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MENTORS

MULTI-ACTORS EDUCATIONAL IMPACT MODELS FOR CHILDREN: A SPORT-CENTRIC APPROACH

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D3.3 – TRAINING FORMAT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Section 1: Introduction 3
Section 2: Value Development in Sport 5
Section 3: The Integrated Approach 8
Section 4: The 4 Value-based Training Modules 9
Section 5: Conclusion 103

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction and Aim of the Training Format

Sports constitute a critical educational and socializing environment for children aged 6–13, acting as a dynamic arena where physical, psychological, and social dimensions intertwine. Far beyond mere motor activity, structured sports participation contributes directly to cognitive and motor development, enhancing bilateral coordination, spatial body awareness, and attentional focus.

Simultaneously, the sporting experience provides a unique pedagogical platform for cultivating essential personal qualities—such as resilience, patience, and self-confidence—alongside vital social competencies including teamwork, empathy, and constructive cooperation. When these core principles are intentionally integrated, they nurture self-discipline, ethical integrity, and long-term sportsmanship, yielding positive behavioral impacts that follow children both on the field and in their broader lives within the community.

Field research conducted within the MENTORS project framework—utilizing extensive insights from primary grassroots stakeholders, including coaches, referees, and parents—highlights that sport offers a structured yet playful environment. Within this protected space, children can productively channel their energy, acquire transformative non-formal educational experiences, and strengthen long-lasting social ties.

However, while these positive outcomes are widely recognized across European grassroots networks, empirical evidence demonstrates that the transmission of values through sport is frequently fragmented, inconsistent, and secondary to performance metrics. The pedagogical potential of youth sports is routinely compromised by structural negative factors, including:

- **Hyper-Competitive Pressure**: Systematically exerted by adult clubs and families, which shifts the child's focus from psychological growth and enjoyment to an all-or-nothing victory mindset.
- **Socio-Economic Disparities**: Creating unequal access to high-quality facilities, inclusive training programs, and resource-rich sporting environments.
- **Pedagogical Gaps**: Grassroots coaches often lack comprehensive training regarding child moral development and psychological safety, focusing almost exclusively on tactical or physical skills.
- **Digital Distractions**: Shifting children's cognitive attention away from real-world, localized community engagement and collaborative physical play.

1.2 Purpose of the Curriculum

This Training Format translates established sociological and psychological data into an operational educational curriculum. It bridges the gap between theoretical research and the realities of the sports pitch, re-engineering the youth sports experience away from a result-driven, survival-of-the-fittest culture toward a reflective, child-centered, and holistic system of value education.

The ultimate goal is to foster system-wide cultural change across European grassroots sports clubs. This manual equips adult agents with the non-formal education (NFE) tools needed to turn everyday training sessions and competitive matches into intentional, ethically sound learning spaces.

SECTION 2: VALUE DEVELOPMENT IN SPORT

2.1 Theoretical Background: How Sports Foster Psychosocial Growth

Psychosocial growth in youth sports is not a passive byproduct of participation; it requires intentional pedagogical engineering. The theoretical backbone of the MENTORS curriculum is rooted in Behavioral Modeling and Social Learning Theory. Children do not internalize abstract ethical concepts through verbal lectures or direct instruction alone. Instead, they acquire complex behaviors, social attitudes, and emotional responses by systematically observing and imitating the real-time actions, reactions, and coping strategies of the adults around them.

This model relies on the child's observational skills, which develop and vary based on the sporting context, age, and individual maturity. Crucially, behavioral modeling functions as a reciprocal system: it helps build empathy within young athletes by making the reasons behind human choices visible on the field, yet it requires a foundational level of empathy from the outset. Interpreting an opponent's, teammate's, or referee's behavior depends on the cognitive capacity to take another person's perspective under intense, competitive social conditions.

2.2 Operational Interventions and Peer Dynamics

Values are taught on the field through a wide network of multi-tiered interventions. These interventions originate from different peer and adult groups, including fellow athletes, older students, coaches, referees, and family members. The long-term success of an educational intervention depends on both its content and a complex matrix of environmental factors that can support or hinder its reception:

- **Institutional Settings and Cultural Norms**: The pre-existing ethical climate of the sports club dictates what behaviors are socially rewarded or penalized.

- **Power Relations and Trust**: Interventions are successful only when built upon horizontal trust and mutual respect between different peer groups. High-stress environments where authoritarianism dominates suppress peer-to-peer communication, inducing compliance rather than authentic value internalization.
- **Communication Dynamics**: Active management of these structural dynamics ensures that value-driven messages are interpreted accurately, fostering shared understanding instead of resistance or misunderstanding among young athletes.

2.3 Field Insights: Gaps Between Declared and Practiced Values

Data from the MENTORS field research revealed a profound misalignment within grassroots sport: a fundamental clash between a result-driven, win-at-all-costs culture and an under-trained, uncoordinated network of adult agents. While clubs, parents, and coaches universally claim to value character development, honesty, and mutual respect, the competitive structure often triggers opposite, counter-educational behaviors:

- **The Sideline Crisis and Negative Modeling**: Parents' overinvolvement and hostile sideline behaviors serve as a powerful source of negative behavioral modeling. When children witness adults shouting at referees or opposing players, they internalize aggression as an acceptable response to pressure.

- **Adult Inconsistency**: Children possess a high sensitivity to adult conduct. When a coach preaches fair play but rewards deceitful tactics (such as simulation or intentional fouls) to secure a win, or when parents openly challenge a referee's authority, the child's moral framework is disrupted. This inconsistency stalls the internalization of values, as the child receives conflicting messages regarding what is genuinely valued in adult society.

