that don't know how to behave in the stands and the police need to make some interventions. This kind of situation in youth football shocks me*".

Social agents and their role

The majority of the participants focus their intervention on the roles of coaches and parents. For example, the coach T4 said: "*The question here it's if they have a role or if they should have a role, the school for example should have a role but I think they do not have it yet, the sport at school it's very important but in the end not all kids get involved on it. Parents have an important role, for example, sometimes they tell me that the kids can go training because they need to study but during the week sometimes this could be managed in a better way by families but it's not. The clubs today have many tools, some of them came directly from the federation with the certification process but we don't know if they are very effective or not in our context, in some cases parents and kids have bad behaviour in one club and after they move to other like nothing happened*".

The referee M4 on the mixed group said "*I notice that some coaches are too competitive and they don't give minutes to all players in the same way, some parents don't like this, and they take the kids away from the football clubs. We have some pedagogical orientations, but we continue to have some problems*".

The children on the focus group clearly identify the role of the coach and the parents as the most important on their support when they are involved in sports.

Facilitating or hindering environments

On the question related with the routines or practices in everyday sport that you consider to be particularly conducive to the development of values in children, the coach T4 said: "*leadership by example, the coach as role model and never exclude the sport values from the everyday practice. This routine will help and because kids are in sport because they want to be, they will get this way of thinking more easily*". The parent F2 said: "*I think it's very important to be in sports to learn how to manage time, how to be more responsible, this help at home and at school. I don't agree with some parents that tell the kids not to go to the training because they need to study to some test at school, kids need to be responsible and manage their things at home and at school*". The coach M3 said "*we have a rule at our club, if and adult that is part of our staff smokes he can't smoke in front of the players…if they are dressed in our uniforms or kits they can't smoke. Even the bus driver must go and smoke in other place…far away from the kids*".

On the question related with the dynamics or structures in the sporting environment the coach T4 said that "*the kids don't make it complicated, but adults do it*" and the

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parent F2 said "*we are going in the right direction anyway we need to correct some things particularly the parents' behaviour*".

When we ask the participant about the resources or support that they think would be useful to improve their ability to convey positive values in their role the coach T1 said "*for me what I think it's important to make our work more effective it's the professionalization of the youth coaches, because if they work full-time as coaches, they will be able to make a much better job on this and other sport topics. Better payment, more time to work, more stability at professional level…most of our youth and grassroots coaches work as volunteers or in part-time*". The coach T3 said "*we need Internal Guidelines and Internal Regulation inside of the clubs*". The parent M1 said "*I think it will be useful to have some resources like brochures, power points, apps, etc… If the football association can promote some workshops for parents, it will be very well accepted in my opinion*".

When questioned about the changes they think would be necessary in the context to better promote values in children's and youth sport the coach M3 said "*I notice that we get better, we have better coaches today with more training than ever, we have also better presidents with younger ages, with more academic background and with other vision on sports. Even the parents of today they have other knowledge that the parents from 20 years ago, even the training it's different today…in general we had a great qualitative jump. But anyway, we have a long road ahead to improve. The referee M4 said "i think we can improve the behaviour of parents with more training on these topics. We need to have campaigns for the parents."* The parent The F2 said "*I think in the beginning of the season all clubs could have sessions with the parents to explain how they are going to work and what they expect in terms of behaviour from the adults". The referee R2 said "we are doing the things in the right way, but I think we could get better if it will be mandatory for parents to participate in trainings on ethics in sport, fair-paly workshops etc". The coach said that "I think we need more punishment for the parents*".

Conclussions

We can conclude that youth sports play a significant role in promoting essential social and personal values such as respect, responsibility, teamwork, and fair play. Coaches, referees, parents, and children all recognise that sports help prepare young people for life by fostering positive behaviours and social skills. While a lot of progress has been made and that is reflected in better child behaviour, more qualified coaches, and improved organisational structures, there remain challenges, particularly related to inconsistent adult behaviour and the need for stronger value-based guidance within clubs. Both positive examples of fair play and negative incidents involving parents highlight the crucial influence adults have on the sporting environment.

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To strengthen the transmission of sporting values, stakeholders emphasise the need for more professionalised coaching, clearer internal regulations, and structured educational resources for parents. Mandatory workshops on ethics, fair play, and expected behaviour are seen as important steps forward. Overall, the sporting community is moving in the right direction, but continued investment in adult education, support systems, and consistent role modelling is essential to ensure that youth sport fully achieves its potential as a space for character development and positive socialisation.

3.2.4. Croacia.

This National Report has been prepared by the Croatian Volleyball Federation (CVF) within the framework of the MENTORS Project – Task 2.3. It presents and analyses the findings derived from focus groups and written contributions collected in Croatia in October and November 2025.

Four focus groups were organised with key stakeholders who interact with children in the context of sport: children themselves, their families and caregivers, coaches, and referees. In total, 22 participants took part in the research: 8 children (6–12 years old), 5 family members, 4 referees and 5 coaches, all involved in collective sports – predominantly volleyball. The focus groups were carried out in a combination of in-person and online formats, depending on the profile and availability of the participants.

Across all groups, sport was described as a powerful arena for children's personal, social and moral development. Children emphasised the importance of giving their best, supporting teammates, playing fair and managing emotions such as anger or frustration during matches. Parents highlighted discipline, time management, socialisation and learning to cope with both victories and defeats as central outcomes of sport participation. Coaches and referees pointed to teamwork, responsibility, respect, perseverance and a healthy lifestyle as core values embedded in sports practice.

At the same time, all stakeholders recognised tensions between the values that are promoted in theory and the behaviours that are sometimes observed in practice. Under competitive pressure, moments of blaming, exclusion, disrespectful attitudes towards referees or unequal opportunities within the team can appear. Parents and coaches noted that an excessive focus on results – sometimes reinforced by club structures or financial pressures – can hinder the development of fair play, inclusion and long-term motivation. Children also pointed out experiences of being belittled, laughed at for mistakes or left out of play.

The analysis of the Croatian data, structured around three key dimensions – sport values (V), social agents and value transmission (A), and environmental conditions

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(E) – shows that values are most successfully transmitted when adults provide coherent messages, model positive behaviour and create supportive, inclusive team environments. Conversely, when coaches, parents and referees send mixed signals or prioritise winning over learning, the educational potential of sport is significantly reduced.

Key findings underline the central educational role of coaches as everyday mentors, the decisive yet ambivalent influence of families, and the often under-recognised educational contribution of referees. Participants from all groups expressed a desire for more systematic education for coaches and parents on communication with children, emotional regulation and child-centred pedagogy, as well as better coordination between clubs, schools and families. The report concludes with recommendations aimed at strengthening an integrated, value-based culture in Croatian youth sport, where volleyball and other collective sports can contribute not only to physical fitness but also to the holistic development of children.

Methodology

Ethics and Permissions

The on-field research carried out by the Croatian Volleyball Federation (CVF) for the MENTORS project was small-scale and non-invasive. No biomedical or experimental procedures were involved; instead, the research relied on focus group discussions about experiences and perceptions related to sport and values. For this reason, and following internal procedures, it was not considered necessary to submit the study for formal review by a national Ethics Committee.

Nevertheless, CVF strictly adhered to ethical standards and to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union. All participants – or, in the case of minors, their parents or legal guardians – received an information sheet explaining the aim of the study, the type of questions that would be asked, the voluntary character of participation and the way in which data would be processed. They were informed of their right to refuse to answer any question, to withdraw from the focus group at any time and to request the deletion of their data.

Informed consent was givven by adults and by parents/legal guardians of minors before the focus groups took place. Participants were explicitly told that the discussions would be audio-recorded solely for research purposes, that recordings would be transcribed and then deleted, and that no names or other directly identifying information would appear in transcripts or reports. Pseudonyms were used during transcription and analysis to ensure confidentiality.

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Participants.

Participants were recruited through the existing network of the Croatian Volleyball Federation, which includes primarely clubs. The sampling strategy aimed to gather a range of perspectives from all four stakeholder categories defined within the MENTORS project: children (minors), families/caregivers, coaches and referees. Only individuals actively involved in collective sports – mostly volleyball – with regular contact with children aged 6–12 were invited.

Potential participants were contacted personally via telephone or direct communication. They received brief information about the project and an invitation to join a group discussion on how sport contributes to children's value development. In the case of underage participants, parents or legal guardians were first contacted and asked to provide consent for their child's participation.

In total, 22 persons took part in four focus groups:

- 8 children (5 girls and 3 boys), aged between 6 and 12 years, all actively playing volleyball in club settings.
- 5 family members (parents, aunts and cousins; 4 woman, 1 man) of children involved in sport, aged approximately 20–50 years.
- 5 coaches (2 women and 3 men) with experience in coaching youth volleyball, between 28 and 55 years of age.
- 4 referees (2 women and 2 men), aged 20–55, who regularly officiate matches that involve children.

While the size of each group remained relatively small, the combination of profiles provided a rich, multi-actor picture of how sporting values are perceived and transmitted in Croatian volleyball.

Table 17

Participants

Focus Group	Profile	No. Participants	Gender Breakdown	Age Range	Format	Notes
FG1	Families	5	4F / 1M	20-50	In person	Collective sports
FG2	Children	8	5F / 3M	6-12	In person	Collective sports
FG3	Referees	4	2F / 2M	20-55	Online	Collective sports
FG4	Coaches	5	2F / 3M	28-55	Online	Collective sports

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Logistics.

The logistics of the focus groups were designed to ensure accessibility, comfort and confidentiality for all participants. Two focus groups – with families and with children – were organised in person. The sessions took place in sports hall and office.

Given the busy schedules and geographical dispersion of some adult stakeholders, the focus groups with referees and with coaches were held online. This allowed participants from different regions to join without travel and proved particularly convenient for referees who often have matches in the evenings and on weekends.

Each session lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. At the beginning of each focus group, the moderator repeated the aims of the study, the rules of participation (respect, confidentiality, voluntary engagement) and obtained verbal confirmation of consent. With permission, all sessions were audio-recorded or transcribed by the assistent.

For the group with children, special attention was paid to creating a relaxed, age-appropriate atmosphere. The moderator used simple language, examples and warm-up questions, emphasising that there were no right or wrong answers. Breaks and short energisers were offered when needed to maintain concentration. All recordings were later transcribed and pseudonymised for analysis. No footage was stored.

Data collection and thematic Analysis.

The Croatian data were analysed using Thematic Analysis, following the phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006). After each focus group, the audio recordings were transcribed, with fillers removed but the original meaning preserved. The autor first familiarised themselves with the transcripts through readings and initial note-taking.

An initial coding framework was then developed in line with the analytical structure of the MENTORS project, which focuses on three main dimensions: (V) perceived and practised sport values, (A) social agents and value transmission, and (E) environmental conditions that foster or hinder value education. Segments of text were coded according to this framework.

The following sections present the results of this thematic analysis, organised according to the three dimensions: sport values (V), social agents (A) and environmental conditions (E).

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Perceived and Practical Sport Values (V)

Promotion of positive values (V1)

Across all focus groups, participants agreed that sport – and volleyball in particular – plays an important educational role in the lives of children. When asked what they learn from sport, children consistently mentioned giving their best effort, cheering for teammates, playing fair, accepting mistakes and controlling emotions. One girl explained that volleyball teaches her "*to be persistent, not to give up in difficult moments, to play fair, respect coaches and referees, play as a team, and that volleyball is a sport that requires a lot of thinking*." Another child pointed out that, after a lost set, the team sometimes manages to come back and win by staying united and believing in each other.

Parents and other family members described sport as a context that supports personal growth, social integration and healthy development. They highlighted responsibility, the formation of routines, dealing with success and failure, andindependence as key outcomes. Several parents underlined how training schedules help their children learn time management, as they need to organise schoolwork and leisure around practices and matches. One parent emphasised that sport "*teaches children how to deal with successes and defeats in life in general*" and helps build self-esteem.

Coaches saw teamwork, discipline, responsibility, respect, perseverance and fair play as central values embedded in volleyball. They stressed that children learn to collaborate towards common goals, to handle success and failure with maturity and to support each other emotionally after mistakes or defeats. A coach described how, after a tough loss, players comfort one another instead of blaming, which he recognised as an indicator of strong team values. Another coach explained that sport allows him to teach young athletes to balance different life domains, such as school, training and social life.

Referees framed sport primarily in terms of discipline, healthy lifestyle and fair play. They pointed out that children engaged in sport often develop better time management skills and a stronger sense of responsibility than their peers who are not active. They also stressed that sport is an important space for socialising and fun, where children can make friends, experience belonging and learn to handle both victory and defeat.

Absence of values and contradictions (V2 & V3)

Despite the widely recognised educational potential of sport, participants across all groups also identified situations where desired values were not fully realised or were even undermined. Children mentioned experiences of being laughed at when they made a mistake during an exercise, being excluded from play or witnessing aggressive reactions when someone let the ball fall. A few spoke about small cliques

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or 'clans' within the team, which made it harder for everyone to feel included, and about occasions when some teammates belittled others because they considered themselves better players.

Children also noticed negative attitudes towards referees when players or spectators disagreed with a decision. They understood that such behaviour contradicts the value of respect that coaches promote in training. Some children expressed a wish for clear rules that would penalise exclusion or aggression, suggesting, for example, that a player who treats others badly should not be allowed to continue playing during a match.

Parents observed that, although fair play and team spirit are often promoted in discourse, club structures and reward systems tend to emphasise results and individual performance. They pointed out that talented players sometimes receive more playing time and attention, which may undermine the idea of equal opportunities and weaken the motivation of others. One parent noted that 'fair play is promoted, but results are rewarded at any cost', while another stressed that there is 'too much focus on results' and that effort is not always recognised in practice.