- **The Authority and Masculinity Dilemma**: Traditional sports structures often foster rigid, outdated concepts of authority, power dynamics, and hyper-masculinity, where vulnerability is viewed as weakness and unconditional obedience replaces critical thinking. This environment directly opposes a culture of genuine respect and prevents children from developing the empowered critical thinking necessary to safely navigate authority figures both on and off the field.

2.4 Facilitating Practices and Proven Good Practices

To address these challenges, this Training Format introduces specific, field-tested good practices designed to dismantle hyper-competitive stress and reinforce positive psychosocial growth:

- **Reflective Routines**: Incorporating structured, non-formal debriefs immediately following training and matches. Discussing real moments of cooperation, ethical decision-making, or emotional outbursts helps children process physical experiences into conscious, internalized moral lessons.

- **Self-Refereeing and Autonomous Play**: Allowing children to arbitrate their own modified games and resolve conflicts without immediate adult interference. This develops autonomous moral reasoning, negotiation skills, peer empathy, and a practical understanding of justice.

- **Intermediate and Alternative Competitions**: Organizing low-stakes, gradual exposures to competition within familiar, low-pressure settings, explicitly prioritizing personal improvement and cooperative play over the scoreboard.

- **Non-Material Recognition**: Shifting reward structures away from physical trophies and toward the explicit celebration of ethical choices, fair play acts, and outstanding support shown to teammates or opponents.

SECTION 3: THE INTEGRATED APPROACH

3.1 What is the Integrated Approach?

The structural core of the MENTORS methodology is the Integrated Approach. This is defined as a highly coordinated, intentional educational framework in which all adult agents surrounding the young athlete—Coaches, Referees, and Families—operate not as isolated, independent entities, but as a unified educational team working at eye-level.
Values are not internalized through isolated phrases, but through total environmental consistency. By synchronizing the communication and live behaviors of the coach on the training ground, the referee during the match, and the parents at home, we eliminate the contradictory signals that disrupt moral development. This cross-sector collaboration serves as the overarching methodology upon which the entire MENTORS ecosystem is built.

3.2 The Four Core Principles

The implementation of the training curriculum across all value modules is strictly grounded in four interconnected principles:

- **Shared Responsibility**: Value education is a collective effort. Children learn through the combined, synchronized influence of every adult figure actively engaging with them across all sport-related contexts.

- **Consistency Across Environments**: The internalization of ethical behavior is strongest when adults deliver identical, mutually reinforcing messages both during the physical sport activity and afterward within the home environment.

- **Communication and Cooperation**: Continuous, intentional alignment between clubs, coaches, referees, and parents prevents structural contradictions and behavioral mixed signals, creating a stable, predictable learning environment.

- **Holistic Development**: Sport is systematically re-engineered not as a survival-of-the-fittest physical performance tracker, but as a primary driver for emotional maturity, social inclusion, ethical growth, and psychological well-being.

SECTION 4: THE 4 VALUE-BASED TRAINING MODULES

KEY VALUE: FAIR PLAY

MODULE A – THEORETICAL & AWARENESS

SUB-VALUES ADDRESSED

- **Integrity**: Respect for the rules, honesty in game situations and rejection of deception.
- **Empathy**: Understanding the state of mind of opponents and teammates, especially after a defeat or a mistake.
- **Inclusion**: Respect for the diversity of abilities, contexts and personalities in the sports environment.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE VALUE

The value of respect and fair play represents the true beating heart of the sporting experience for children in the age group between six and twelve, placing itself not as a simple set of rules of good conduct, but as the fundamental ethical core on which the entire pedagogical architecture of the MENTORS project rests. In this crucial phase of human development, sport ceases to be a mere physical or recreational activity to transform itself into a powerful and irreplaceable ecosystem of secondary socialization, where young athletes learn for the first time to negotiate common space, to manage the weight of their instinctive emotions and to gradually build a solid and conscious moral identity.

Defining respect in this context means embracing a multidimensional and profound vision, which includes not only the formal acceptance of the rules, but also the care of oneself, the authentic appreciation of teammates, the deep acceptance of the rules of the game as guarantors of freedom and the proactive recognition of the opponent as an indispensable person for the very experience of the game to exist.

Fair play, as a result, evolves from a banal and passive regulatory compliance to a form of superior integrity that manifests itself in radical honesty during game situations, in the rejection of any form of deception or simulation and in a deep empathy that allows one to experience the joy of victory with humility and the pain of defeat with absolute dignity.

From a psychological point of view, sport offers fertile ground for the development of self-control and discipline, but without an explicit value orientation, competition risks degenerating into aggression or a search for success at any cost. The concept of respect, in the context of MENTORS, is therefore presented as a transversal skill that the child must be able to exercise in every direction.

First of all, towards himself, learning to know his limits and celebrate his progress without falling into narcissism; secondly, towards the other, transforming the opponent from an "enemy to be defeated" to a "challenge partner" that allows us to improve our performance. This resemantization of the opponent is a key step in preventing bullying and discrimination, as it teaches that the diversity of skills or jerseys never cancels out the common belonging to the community of sportsmen. Fair play therefore becomes the tool through which sporting justice is manifested: it is not only not cheating, but it is acting in such a way that the beauty of the game and the fairness of the confrontation are always preserved, even when this involves a personal sacrifice or an immediate loss of advantage.

The evidence collected in the extensive research conducted within the MENTORS project in several European countries clearly demonstrates that respect is perceived as the most transversal and fundamental value by all the social groups involved. However, the analyses highlight a critical and worrying discrepancy between the ethical ideal declared by adults and the reality lived daily on the playing fields. Although coaches, parents, and managers formally recognize the supreme importance of fairness, the psychological pressure from competitive competition often leads to inconsistent and contradictory behavior that generates deep confusion in the child.

The transmission of these values, in fact, does not take place theoretically or through abstract sermons, but through a complex social ecology where each adult figure plays a role as a decisive symbolic mediator. Coaches act as the main behavioral mirrors: their way of reacting to a technical error, a foul suffered or an unfair defeat has an immensely greater pedagogical impact than any verbal lesson on sportsmanship.

A mentor who keeps calm in the face of a refereeing error and who rewards commitment and fairness rather than just numerical scoring, creates a "psychologically safe" environment around the athlete where fair play can finally flourish as a conscious choice and not as an imposed obligation.

In the same way, the reflection introduced by MENTORS assigns a new and revolutionary centrality to the figure of the referee, no longer seen as a distant authority, a punitive judge or an obstacle to success, but as a real agent of civilization and an educator in action. Through constant dialogue, transparent language and the calm explanation of the decisions made in the heat of the match, the referee helps children to internalize the deep sense of justice and the vital need for emotional control in moments of maximum tension. At the same time, families represent the natural extension of the team identity and must act in total harmony with the messages of the sports club to prevent excessive pressure on results or a hostile attitude in the stands from distorting the formative meaning of the competitive experience.

The main challenge that emerged from the focus groups of Work Package 2 concerns the need to protect young athletes from external negative models — often borrowed from the world of exasperated professionalism — and from the tendency to marginalize technically less gifted children in the name of an immediate victory that leaves no educational traces.

In conclusion, promoting respect and fair play in the context of the MENTORS project means intentionally investing in building citizens who are more aware, upright and capable of solidarity. Sport must remain a training ground for authentic life, where honesty, loyalty and recognition of the value of the other always prevail over the logic of pure numerical competition. Only when the child understands that playing by the rules and the opponent makes him a better person, and that the real victory lies in the quality of his moral conduct, can we say that the educational goal has been achieved.

This introduction therefore acts as a compass for all the subsequent activities of the module, remembering that every interaction on the field is a unique opportunity to teach that the beauty of sport lies precisely in its ability to unite individuals under the sign of a common and unshakable mutual respect.

2. RESEARCH INSIGHTS

The analysis of the results that emerged from Work Package 2 of the MENTORS project offers a complex and multifaceted overview of how the value of respect and fair play is perceived, interpreted and experienced in youth sports contexts in seven different European countries. Field research, conducted through systematic focus groups with coaches, parents and managers, revealed a unanimous and almost universal convergence on the importance of respect as a fundamental pillar of every educational activity.

However, the data simultaneously laid bare a deep "educational fracture" between the declared ethical theory and the practice observed daily on the playing fields. From the point of view of pedagogical literature, this phenomenon finds an accurate and scientific explanation in Albert Bandura's Theory of Social Learning, which strongly suggests that children, especially in the age group between six and twelve, do not learn moral values through abstract verbal instructions or theoretical lessons, but mainly through the constant observation and imitation of social models that are significant to them.

In this sense, MENTORS' research empirically confirms that when a coach or parent manifests even mild aggressive frustration towards a referee or opponent, they are unintentionally providing a lesson in unsportsmanlike behavior that instantly invalidates any previous teaching about fairness. This modeling process is so powerful that it overwrites the rules written in the clubs' codes of ethics, making the figure of the adult the main vehicle for transmitting — or, unfortunately, eroding — fair play.

Another crucial and extremely interesting aspect that emerged from the data collected in WP2 concerns the constant and often unresolved tension between task orientation and ego orientation, concepts that are widely covered in the literature on Positive Youth Development (PYD). Evidence shows that in sports environments where a culture of winning at all costs prevails and where success is measured exclusively through scoring, respect tends to become a purely ancillary element, almost a bureaucratic nuisance.

On the contrary, when the sports environment is intentionally structured to enhance the Self-improvement, technical mastery and peer cooperation, fair play naturally emerges as a necessary and rewarding social skill. The pedagogical literature, supported by the results of MENTORS' field research, suggests that competition should not be eliminated or demonized, but should be "resemantised" as a challenge shared with the opponent to overcome one's limits.

However, the focus groups highlighted with concern how many parents still tend to project their frustrated ambitions or dreams of success onto their children, transforming the Sunday game into an identity and social battleground that stifles the educational spirit of the game in the bud.

This external pressure not only undermines the child's enjoyment and psychological well-being, but profoundly alters his perception of justice, gradually leading him to consider deception, simulation or protest as legitimate and necessary tools to achieve the success required by adults.

The research also investigated the role of the referee within the sports educational triangle, finding significant evidence in the theories of listening and dialogue pedagogy. Participants in focus groups have often described the referee as an isolated figure, a "foreign body" to the game or, in the worst case, as a necessary target for the collective frustrations of athletes and spectators. Modern pedagogical literature, on the other hand, suggests that the legitimization of arbitration authority is a fundamental and essential step for the development of civic sense and respect for the law in adult life.

The data from the MENTORS project clearly indicate that where there is open, transparent and mutually respectful communication between referee and young athletes, episodes of aggression and violations of the rules decrease dramatically. This approach transforms the referee's whistle into a moment of guided and conscious learning, helping the child to understand that external regulation is not a limit to his freedom, but the essential condition to ensure the fairness, beauty and safety of all participants.

The challenge identified in WP2 is therefore to fully reintegrate the referee into the educational process, definitively eliminating that perception of "enemy" or "unfair judge" that is too often fueled by the distorted messages of the media or by the disorderly behavior of adult viewers.

Finally, the results of the research strongly underline the importance of systemic coherence between the different actors involved in the child's sports path. The pedagogical literature defines this fundamental concept as "educational continuity", a principle according to which the effectiveness of a value message critically depends on its uniformity in different contexts. If the value of respect is vigorously promoted in the gym during the week but is then blatantly contradicted by the behavior of the parents at home or during the competition, the child experiences a destabilizing cognitive dissonance that hinders the deep internalization of values.