Coaches acknowledged that, in high-pressure situations, some children prioritise winning over collaboration or resort to blaming teammates for mistakes. They described moments when individual ambition overshadowed team interests – for instance, when a player refused to pass the ball to a better-positioned teammate. They also reported that external pressures from clubs or parents can sometimes push them towards decisions that contradict their pedagogical intentions, such as limiting playing time for less experienced players.

Referees emphasised a particular gap between the value of respect that should be shown towards officials and the reality they sometimes face on the court. They reported episodes of parents or coaches modelling disrespectful behaviour, which children then imitate. One referee specifically mentioned that respect towards young referees is often weaker, reflecting both lack of education at home and insufficient support from clubs in enforcing appropriate behaviour.

These contradictions highlight that values are not simply 'taught' once and internalised, but are continuously negotiated and sometimes contested in the everyday practice of youth sport.

Socializing agents and value transmission (A)

The role of coaches (A1)

All stakeholder groups agreed that coaches are central figures in the transmission of values in sport. Children described their coaches as those who teach them technical skills, but also as adults who help them manage emotions, encourage them when they feel insecure and show them how to behave towards others. Several children underlined that they fell in love with volleyball because of a specific

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coach who saw their potential, supported them and 'pushed' them in a positive way. Others noted that the way a coach corrects mistakes is crucial: calm explanations and constructive feedback motivate them to improve, while shouting or harsh criticism can reduce their motivation.

Coaches themselves saw their role as going far beyond the teaching of techniques and tactics. They described themselves as mentors whose work involves supporting young people's personal development, guiding them through successes and failures and modelling the behaviours they expect from the team. One coach emphasised that his impact does not end at the sports hall: the values he teaches – such as respect, responsibility and perseverance – are directly transferable to school and daily life. Another coach highlighted that the way he reacts to errors sets the tone for the entire team culture: if he remains respectful and focuses on learning, players are more likely to adopt the same approach.

At the same time, coaches recognised limitations and challenges. They noted that they had received formal education in kinesiology and sport science, but much less training on communication with children, emotional development or working with parents. Some expressed a desire for workshops and resources on child psychology, value-based coaching and conflict management. They also pointed out that their efforts can be undermined if other adults – particularly parents or club officials – send conflicting messages about priorities, such as insisting on winning at all costs.

Families play a decisive yet sometimes ambivalent role in children's experience of sport. On the positive side, parents and other relatives often provide emotional support, encouragement and practical help, such as driving children to training and matches, attending tournaments and celebrating progress regardless of the final score. Several family members emphasised that their main goal is for children to be happy and to enjoy the sport they have chosen. One mother described how she avoids criticising referees or opposing teams in the stands, choosing instead to congratulate her child on their effort even after a loss.

Families also shape the broader value framework within which sport is interpreted. Parents linked sport to life skills such as responsibility, planning, empathy and perseverance. Some used small household tasks and control of screen time as ways of reinforcing discipline and balance between sport, school and leisure. They recognised that children learn more from adults' behaviour than from their words, and thus tried to model respect and constructive communication.

However, the data also revealed more problematic aspects of family involvement. Coaches and referees recounted examples of parents putting undue pressure on children to perform, living their own sport dreams through their children or focusing too heavily on results and playing time. Children themselves noted that when parents demand that their child must always win, a defeat can feel much worse and

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overshadow the positive aspects of participation. Some parents admitted that, at times, expectations may be unrealistic or influenced by financial or status considerations related to club success.

Several family members pointed out that coaches are often not formally trained in pedagogy or psychology and that clubs rarely provide systematic support for value education. They called for more cooperation between clubs, schools and families, and for joint educational sessions on topics such as communication with children, motivation and handling pressure. In their view, values in sport develop not by chance but through a coordinated approach by all adults around the child.

The role of referees (A3)

Referees see their primary task as ensuring that games are played according to the rules, but they also recognise their influence on the value climate of youth sport. In the Croatian focus groups, referees described how they try to foster fair play and respect by reacting calmly to conflict, explaining decisions when appropriate and signalling that certain behaviours – such as arguing, disrespect or aggression – are not acceptable. Some referees noted that they intentionally use their authority to show young players that sanctions are not mere punishment but a form of correcting behaviour.

At the same time, referees felt that their educational role is often overlooked. They reported limited coordination with coaches and clubs regarding value education and pointed to a lack of clear protocols for addressing inappropriate behaviour from spectators or parents. One referee suggested that giving referees greater authority and institutional backing to sanction misconduct could improve the overall respect towards officials and reinforce the message that fair play is non-negotiable.

Referees also stressed that they can only do so much if children do not receive consistent messages at home and from coaches. They therefore argued for broader educational initiatives that involve all social agents, not just referees individually.

The role of peers (A4)

Peers – teammates and friends within the sport environment – emerged as highly influential agents in children's narratives. Many children referred to teammates as those who support them when they make mistakes, cheer for them during matches, explain exercises they do not understand or even organise practical help, such as providing transport or lending equipment. These interactions contribute to the development of friendship, solidarity and mutual trust.

At the same time, peer dynamics can also be a source of difficulty. Children spoke about the formation of cliques, gossiping, occasional ridicule after mistakes and competition over who is the 'better' player. Such dynamics can hinder cohesion and make it harder for all players to feel safe and valued. Coaches and parents

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recognised that building a positive team culture requires active work with peer relationships, not only with individual children.

Overall, peers act as both mirrors and amplifiers of the values promoted by adults: when coaches and families consistently model support, respect and inclusion, those behaviours are more likely to be reflected in peer interactions as well.

Environmental conditions that influence value education (E)

Facilitating practices (E1)

Participants across all groups identified specific routines and practices that help create environments conducive to value learning. For coaches, these included structured warm-ups that require cooperation, small-sided games that emphasise teamwork and communication, and regular team meetings or reflection circles after matches. Some coaches make a point of praising not only technical performance but also behaviours such as supporting a teammate after a mistake or showing respect towards opponents and referees.

Children mentioned rituals such as team cheers before matches, repeating exercises they are weakest at, and using positive self-talk and mutual encouragement (e.g. telling each other that one mistake or one lost match does not define them as players). Several children emphasised how discussions within the team – for example, analysing why a match was lost and what could be improved – help them learn responsibility and problem-solving.

Families and coaches highlighted the importance of fixed training schedules for developing routines and time management skills. Regular attendance at training, preparation of equipment and planning of homework around sport commitments all reinforce responsibility and self-organisation. Some parents also spoke about praising effort and persistence, not only results, and about jointly setting realistic goals with their children.

Finally, several participants pointed to the broader psychosocial benefits of sport-related environments: sports halls and clubs provide spaces where children can connect with peers, build friendships and feel part of a community, which in turn supports their psychosocial well-being and resilience.

Obstacle dynamics (E2)

Alongside these facilitating practices, participants also identified structural and cultural factors that may hinder the effective transmission of values. One recurrent theme was the strong focus on competition and results within some clubs. Parents, coaches and referees observed that success is frequently measured primarily in terms of wins, rankings and trophies, while less visible outcomes – such as improved confidence, cooperation or emotional regulation – receive limited recognition. This can create pressure on both children and adults, discouraging risk-

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taking and experimentation and sometimes leading to unfair distribution of playing time.

Another barrier mentioned by families is the limited availability of facilities and the resulting late training hours. When children have to train late in the evening due to lack of hall time, they may become tired, struggle with school obligations and perceive sport as an additional stressor rather than a source of enjoyment. Combined with long school days and homework, this can reduce their ability to fully benefit from the value-learning potential of sport.

Parents and coaches also pointed to the pervasive influence of digital technologies and screen time. Several family members contrasted children who spend much of their free time on mobile phones or video games – with excess energy and little structure – with those involved in sport who have clearer routines and healthier outlets for their energy. However, they acknowledged that even sporty children may be affected by digital distractions, which can compete with training for attention and motivation.

Within teams, obstacles include unequal treatment of players, inadequate communication between coaches and parents, and insufficient mechanisms for addressing disrespectful behaviour. Referees noted that their role is sometimes undermined when coaches or parents openly criticise calls from the sidelines, sending mixed messages about respect for authority. Children, for their part, highlighted gossiping, exclusion and lack of communication as factors that make it harder to get along and learn from each other.

Finally, several participants spoke about the absence of systematic education on psychological and pedagogical aspects of sport for coaches, referees and parents alike. While technical training is often available, opportunities to learn about child development, emotional support and value-based education are scarcer. This limits the capacity of adults to intentionally create value-rich environments.

Key findings

The thematic analysis of the Croatian focus groups reveals a coherent yet nuanced picture of how sport-related values are understood and transmitted in the context of youth volleyball.

The following points summarise the main findings:

- Sport is widely recognised as a meaningful learning space. Across all stakeholder groups, sport is seen as more than physical exercise. Children, parents, coaches and referees converge in describing volleyball as a context where children learn perseverance, discipline, social skills, emotional regulation and fair play. These values are experienced in concrete situations:

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coming back after losing a set, comforting a teammate who made a mistake, accepting a referee's decision or planning time around training.

- There is a gap between declared values and everyday practice. While values such as fairness, inclusion and equal opportunities are strongly promoted at the level of discourse, they are not always realised in practice. Competitive pressure, emphasis on results and unequal distribution of attention and playing time can lead to experiences of exclusion, belittling or disrespect. This dissonance can undermine children's trust in the authenticity of value messages.
- Coaches are central but need more support. Coaches are perceived – and perceive themselves – as key agents in children's value development. Through daily interactions, they shape team culture, influence emotional climate and model appropriate behaviour. However, many feel underprepared for the pedagogical and psychological parts of their role. They request more structured training on communication, motivation, conflict management and child- centred coaching.
- Families hold significant influence, both positive and negative. Families provide logistical and emotional support and shape how children interpret success, failure and commitment. When parents emphasise enjoyment, effort and learning, children tend to experience sport as a safe and growth-oriented space. When they focus mainly on results, playing time or comparison with others, children may feel pressure, anxiety or diminished self-worth. Families also identify a lack of systemic support and call for more cooperation with clubs and schools.
- Referees act as guardians of fairness but are not fully integrated into educational efforts. Referees influence the moral climate of matches through their decisions and demeanour. They try to model calmness and impartiality and to correct negative behaviour via sanctions. Yet they often feel their educational role is undervalued and that they lack institutional backing when facing disrespect from spectators or teams. Closer collaboration with coaches and clubs could enhance their contribution.
- Peer relationships are a powerful channel for value transmission. Teammates play a crucial role in supporting, motivating and socialising children. Positive peer interactions – encouragement, mutual help, shared rituals – reinforce values taught by adults. However, gossip and competition over status can damage cohesion and create unsafe environments for some players. Addressing peer dynamics should therefore be part of value-based coaching.
- Environmental and structural factors shape the possibilities for value learning. Factors such as hall availability, training schedules, club policies on playing time, and the broader sporting culture around competition have significant effects on how values are experienced. Late training hours, lack of facilities or a narrow focus on performance can reduce participation,

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enjoyment and opportunities for learning. Conversely, clear club guidelines that reward fair play, participation and effort can support value transmission.

- There is a strong demand for integrated, multi-actor education. Participants from all groups expressed interest in educational initiatives that bring together coaches, parents, referees and club officials. Suggested formats include workshops on communication with children, joint meetings to align expectations, and recognition schemes for clubs that prioritise value-based practices. Such initiatives could help move from isolated efforts to a coordinated approach to value education in sport.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Croatian component of the MENTORS on-field research confirms that youth sport, and volleyball in particular, holds considerable potential as a space for children's holistic development. When guided by coherent and supportive adults, sport becomes a laboratory for practising perseverance, collaboration, empathy, respect and self-regulation. However, this potential is not automatically realised. It depends on the interaction of multiple social agents and the structural conditions under which sport is organised.

The findings indicate that values are most effectively transmitted when adults model the behaviours they wish children to adopt, provide consistent messages across contexts (home, club, school, competition) and prioritise process and learning over short-term results. Conversely, when adults send conflicting signals or focus narrowly on performance, children may experience confusion, pressure and disillusionment.

Building on these insights, the following recommendations are proposed for stakeholders in sports – clubs, federations, schools, coaches, referees, families and policymakers:

a) Develop and implement value-based club policies.
   a.1. Encourage clubs to adopt written charters that define core values (e.g. respect, inclusion, fair play, effort) and translate them into concrete guidelines for coaches, players and parents.
   a.2. Introduce recognition mechanisms (for example certifications) for clubs that demonstrate commitment to these principles, for example by ensuring balanced playing time, promoting mixed-gender participation at younger ages or organising fair play campaigns.
b) Strengthen pedagogical training for coaches.
   b.1. Integrate modules on child development, communication, emotional intelligence and conflict management into coaching education programmes.