The conclusions of WP2 therefore invite the creation of a real "Extended Team Identity", an educational pact where clubs, families and institutions collaborate actively and humbly to protect the integrity of the athlete's training path. In conclusion, research insights show that fair play cannot and should not be considered static content to be taught "once", but must be understood as a dynamic, daily and choral practice, supported by a social environment that rewards honesty, promotes empathy and recognizes in deep respect for the other the essential condition for the beauty and duration of every sporting and human experience.

3. INTEGRATED GUIDELINES

The pedagogical effectiveness of the MENTORS project in grounding the values of respect and fair play depends entirely on the ability to create a "community of practice" where each adult involved acts as a piece of a coherent and crack-free educational mosaic. In this delicate age group, which goes from six to twelve years, the child is not a simple receiver of instructions, but an acute observer of the social environment that surrounds him; he learns to navigate the world and to build his own moral compass not through theoretical lessons, but by decoding the signals, reactions and emotions of his reference figures. If the message of respect is fragmented — if, for example, the coach formally teaches it during the week but the parent implicitly denies it by criticizing the referee at the weekend — the child experiences a cognitive dissonance that nullifies any previous pedagogical effort.

Therefore, multi-actor cooperation must be understood not as a simple courtesy collaboration, but as a strategy of total "value protection", capable of enveloping the athlete in a psychologically protected environment where integrity and respect for the other are the only languages spoken and recognized. This synergy represents the indispensable prerequisite for transforming the sports field from a simple arena of physical confrontation and technical competition to a real laboratory of active citizenship, where the foundations of civil coexistence are formed.

The coach, as the architect of the motivational climate and the main mentor on the field, has the primary responsibility to transform each training session into an opportunity for ethical learning that goes far beyond the mere explanation of technical fundamentals. The strategy of proactive modeling requires the coach to be fully aware that his every word, every pause, his every reaction to a mistake and even his non-verbal language are constantly monitored and internalized by the young athletes. During the week of preparation, the coach-mentor must not limit himself to managing the physical load, but must intentionally structure exercises that do not only reward speed or strength, but that necessarily require cooperation, sacrifice for the partner and absolute respect for shared rules.

An operational example of high pedagogical value consists in creating game situations in which the score or success of the exercise is assigned only if the entire team has actively participated in the action or if a spontaneous gesture of support has been made towards a teammate in difficulty. In these moments, the coach must possess the sensitivity to "stop time", interrupting the activity not to correct a coordination defect or an inaccurate shot, but to highlight disrespectful behavior, inappropriate language or, on the contrary, to solemnly celebrate an act of honesty and sporting loyalty. It is precisely in these interstices of daily practice, away from the spotlight of the official match, which builds the moral conscience of the athlete of the future. The coach's leadership must evolve towards a form of radical educational transparency: constantly explaining the "why" of a technical choice or a disciplinary sanction helps children not to perceive authority as an arbitrary imposition or an exercise of power, but as a necessary and benevolent guide aimed at ensuring the fairness, safety and enjoyment of all participants.

At the same time, the figure of the referee must be completely resemantized and rehabilitated within the strategic vision of the MENTORS project, moving from the traditional role of "punitive judge" or "external obstacle" to that of "facilitator of equity" and educational partner. During the match, which inevitably represents the moment of maximum emotional activation and psychological stress for the child, the referee must act with a strong, almost clinical pedagogical sensitivity. His communication must not be limited to the whistle or the technical gesture, but must be imbued with a constant didactic intent: every decision should be accompanied by a brief, calm and assertive explanation, aimed at making the young athlete understand that the rule does not exist to limit his freedom, but to protect the integrity of the game and the health of the opponent.

This interaction transforms the sanction from a moment of frustration to a moment of deep civic awareness. The referee's cooperation with the technical staff begins long before the kick-off, through coordination meetings in which the common educational objective of the day is reiterated, eliminating any residual opposition between those who direct and those who coach.

When the referee uses tools such as the "White Card" to publicly acknowledge a gesture of exceptional sportsmanship — such as a child correcting a decision in his favor or helping an opponent get up after a tackle — he is not only rewarding an individual, but he is sending a powerful cultural signal to the entire public, managers and teammates: Moral integrity is of greater value than any goal or point scored. This mutual legitimization between referee and coach creates a united and unassailable front that defuses protests, verbal aggression in the bud and teaches children that human error is an intrinsic element of life that must be faced with resilience, composure and respect.

The third fundamental pillar, represented by families, is the element that more than any other determines the stability and duration of the entire educational system in the long term. Parents must make a cultural leap in quality, understanding that they are an integral part of the identity of the team and the training project, and not just external users or passive spectators. Their strategy of action must be strictly divided between the exemplary behavior to be held "on the sidelines" and the role of support and reflection to be played "within the home". During the course of the match, the MENTORS parent must adopt the profile of a conscious and silent spectator, capable of encouragement that is never aimed at the result, but exclusively at the commitment, courage and beauty of athletic gestures, regardless of the jersey worn by the protagonists on the field. Categorically refraining from shouting technical or critical instructions is an act of deep respect for the child's decision-making autonomy, who must be left free to make mistakes and learn, and for the child's decision-making.

professionalism of the coach. However, it is once the activity is over that the role of the family becomes even more critical: on the way home or during meals, parents have the extraordinary opportunity to act as facilitators of the debriefing, transforming the emotional story of the game into an opportunity to explore how the child felt in relation to others and how he or she handled moments of injustice or tension.

Open-ended and thoughtful questions, which avoid obsessive score analysis and instead focus on the quality of human relationships experienced in the field, push the child to internalize respect as a permanent compass. If a parent has the moral strength to validate a difficult refereeing decision, even when it appears technically dubious, he is imparting to his child the most valuable lesson of the entire sporting journey: the primacy of respect for common rules and civil coexistence over personal interest or desire to win.

The real strength and originality of the integrated guidelines of MENTORS lie in the "educational continuity" that they are able to generate through a network of mutual reinforcements. Cooperation is not a sporadic event, but a constant maintenance of the relationships between clubs, staff and families. This means promoting regular discussion tables where we do not discuss tactical schemes or rankings, but the quality of the educational environment, the psychological well-being of young athletes and the prevention of phenomena such as bullying or exclusion.

Cooperation is most effective especially in the management of moments of crisis or deviant behavior: if a child becomes the protagonist of a disrespectful act, the system's response must be unequivocal, firm and coordinated. The coach immediately intervenes on the field to re-establish the order of values, the referee manages the dynamics in the context of the game and the family resumes and deepens the discourse at home, not with a punitive or repressive spirit, but with exquisitely reflective and reparative purposes. This systemic coherence ensures that the value of respect is not perceived as an abstract concept, an annoying bureaucratic obligation or a simple poster hanging in the locker room, but as a living daily practice, a habit of the heart and mind that the child will carry with him as a precious treasure well beyond the end of his competitive sports experience.

In this extended vision, sport ceases to be an end in itself and becomes a privileged means for building a more equitable, empathetic and supportive society. The challenge that the MENTORS project launches to all its protagonists is to take responsibility for being "guardians of fair play", protecting the beauty of the game from the toxic drifts of selfishness and aggression. Every carefully planned training, every referee whistle explained with patience and every parental applause addressed to a deserving opponent are the bricks with which a future is built in which the recognition of the other is the supreme value.

The operational synergy between these different souls of youth sport guarantees that the child's educational path is an integral experience, capable of forging not only competent athletes, but above all men and women capable of navigating the complexities of social life with honesty, respect and an unwavering sense of justice. Only through this choral, total and daily commitment of all the adults involved, can fair play finally cease to be a rare exception to become the golden norm of all human interaction, making sport the largest and most inclusive training ground for democracy and humanity available to the new generations.

4. COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT

The communication toolkit of the MENTORS project should not be considered a simple set of technical instructions, but the operational language through which the entire ecosystem of respect comes to life and manifests itself to the child's senses. In youth sports communication, the content of the message is inextricably linked to its form and the emotional tone with which it is conveyed; therefore, the development of a specific communicative competence for adults is the prerequisite for transforming every interaction into a reinforcement of values.

The fundamental strategy that must guide every communicative act is the adoption of an approach oriented towards positive reinforcement and the enhancement of moral identity with respect to physical performance. This means that the adult must actively engage in proactive behaviors, such as the constant and public recognition of gestures of sportsmanship, not limiting himself to praising his athletes but also extending the appreciation to opponents. Openly celebrating an exceptional save by the opposing goalkeeper or a gesture of loyalty by a teammate who admits his or her mistake teaches the child, in a direct and indelible way, that the value of the person and the integrity of the game far outweigh belonging to a jersey or the need for a point on the scoreboard.

At the same time, the toolkit defines very clearly the behaviors to be avoided at all costs so as not to compromise the stability of the educational path. It is necessary that every adult — be it coach, parent or manager — strictly refrain from any form of criticism or sarcastic comment directed at the figure of the referee or the players of the opposite team. Every single word of disappointment expressed by an adult on the fringes of the field acts as an implicit authorization for the child to perceive the other as an enemy to be defeated or an unfair obstacle, destroying months of work on frustration management and empathy in a matter of moments. In terms of concrete actions, the adult must learn to manage moments of maximum tension through the so-called "educational silence" or through incitements that focus attention on collective commitment and resilience. Instead of shouting directive instructions that deprive the child of his or her decision-making autonomy, communication must be oriented towards supporting the growth process, encouraging young athletes to sincerely apologize after a foul and to resume play with the awareness that error is a natural component of learning and not an opportunity for conflict.

The beating heart of this toolkit, however, lies in the specific verbal strategies and example sentences that adults can use to manage critical situations. The choice of terms must be surgical: instead of generic praise, the adult should use expressions that validate ethical behavior as a form of excellence.

For example, after a defeat matured in an atmosphere of great fairness, the most powerful phrase that a parent or a coach can utter is to underline how important it was to see the team keep its head up and respect the refereeing decisions even when they were difficult to accept, showing a deep pride not for the result, but for the dignity demonstrated.

During moments of guided reflection or debriefing at the end of the activity, it is essential to stimulate the child's critical thinking through questions that explore the dimension of respect, such as asking which gesture of loyalty struck him the most during the race or how he felt when he helped a classmate to get up. This type of dialogue transforms lived experience into rational awareness.

In addition, communication must be restorative and not punitive when faced with a lack of respect from the child. Instead of a scolding for its own sake, the adult should put the athlete in front of the responsibility for his actions, asking him in a calm but firm way what consequences his behavior had on the climate of the match and what he could have done differently to protect the value of fair play. Phrases such as "Your partner counted on your correctness, how can we fix it together?" open a path of reconciliation and growth. It is equally essential to teach children the use of formulas of courtesy and gratitude that normalize mutual respect, suggesting that they always thank the referee at the end of the match or compliment the opponent for the intensity of the game. This system of verbal messages, if repeated with coherence and conviction by each reference figure, creates a sort of "positive magnetic field" that surrounds the young athlete, making respect and fair play not simple external obligations, but an integral and rewarding part of one's sporting and human identity.

Ultimately, the MENTORS communication toolkit aims to equip every adult with the right words to build a healthy emotional memory, capable of forming citizens who know how to communicate honestly, manage defeats with class and always recognize the intrinsic value of the other, in every context of life.