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b.2. Offer continuous professional development opportunities (workshops, mentoring, peer-reflection groups) focusing on value-based coaching and holistic athlete development.

b.3. Encourage coaches to systematically reflect on team culture and to use everyday situations – both successes and setbacks – as opportunities for value discussion.

c) Support families as partners in value education.

c.1. Provide parents with accessible information and workshops on how to support children in sport without excessive pressure, how to respond to wins and losses and how to communicate with coaches.

c.2. Promote codes of conduct for spectators that emphasise respect towards referees, coaches, opponents and children themselves.

c.3. Foster regular, structured communication between coaches and families to align expectations regarding participation, playing time and goals.

d) Recognise and equip referees as educators.

d.1. Include value education and communication with children in referee training curricula.

d.2. Provide clear institutional backing for referees to act against inappropriate behaviours from spectators or teams, especially in youth competitions.

d.3. Create channels for feedback and dialogue between referees and coaches to improve mutual understanding and coordination.

e) Address peer dynamics within teams.

e.1. Encourage team-building activities that promote inclusion, trust and mutual support, both on and off the court.

e.2. Train coaches to recognise and intervene in cases of gossiping, bullying or exclusion, and to facilitate open dialogue among players.

e.3. Create opportunities for older or more experienced players to act as positive role models and mentors for younger teammates.

f) Improve structural conditions for participation.

f.1. Advocate for better access to sports facilities and more favourable training schedules for children, in collaboration with local authorities and schools.

f.2. Explore possibilities for integrating more physical activity and basic sport skills into school curricula, thus reinforcing the connection between education and sport.

f.3. Consider financial support schemes or partnerships to ensure that sport opportunities remain accessible to children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

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g) Promote integrated, multi-actor initiatives.
g.1. Use the MENTORS project as a platform to bring together different stakeholders at local and national levels to exchange good practices and jointly design interventions.
g.2. Pilot multi-actor workshops or local 'sport and values' forums where children, parents, coaches and referees can reflect together on challenges and co-create solutions.

By pursuing these directions, youth sport can move towards to a model where learning values is not a by-product but a central objective, shared by all actors. In such a model, children are not only trained to become better athletes but also supported in becoming responsible, confident and empathetic individuals.

3.3. Findings throuh an integrated approach. Cross-cultural orientation.

The present analysis has as its main objective to carry out a comparative and exhaustive analysis of the results obtained in the national reports of Spain, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Germany, Portugal, and Italy (combining the two provided documents), within the framework of the MENTORS project.

1. The analysis focuses on four fundamental pillars:
2. The identification of the most influential psychosocial agents in the transmission of values.
3. The fundamental values perceived and practiced.
4. The key findings (barriers and facilitators).
5. The specific conclusions and recommendations.

Additionally, to offer a deeper layer of understanding of the observed differences and similarities, a cultural analysis is incorporated that relates these findings to the Hofstede Cultural Dimensions for each country. This approach seeks to contextualize how the underlying national culture shapes the perception of sport, authority, and teamwork, which are essential elements in grassroots sports. The scope and detail of the analysis are aimed at meeting the requirement of 4000 to 5000 words, offering a comprehensive view of values education through sport in Southern and Central Europe.

3.3.1. Key Psychosocial Agents and Their Role

Grassroots sport is a complex ecosystem where multiple actors converge, but the research has revealed a clear hierarchy of influence in the transmission of values. Coaches and families (parents) are, without exception, the most cited

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agents in all countries, followed closely by referees/officials and, to a lesser extent, club presidents and teammates.

A. The Coach: The Central Figure and Role Model

In all national contexts, the coach emerges as the central and most decisive figure in the process of values education.

- Italy (CUS Palermo & FIPAV): The coach's role is described not only as a technician but as an educator and role model. In the Italian context, it is emphasized that their responsibility goes beyond technical instruction, and their ability to use corrective feedback and transform error into an opportunity for improvement is crucial. This approach underlines a pedagogical vision of sport, where the process and the formation of the person are prioritized over the immediate sporting result.
- Spain: The Spanish report reinforces this idea, highlighting the need for coaches to be seen as "educators" and not just "technicians". This implies the adoption of a clear pedagogical intentionality in each training session.
- Germany: The German report also places the coach as the central figure. However, concern is detected about traditional practices, where severity is mistakenly believed to improve performance, which can hinder the transmission of positive values such as cooperation and self-awareness. This suggests a conflict between the modern educational vision and entrenched hierarchical practices.
- Croatia and Portugal: Both countries identify coaches as primary agents. In the case of Portugal, a general qualitative improvement is observed in the training and vision of current coaches compared to previous generations.

B. Parents/Families: Emotional Support and Source of Pressure

The role of the family is the most ambivalent and the main focus of concern in most reports. Parents are fundamental for emotional support and for encouraging children's participation. However, in all countries analyzed (especially Spain, Cyprus, Portugal, Croatia, and Italy), they are identified as the main source of excessive pressure, anxiety, and disrespectful behaviors on the sideline.

- Portugal and Cyprus: In these countries, the need to address parental behavior is critical. Mandatory training in sports ethics and fair play, or even the application of punitive measures for bad behavior, is proposed. In Cyprus, it is noted that parental pressure and a victory-oriented mindset negatively affect young people's perception of fun.
- Spain: The report underlines the "ambivalent" role of the family, which can be a strong ally or an obstacle, depending on whether their focus is aligned with the club's pedagogy.

C. Referees and Officials: Agents of Civility and Normativity

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The role of the referee is varied, oscillating between a mere normative authority and a true educational agent.

- France: Emphasis on Arbitration: The French report focuses particularly on the role of the referee, seeing them as an "agent of civility" and a role model. The educational value of arbitration and the ethical and pedagogical training of referees are highlighted as a facilitating practice. The main obstacle, however, is the lack of respect they receive from parents and coaches.
- Spain and Italy: In Spain and Italy, the recovery of the referee as an educational agent is also demanded, especially if they act with respect, explain their decisions, and manage conflicts with pedagogical intent.
- Portugal and Croatia: Respect for referees is a key value that is often undermined by adult behavior.

D. Other Agents: Teammates and Clubs/Institutions

Teammates.

Curiously, in Spain, the influence of teammates was not mentioned as a relevant factor in the transmission of values. This contrasts with the high importance of the value of team spirit/compañerismo. In Croatia, teammates are cited, but their influence seems secondary to that of coaches and parents.

Clubs and Institutions.

Clubs and sports organizations are crucial in Cyprus and France for creating a club culture that rewards effort and respectful behavior. In Italy, there is a generalized criticism of the lack of support and interest from institutions and the Stateto guarantee the accessibility and quality of facilities.

3.3.1. Fundamental Values Highlighted in Grassroots Sport

The convergence of values among the analyzed countries is notable, with Respect and Teamwork/Compañerismo (Camaraderie/Team Spirit) emerging as the ethical pillars of grassroots sport Table 17).

Table 17

Most prominent values across the different countries.

Country	Most Highlighted Values (V)
Spain	"Compañerismo (most prominent), Respect, Personal Improvement, Obedience, Integrity."
Croatia	"Respect, Discipline, Teamwork, Friendship/Social Bonds, Perseverance."
Cyprus	"Respect (key), Discipline, Teamwork, Effort, Honesty/Fair Play."
France	"Respect (especially for authority), Integrity, Fair Play, Personal Improvement, Solidarity/Inclusion."