MODULE B – PRACTICAL & NFE SESSIONS

1. SESSION OVERVIEW

SESSION NAME: Be The Ref



Photo from the Bragança FA Archive

PURPOSE OF THE EXERCISE



To give opportunity to all children to referee and understand how difficult it's to perform well in this role in sports. Many young players complain about referees without understanding how difficult it is to make decisions under pressure. When they become referees themselves, they often gain a different perspective.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

In general, improve the respect and fair play for all participants in sports but especially for the referees.
Some other outcomes can be also:
1) Develop a better understanding of the challenges and responsibilities associated with the referee role.
2) Improve their understanding of fair play principles and the importance of following rules.
3) Strengthen communication, empathy, and decision-making skills.
4) Learn to accept decisions made by others, even when they disagree with them.
5) Reflect on the impact of their behavior towards referees, teammates, and opponents.
6) Promote positive attitudes such as honesty, integrity, respect, and self-control during sporting activities.

2. LOGISTICS & RESOURCES



Photo from the Bragança FA Archive

The group-size cannot have more than 30 elements per coach, because a bigger group with more than 6 pitches will be difficult to manage just by one coach.

We need to divide the group into smaller groups of 5 elements, where they will play football 2 vs. 2 with the other element acting as referee in the game. We will need as many mini-football pitches as necessary to put all groups of 5 elements into action at the same time, if the group has 30 people, you will need 6 mini-football pitches.

The mini-football pitches can be a square of 5 meters long on each side and the small goals of 1 meter long can be made with training cones. Each game can be played for 5 minutes without stopping and at the end of the 5 minutes another player is selected to be the referee in a rotation system (a total of 25 minutes will be needed for all players to be active as referees).

The matches start and finish at the same time after the whistle of the coach, the 5 minutes time for each match are controlled by the coach with one minute to change the roles of the players. In total the sport activity will have 30 minutes of duration.

3. PREPARATION

Materials that will be needed:
Training cones to mark mini-pitches and goals
(if you can have small goals can be good too).
Footballs (one per mini-football pitch).
Whistle for each referee and the coach (very important).
Stopwatch or timer for the coach.



Photo from the Bragança FA Archive

Steps Before starting:

1. Create one mini-football pitch per group (approximately 5m x 5m).
2. Mark two goals of approximately 1 meter width using cones.
3. Divide the participants into groups of five people.
4. Explain the rules of the game and the referee's responsibilities.
5. Introduce the fair play principles that participants should demonstrate throughout the activity: respect for referees, respect for opponents, respect for rules, positive communication, honesty and integrity
6. Brief participants on the objectives of the activity.
7. Encourage players to respect all referee decisions during each round.
8. Ensure that every participant understands the rotation system so that everyone experiences the referee role.

4. DEVELOPMENT

Warm-Up (18%)
3’ minutes running around one half-of the football pitch
All players run slowly around the half football pitch to activate the body to exercise.

5’ minutes rondo drill with 5 players (1 in the middle).
Four players form a square and the player in the middle must try to intercept the passes between the players in the square. After each interception, the player that made the “bad pass” goes to the middle.

Development/Core Activity (70%)
Exercise: Be The Ref
2’ minutes distribution of the 5 players on the pitches.
30 minutes of the exercise “Be The REF”, with the rotations of the roles each 5 minutes.
The coach must control the match's time and whistle each 5 minutes for the rotations between the football players. The referees on the mini-football pitches must try to do their job the best they are capable.

Cool-down (12%)
Flexibility
5’minutes flexibility exercises with focus on the lower body.

Toe Touch Stretch (1 minute)

Starting Position:
Stand tall with feet shoulder-width apart. Keep knees slightly soft, not locked.

How to Perform:
Slowly bend forward from the hips.
Reach both hands toward your toes.
Go only as far as feels comfortable.
Hold for 5 seconds.
Slowly return to standing.
Repeat several times during the minute.

Coaching Cues:
"Reach for your toes like you're picking up a treasure." Keep movements slow and controlled.
Do not bounce.

Target Areas: Hamstrings and lower back.

Butterfly Stretch (1 minute)

Starting Position:

Sit on the floor.
Bring the soles of your feet together.
Hold your feet with both hands.

How to Perform:

Sit up tall with a straight back.
Gently move your knees up and down like butterfly wings.
After 30 seconds, stop flapping and hold the stretch.
Gently press your knees toward the floor for the remaining 30 seconds.

Coaching Cues: "Pretend you're a butterfly getting ready to fly." Keep your chest up and shoulders relaxed.

Target Areas: Inner thighs and hips.

Frog Stretch (1 minute)

Starting Position: Begin on hands and knees. Place hands directly under shoulders.

How to Perform:

Slowly move your knees wider apart.
Keep your feet in line with your knees.
Lower your hips slightly toward the floor.
Hold the position for 20 seconds.
Gently rock forward and backward for 20 seconds.
Hold again for the final 20 seconds.

Coaching Cues: "Pretend you're a frog sitting on a lily pad." Move slowly and stay comfortable.

Target Areas: Groin, inner thighs, and hips.

Flamingo Stretch (1 minute)

Starting Position:
Stand tall. Hold onto a wall or partner if needed.

How to Perform:

Lift one foot behind your body.
Hold your ankle with the same-side hand.
Keep your knees close together.
Stand tall and balance for 30 seconds.
Switch legs and repeat for another 30 seconds.

Coaching Cues:

"Stand tall like a flamingo." Keep your eyes focused on one spot.

Target Areas: Quadriceps and hip flexors.

Deep Squat Stretch (1 minute)

Starting Position: Stand with feet slightly wider than shoulder-width apart.