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Germany	"Discipline, Cooperation, Respect, Self-awareness, Patience."
Portugal	"Respect, Discipline, Solidarity, Friendship."
Italy (CUS & FIPAV)	"Respect (fundamental), Collaboration/Teamwork, Sacrifice/Commitment, Integrity, Personal Improvement."

A. Respect: The Basis of Social Interaction

Respect is universally recognized as a central value in grassroots sport.

- In Cyprus and Croatia, respect is seen as a key value, especially towards rules and authority (referees and coaches).
- In France, dignity and respect for officials are the focal point of the report, linking respect with citizenship and civility.
- In Spain, respect is the second most cited value, frequently reinforced by daily routines(greetings, punctuality).

B. Values Related to the Group and Cooperation

Teamwork, Companionship (Camaraderie/Team Spirit), and Solidarity are vital, especially in Southern European countries.

- Spain: Companionship is the most prominent value. This reflects the importance of empathy, mutual support, and group cohesion in Spanish sports culture.
- Italy: Collaboration and Teamwork are fundamental, often linked to the concept of Sacrifice/Commitment.
- Portugal and Croatia: Friendship and Social Bonds are highly highlighted values, suggesting that sport is strongly perceived as a space for primary socialization.

C. Values of Individual and Ethical Character

Discipline and Personal Improvement (or Effort) are transversal values, although they are interpreted differently:

Discipline.

It is fundamental in Croatia, Germany, and Portugal. In Germany, it is related to Self-awareness and learning through structured routines.

Integrity and Fair Play.

The value of Integrity and Fair Play are crucial in Spain, Cyprus, and France, especially in interaction with regulations and officials.

Sacrifice vs. Fun.

In Italy, the dichotomy between sport "done well" (focus on process, fun, and formation) and sport "done badly" (focus on result and victory at all costs) is

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highlighted. The Cypriot report echoes this tension: although young people value fun over victory, they are negatively affected by the performance mindset of adults.

3.3.2. Key Findings: Barriers and Facilitators

The national reports consistently identify a set of practices that facilitate values education and cultural dynamics that hinder it.

A. Barriers and Hindering Dynamics

The main conclusion is that sport does not educate by itself, and its educational potential is seriously limited by structural and cultural factors.

Results-Oriented Culture and Adult Pressure.

This is the most significant obstacle in almost all countries. Spain and Cyprus point to the dominance of a results-oriented culture over integral formation. Parental pressure (shouting, unmanaged expectations, lack of respect for referees) is a key barrier in Portugal, Cyprus, Croatia, and Italy. This pressure generates anxiety and undermines sports ethics in young people.

Lack of Training and Consistency.

The lack of specific values training for adults (coaches, parents, referees) is the barrier most cited in Spain and an urgent need in Portugal, Croatia, and Italy. The poor coordination and consistency among the messages of the different agents (club, family, school) makes the internalization of values difficult.

Hierarchical Attitudes and Severity.

In Germany, the belief that severity or hierarchical rigidity ("colonialist attitude") improves performance is identified as an obstacle, despite having no scientific basis. This reflects a possible cultural clash with the importance of Discipline perceived in countries with high Power Distance. In France, the main obstacle is the lack of respect for the figure of authority of the official.

Lack of Institutional Support.

The Italian reports are particularly critical of the lack of support and investment by institutions and the State, which hinders accessibility to facilities and social inclusion through sport.

B. Facilitating Practices and Good Practices

Structured Routines.

The use of routines is the most highlighted facilitating practice in several countries, as it consolidates values naturally and effectively. In Spain, greeting rituals,

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punctuality, and equipment care are cited. In Germany, warm-up routines and review/feedback moments at the end of the session help to internalize discipline, cooperation, and self-awareness.

Pedagogical Training of Officials and Coaches.

In France, the ethical and pedagogical training of referees is an essential practice. In Portugal, a qualitative leap is observed in the training of coaches and club presidents.

Use of Corrective Feedback.

In Italy, the use of corrective feedback to teach that error is an opportunity for improvement is a crucial facilitating practice for the coach.

3.3.3. Key Conclusions and Recommendations

The recommendations of the reports converge on the need for a cultural change and the pedagogical professionalization of adult agents.

A. Focus on Adult Training

The need for specific and mandatory training for adults is the strongest and most transversal recommendation.

Parents.

Mandatory training in sports ethics and fair play is recommended for parents (Portugal, Cyprus). In Portugal, holding start-of-season sessions to align behavioral expectations is proposed.

Coaches and Referees.

Training must be pedagogical and ethical, beyond the technical aspect.

Inclusion of Professionals.

Italy and Germany recommend the support or inclusion of professionals (psychologists, pedagogues) in clubs or club networks to help manage complex dynamics and address the "educational emergency".

B. Need for Consistency and Collaboration

Consistency of Messages.

It is fundamental to foster collaboration and communicationamong coaches, parents, and teachers to ensure that the values promoted in different environments are consistent.

Codes of Conduct.

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The implementation of shared codes of conduct and formal safeguarding mechanisms is a key recommendation in France to protect young officials and ensure an ethical environment.

C. Cultural and Institutional Change

Emphasis on the Process.

Clubs and organizations must promote cultures that reward effort and respectful behavior, instead of focusing only on results (Cyprus).

Criticism of Hierarchy.

Germany calls for a cultural change that moves away from hierarchical and "colonialist" attitudes in sports training.

State Support.

The Italian State is demanded to simplify access to facilities and orient funding towards educational quality, and not just the quantity of sports practice. Cultural campaigns are also proposed to counteract "toxic" professional sport models.

3.3.4. Cultural Analysis and their Relationship with the Results

The Hofstede Cultural Dimensions framework (Power Distance, Individualism, Masculinity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-Term Orientation, Indulgence) provides an invaluable lens for understanding the observed differences in the national reports regarding authority, conflict, and group versus individual values Table X).

A. Power Distance (PDI) and the Figure of the Coach/Referee

The Power Distance index measures the extent to which the less powerful members of a society accept the unequal distribution of power.

- Countries with High PDI (France, Portugal, Croatia, Cyprus): In these cultures (60+), hierarchy is expected and accepted. The coach or referee are seen as unquestionable figures of authority.
  Relationship with Results: This explains why the value of Discipline is so highlighted in Croatia and Portugal. In France (PDI 68), the defense of the referee as an "agent of civility" is vital, and the lack of respect towards them is seen as a threat to the social order. The focus on rules and obedience towards authority is a reflection of this high PDI.
- Countries with Moderate/Low PDI (Germany, Italy): Germany has a notably low PDI (35), which implies a culture that values equality, consultation, and challenges unjustified hierarchical structures.
  Relationship with Results: The German report points to a barrier: the belief that severity (a manifestation of high authority) improves performance. This

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concern about the "colonialist" or hierarchical attitude is a cultural manifestation of a society that rejects unjustified authority and seeks more consultative leadership.

Table 18

Cultural Dimensions related to participants.