How to Perform:

Slowly lower into a deep squat.
Keep your heels on the floor.
Place your elbows inside your knees.
Gently push your knees outward.
Hold for 20 seconds.
Stand up and shake your legs.
Repeat two more times.

Coaching Cues:

"Sit like a frog ready to jump."
Keep your chest up and look forward.

Target Areas: Hips, ankles, groin, and lower body mobility.

5. EVALUATION & DEBRIEF



Photo from the Bragança FA Archive

Following the sport activity, facilitators/coaches should organize a short reflection session using questions such as:

For all the participants acting as referees

- How did you feel when making decisions during the game?
- Was it easy or difficult to referee your peers?
- How did it feel when players respected your decisions?
- How did it feel when your decisions were questioned?

For all players

- How easy was it to accept the referee's decisions?
- Did your perspective on referees change after seeing your peers and yourself in this role?
- What behaviors showed respect during the activity?
- What behaviors could be improved?

For Group Reflection

- Why is the referee important in sport?
- What can players and other sport people do to create a more respectful sporting environment?
- How can the lessons learned today be applied in other sports and daily life situations?

Evaluation Methods

- Observation of participant behaviour during the activity.
- Self-reflection by the participants.
- Group discussion and feedback.

6. EXPECTED IMPACT



Photo from the Bragança FA Archive

Short-Term Impact
In the short term we can verify the increased awareness on the difficulties and responsibilities of refereeing, we can also check improved respect towards referees and authority figures in sport. We will be able to see also a greater understanding of fair-play values and more positive interactions between all participants during sporting activities.

Medium-Term Impact
We will verify in the medium term a reduction in negative behaviors towards referees during games, increased acceptance of rules and decisions, improve conflict-resolution skills and emotional self-control and a stronger culture of respect within sports teams and youth groups.

Long-Term Impact
We will be able to see the development of responsible and respectful sporting behaviors, promotion of fair play as a core value in sport and everyday life, increased empathy towards people performing leadership and decision-making roles and a contribution to a more inclusive, respectful, and positive sporting environment for children and young people.

7. ANNEX: TECHNICAL SHEET

This activity consists of short two-a-side football matches in which a referee is required to make minor interventions based on the flow of the game. As the game is played as a two-a-side football variant in a small space, there will be many situations, though none of them particularly complex.

This 5-minute match experience allows players to take on both roles, that of player and that of referee, which enriches the experience, particularly when participating in the role of referee. This experience will enable players to realize that the role of the referee is very difficult and that referees are sometimes treated unfairly by players and spectators.

Exercise name: Be The REF
Objective: Improve respect and fair play
Players: 5 -30 participants
Field: Small-sided football pitch
Duration: 45 minutes + 15 minutes

Key Rules:

- Football rules adapted to small pitches
- Respect the referees' decisions
- Mandatory all payers act as referee
- Mandatory reflection

KEY VALUE: HEALTHY COMPETITION

MODULE A – THEORETICAL & AWARENESS

SUB-VALUES ADDRESSED

- Striving for excellence
- Respectful rivalry
- Self-discipline and emotional control

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE VALUE

Healthy competition in youth sport refers to the ability to engage in competitive situations in a way that promotes personal growth, learning, and respect for others, rather than focusing exclusively on winning. In the developmental phase of children aged 6 to 12, competition represents a powerful educational opportunity, as it exposes young participants to challenges, emotions, and social interactions that contribute to their overall development.

When appropriately guided, competition can support children in building motivation, persistence, and self-confidence. It allows them to experience both success and failure in a structured environment, helping them gradually develop resilience and a constructive attitude toward difficulties. At the same time, sport provides a context in which children begin to understand rules, fairness, and the importance of respecting others, including teammates, opponents, and referees.

Within this framework, healthy competition is not a spontaneous outcome of participation in sport, but rather a value that needs to be intentionally fostered. It is closely connected to a set of interrelated sub-values that together shape a positive competitive experience.

One of these is striving for excellence, which refers to the ability to focus on personal improvement and effort rather than external results. Children who develop this orientation learn to set realistic goals, to appreciate their own progress, and to remain motivated even when facing challenges. In this sense, excellence is understood not as outperforming others, but as continuously working toward one's own potential.

Another key dimension is respectful rivalry. In healthy competition, opponents are not seen as obstacles to defeat, but as essential partners in the learning process. Through interaction with others, children are exposed to different levels of ability and styles of play, which encourages adaptation, respect, and mutual recognition. This perspective helps reduce hostility and promotes a sense of fairness and sportsmanship.

A further important component is self-discipline and emotional control. Competitive situations often generate strong emotions, such as excitement, frustration, or disappointment. Learning how to manage these emotions in a constructive way is fundamental for children's development. Through guided experiences, they can acquire strategies to cope with mistakes, accept decisions, and maintain respectful behaviour even in challenging moments.

These sub-values are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Striving for excellence supports motivation and engagement, respectful rivalry fosters positive social interactions, and emotional control ensures that competition remains a constructive experience. Together, they contribute to creating an environment in which children can experience competition as a meaningful and enjoyable process.

Finally, the goal of promoting healthy competition is to shift the focus from outcome to process. Rather than defining success only through winning, children are encouraged to value effort, learning, and respect. This approach not only enhances their sport experience, but also supports the development of life skills that extend beyond the playing field.

Healthy competition in children's sport refers to engaging in competitive situations in a way that promotes personal growth, learning, and respect, rather than focusing exclusively on winning.

For children aged 6–12, competition plays a particularly important developmental role, as this is a phase in which they begin to build their self-concept, learn how to interact with others, and develop basic emotional regulation skills. At this stage, children are highly sensitive to feedback from adults and peers, and their experience of competition can significantly influence their motivation, confidence, and long-term engagement in sport.