Country	Power distance	Individual orientation	Masculinity	Uncertainty	Long Term	Indulgence	Key Cultural Profile
Germany	35 (Low)	67 (High)	66 (Masculine)	65 (Moderate)	83 (High)	40 (Restraint)	"Individualistic, Task-Oriented, Structured."
France	68 (High)	71 (High)	43 (Feminine)	86 (Very High)	63 (Moderate)	48 (Moderate)	"Hierarchical, Intellectual, Avoids Uncertainty."
Spain	57 (Moderate)	51 (Moderate)	42 (Feminine)	86 (Very High)	48 (Low)	44 (Restraint)	"Avoids Uncertainty, Focused on Relationships (Feminine)."
Italy	50 (Moderate)	76 (High)	70 (Masculine)	75 (High)	61 (Moderate)	30 (Restraint)	"Individualistic, Task-Oriented, Passionate."
Portugal	63 (High)	27 (Low)	31 (Feminine)	104 (Extreme)	28 (Low)	33 (Restraint)	"Collectivist, Very Hierarchical, Avoids Uncertainty."
Croatia	73 (High)	33 (Low)	40 (Feminine)	80 (High)	58 (Moderate)	33 (Restraint)	"Hierarchical, Collectivist, High Need for Rules."
Cyprus	60 (Moderate)	30 (Low)	50 (Moderate)	80 (High)	45 (Low)	40 (Restraint)	"Collectivist, Avoids Uncertainty, Conservative."

B. Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV) and Group Values

The IDV measures the degree to which people are integrated into groups. High scores (Individualism) indicate a focus on the self and the immediate family ; low scores (Collectivism) indicate loyalty to larger groups.

- Individualistic Countries (Italy, France, Germany): These countries (IDV > 65) prioritize personal achievement and individual initiative.
  Relationship with Results: High individualism in Italy (IDV 76) and Germany (IDV 67) may explain the emphasis on values such as Personal Improvement and individual Sacrifice/Commitment. In Italy, the focus on "sport done well" prioritizes the child's journey and their personal growth over the collective result, aligning with an individualistic ethos. In Germany, the value of Self-awareness also reinforces the internal development of the individual.
- Collectivist Countries (Portugal, Croatia, Cyprus, and Moderate Spain): These countries (IDV < 55) value group loyalty and mutual support.

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Relationship with Results: This collectivism is palpable in the most prominent value in Spain: Compañerismo (Camaraderie/Team Spirit), which is a direct manifestation of group cohesion and mutual support. Similarly, in Portugal, Croatia, and Cyprus, Friendship, Social Bonds, and Teamwork are fundamental. The absence of the mention of the influence of teammates as a socializing agent in the Spanish report is an interesting anomaly, suggesting that while the group value is central, the agent of transmission is still delegated to adults (coaches).

C. Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS) and the Culture of Results

The MAS dimension (Masculinity) measures whether a society is guided by ambition, assertiveness, and the pursuit of results (Masculine, high MAS) or by cooperation, modesty, and quality of life (Feminine, low MAS).

- Masculine Countries (Italy, Germany): Both have high scores (Germany 66, Italy 70). These cultures tend to value performance, competition, and victory. Relationship with Results: High MAS in Italy may contribute to the described tension between sport "done well" (the process) and "done badly" (victory), reflecting an internal struggle in sports culture between the formative ethos and the pressure to win.
- Feminine Countries (Spain, France, Portugal, Croatia): These countries (MAS < 50, with Portugal at 31) are more focused on quality of life, solidarity, and the avoidance of open conflict.
  Relationship with Results: The emphasis on values such as Solidarity (Portugal) and Compañerismo (Spain) is in line with a feminine ethos. However, the main conflict identified in these countries (Spain, Cyprus) is the results-oriented culture imposed by adults , suggesting that the grassroots sports culture is being contaminated by high performance and external pressure, challenging the underlying, more "feminine" cultural tendency to seek well-being and cooperation.

D. Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) and the Need for Norms

UAI measures the extent to which a culture feels threatened by ambiguity, which leads to the need for rules and structures.

- Countries with Very High UAI (Portugal, Spain, France, Cyprus, Croatia): These countries (UAI > 80) demonstrate a strong need for clear rules, structure, and an aversion to risk. Portugal stands out with a UAI of 104, one of the highest scores in the world, indicating an extreme need for rules and procedures.
  Relationship with Results: The high need for Rules and Discipline is a direct conclusion from almost all these countries. In Portugal, the urgency to

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create mandatory training and punitive mechanisms for parents reflects this cultural need to mitigate the chaos of the sideline by imposing strict norms. The struggle for Respecttowards the referee (the agent of the norm) in France and Spain is a struggle for stability and order in a cultural environment that detests ambiguity and unpredictability.

E. Long-Term Orientation (LTO) and Indulgence (IND)

- LTO (Long-Term Orientation): Germany and France score high, valuing future planning and perseverance (LTO 83 and 63 respectively). This is reflected in the German report, which highlights the importance of routines for internalizing values in the long term.
- IND (Indulgence): All countries have low scores (Restraint), which means they control their impulses and enjoy leisure less.
  Relationship with Results: Low IND in all countries (especially Croatia, Portugal, and Italy, all with 33 or less) is related to the focus on Sacrifice/Commitment and Discipline. In these cultures, fun and immediate gratification tend to be sacrificed for duty, which intensifies the clash when young people state that they value fun over victory (Cyprus). The restrictive adult culture clashes with the children's desire for playful activity.

3.3.5. Final Comparative Synthesis (Detailed Conclusions)

The comparison of the national reports reveals a landscape of shared challenges and culturally nuanced responses to the question of how to educate in values through sport.

A. Convergence of Challenges

Despite cultural differences, the problem is universal: adult pressure nullifies the educational potential of sport.

- Coach as Educator versus Technician: There is total consensus that the coach must be an educator. However, the persistence of hierarchical or strict approaches (Germany, Croatia) shows that the implementation of this pedagogical vision still struggles against entrenched practices.
- The Paradox of Parents: Families are the most important emotional resource, but their behavior is the main obstacle identified in countries with high UAI and moderate MAS (Portugal, Spain, Cyprus, Italy). This dynamic underlines the need to treat parents not only as an audience but as psychosocial agents who require specific training.
- Respect as a Critical Value: Respect is the most attacked value, especially towards referees, and its defense becomes a priority in countries with high UAI (need for order) such as France and Portugal.

B. Divergence in Responses and Cultural Emphasis

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Hofstede's analysis allows for the categorization of countries into groups with similar responses to shared problems:

- The Collectivist-Hierarchical Axis (Portugal, Croatia, Cyprus): These countries, with low Individualism and high Power Distance, prioritize Discipline and Social Bonds. Their response to problems is the search for strict norms and structures (Portugal proposes punishments and mandatory training) , in line with their extreme Uncertainty Avoidance (Portugal UAI 104). The solution is perceived in the imposition of order.
- The Individualistic-Task-Oriented Axis (Germany, Italy): These countries, with high Individualism, tend to focus on individual formation (Personal Improvement, Self-awareness).
  - Germany (Low PDI): Its concern focuses on how hierarchy (low PDI) and severity(high MAS) affect individual development. Its solution involves a "cultural change" that respects equality and consultation.
  - Italy (High MAS): Its main struggle is how to reconcile its strong Masculine drive (results orientation) with the educational vision of sport. Its criticism is directed at the lack of state support, seeking to externalize the solution through stronger institutions.
- The Mediterranean Axis of High Uncertainty (Spain, France): These countries, with UAI 86, seek stability.
  - Spain (Compañerismo): Although it seeks stability, its emphasis on Compañerismo(Camaraderie/Team Spirit, Feminine/Moderate Collectivist) suggests that group cohesion is the main coping mechanism for uncertainty. Daily routines are the low-cost, high-efficacy means of imposing order.
  - France (Arbitration): Its high PDI focuses the solution on the defense of formal authority (the referee as an agent of civility).

C. A Vision for the Future: The Need for Pedagogical Professionalization

The most powerful conclusion of this comparative analysis is that grassroots sport requires a cultural transformation that elevates the pedagogical status of the coach and the referee on par with their technical role, and that obligatorily includes parents in this educational ecosystem. Models of specific training for adults, the promotion of respect routines, and institutional support to guarantee accessibility are the keys to unleashing the enormous potential of sport as a school of life throughout Europe. Cultural divergence only underscores that, although the problem is the same, the implementation strategy must be adapted to the uncertainty avoidance, the relationship with authority, and the balance between individual and collective values of each country.

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4. Conclusions.

This report represents a comprehensive, multi-methodological study integrating evidence from a systematic literature review, a critical analysis of 103 documented good practice programs, and an extensive cross-cultural analysis of focus group data collected across eight distinct European nations. This synthesis provides a robust and multifaceted perspective on the state of value transmission in grassroots sport, identifying prevailing theoretical frameworks, programmatic priorities, and systemic challenges.

Theoretical Models of Departure and Research Gaps

The systematic review task revealed a critical aspect of the current research field: its marked **methodological heterogeneity** and its reliance on **descriptive, qualitative, and observational designs**. While significant, this body of work tends to prioritize the **description and understanding** of the phenomenon of value transmission over the rigorous **evaluation of specific educational interventions**.

- **Models and Frameworks:** A central conclusion is the lack of a single, unifying theoretical model in the literature. Interventions, when described, often ground themselves in diverse ethical, philosophical, or psychological frameworks. Recent studies are increasingly attempting to anchor their work in contemporary educational and developmental psychology, most notably the **Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework**, which posits that sport can be an intentional setting for developing life skills and positive attributes. Other programs draw inspiration from **specific ethical codes** (e.g., the moral code inherent to martial arts like judo) or even **philosophical concepts** (e.g., Ubuntu).
- **The Critical Gaps:** The most significant methodological limitation identified is the paucity of **longitudinal designs** and **randomized controlled trials (RCTs)**. This deficit severely hinders the ability of researchers and practitioners to conclusively assess the long-term impact and sustained efficacy of value education programs, making it difficult to establish clear causality between an intervention and a positive behavioral outcome.

Values: Most and Least Addressed (Priorities and Blind Spots)

The comparative analysis of the 103 good practice programs and the qualitative insights from the focus groups highlights a consistent pattern regarding which values are prioritized and which are neglected.

- **The Foundational Values (Most Worked):** There is a near-universal focus on **collective, ethical, and relational values**. **Respect** stands out as the fundamental and most frequently addressed value, often operationalized through concrete behaviors such as greetings, adherence to rules, and

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punctuality. Within applied programs, **Fair Play** is the single most highlighted and explicitly taught value. Furthermore, values promoting group cohesion, such as **Teamwork, Cooperation, and Companionship/Solidarity**, are central, particularly in sporting cultures from Southern Europe where the collective identity holds strong cultural weight. These values are primarily targeted because they are seen as prerequisites for a functional and healthy sporting environment.

- **The Development Gaps (Least Worked):** A significant finding is the relative neglect of **individual and socio-emotional values**. Values essential for personal growth, such as **Resilience, Self-Control, Empathy, and a passion/love for the sport (commitment)**, are less frequently the explicit focus of good practice programs. Furthermore, the explicit teaching of **non-violence/peaceful conflict resolution** appears to be a reactive, rather than proactive, component. This oversight suggests that current value transmission efforts may be effective in shaping the collective moral climate but fall short in fostering the full spectrum of personal and emotional competencies necessary for holistic youth development.

Main Challenges and Systemic Barriers in Value Transmission

The cross-cultural focus group analysis provided the deepest understanding of the real-world obstacles, revealing that the challenges are largely systemic and cultural, rather than simply programmatic.

1. **The Overwhelming Pressure of Competition:** The foremost challenge identified across all participating countries is the **prevalence of a result-oriented culture** that places excessive competitive pressure on young athletes. This hyper-competitive focus creates a fundamental **tension or conflict between the performance objective and the educational/formative objective** of sport. This culture often incentivizes tactical misconduct, leads to early dropout, and undermines the deliberate teaching of ethical values.
2. **Lack of Coordinated Adult Training (Inconsistent Messaging):** A core systemic problem is the **lack of consistent and coordinated training for all psychosocial agents**—coaches, referees, parents, and administrators. The focus group participants consistently reported that value transmission is severely compromised by **inconsistent messaging** and **misaligned expectations** from key adults. The conclusion is clear: for values to be effectively transmitted and internalised, all adults involved in the youth sports ecosystem must share a clear, common pedagogical vision and actively model the desired behaviors.
3. **The Peripheral Status of Key Agents:** The analysis of both practices and focus groups indicates that **referees and families/parents** are often treated as secondary or peripheral agents in the value education process, despite their immense influence. Referees are primarily seen through a technical lens (rule enforcement), and parents are often relegated to a

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passive or even negative role. A crucial conclusion for future strategy is the necessity of a **cultural transformation** that **elevates the pedagogical status of the coach and the referee** to be equal to their technical roles, and which **obligatorily integrates parents** into this educational ecosystem with dedicated training and clear roles.

4. **Cultural and Contextual Adaptation:** The cross-cultural study confirms that effective implementation requires sensitivity to national context. Strategies must be **adapted to local factors** such as a culture's inherent level of **uncertainty avoidance**, its traditional **relationship with authority figures** (coaches/referees), and its cultural **balance between individual achievement and collective values**. A one-size-fits-all approach is doomed to fail.

In summary, the findings suggest that the challenge in youth sport is not the lack of good intentions or innovative programs, but a fundamental misalignment between a result-driven culture and an under-trained, uncoordinated network of adult agents. Future efforts must shift from simply creating new programs to fostering a system-wide cultural change.

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