In this context, competition becomes a key opportunity for learning. It allows children to gradually develop motivation and persistence when facing challenges, learn how to deal with both success and failure, build self-confidence and resilience, and understand rules, fairness, and respect.

However, for these benefits to emerge, competitive experiences must be carefully designed and adapted to children's developmental needs. Activities that are most effective at this age are those that reduce excessive pressure and emphasise participation, learning, and interaction. For instance, small-sided games allow children to be more involved and experience frequent decision-making situations, while adapted rules can help balance different skill levels and keep the focus on learning rather than performance alone.

In addition, activities that explicitly integrate behavioural objectives alongside performance outcomes are particularly valuable. For example, in a "dual scoring" game, teams can earn points not only for goals or successful actions, but also for behaviours such as encouraging teammates, showing respect toward opponents, or reacting constructively to mistakes. Similarly, personal goal-setting activities—where each child identifies a specific aspect to improve before the game—help shift attention from comparison with others to individual progress. Another effective approach is the use of reflection moments during or after play, where children are guided to think about how they behaved, how they managed emotions, and what they learned from the experience.

In a sports context, healthy competition therefore means valuing effort and improvement over results, recognising opponents as partners in the learning process, and managing emotions constructively during challenges. These elements are best supported through activities that create space for reflection, experimentation, and positive social interaction, rather than rigid or highly result-oriented formats.

Healthy competition is a core value in children's sport, as it supports personal growth, motivation, and learning while preserving respect for oneself and others. It is not defined by winning at all costs, but by the ability to engage in challenges, effort, and comparison in a balanced and educational way. When properly guided through appropriate activities and consistent adult support, competition becomes a positive learning environment where children can develop resilience, self-control, and respect, rather than experiencing pressure, fear of failure, or hostility.

2. RESEARCH INSIGHTS

The development of healthy competition in youth sport must be understood within a complex social ecosystem, where multiple actors influence how children experience and interpret competition. Findings from the project's cross-analysis research report clearly show that sport can be a powerful context for value development, but this process is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Instead, it depends on the quality of interactions between children and the key psychosocial agents surrounding them.

Among these agents, parents and coaches emerge as the most influential figures. Their behaviours, expectations, and communication styles directly shape how children perceive success, failure, and effort. Referees, although less frequently recognised in educational terms, also play a meaningful role by modelling fairness, consistency, and emotional control during competition. Together, these actors contribute to creating the emotional and motivational climate in which competition takes place.

A central finding of the research concerns the tension between educational goals and performance-oriented environments. In many cases, competitive sport settings tend to prioritise results and winning, which can generate pressure, anxiety, and fear of failure among children. This outcome-oriented approach may undermine the developmental potential of sport and even lead to disengagement. On the other hand, when competition is framed as an opportunity for learning, improvement, and personal challenge, it becomes a powerful driver of motivation, enjoyment, and long-term participation.

The report also highlights the importance of emotional and social development within competitive contexts. Skills such as emotional regulation, self-control, and respect are essential components of healthy competition. However, these competencies do not develop spontaneously. Children need to be guided in learning how to manage frustration, cope with mistakes, and respond constructively to both victory and defeat. In this sense, adults act not only as instructors but as role models whose behaviour is constantly observed and imitated.

Another critical issue emerging from the research is the inconsistency between the messages delivered by different social agents. Children often receive mixed signals: for example, a coach may emphasise effort and improvement, while parents focus primarily on winning, or referees promote fairness while their decisions are openly challenged by adults. This lack of alignment can create confusion and weaken the internalisation of values, ultimately affecting children's behaviour during competition. These findings strongly reinforce the importance of adopting an Integrated Approach, where all stakeholders share common educational objectives and communicate them coherently.

In addition, the analysis of existing programmes shows that while values such as respect, fair play, teamwork, and cooperation are widely promoted, other dimensions, particularly those related to emotional resilience, self-control, empathy and healthy competition, are less explicitly addressed. This suggests that there is still a gap between recognising the importance of these values and systematically integrating them into practice.

Finally, the research identifies both barriers and facilitating factors that influence the development of healthy competition. On one hand, a result-driven culture, parental pressure, and limited pedagogical training for coaches can hinder value-based learning. On the other hand, positive and supportive environments, clear communication of educational goals, and consistent behaviour among adults significantly enhance children's ability to experience competition in a constructive and meaningful way.

Overall, the evidence confirms that healthy competition must be intentionally fostered through coordinated actions. It requires a shift from a purely outcome-oriented perspective to a process-oriented approach, where effort, learning, and respect are consistently reinforced. This module is designed to translate these research findings into practical strategies, enabling coaches, referees, and families to jointly create a competitive environment that supports children's holistic development.

3. INTEGRATED GUIDELINES

The promotion of healthy competition in youth sport requires a coordinated and consistent effort from all key adult figures involved in children's sport experiences. Coaches, referees, and families each play a distinct yet interconnected role in shaping how children understand and experience competition. Only through a shared and aligned approach can competition become a positive and educational process.

Coaches are central in creating the learning environment in which competition takes place. Their role goes beyond technical instruction, as they are responsible for framing competition as an opportunity for improvement rather than simply a test of performance. By focusing on individual progress, effort, and skill development, coaches can help children shift their attention from outcomes to learning processes. This includes setting realistic and personalized goals, encouraging experimentation, and normalizing mistakes as a natural and valuable part of learning. Equally important is the way coaches manage their own emotions: by remaining calm and constructive, especially in high-pressure situations, they model the behaviours they expect from their athletes.

Strategies:

- Focus on performance goals (skills, effort, improvement)
- Normalize mistakes as part of learning
- Provide constructive and specific feedback → examples:

"I really liked how you kept trying, even after the mistake."
"Good effort — you're improving your movement."
"It was a great decision to pass the ball there."
"You stayed focused until the end — well done."
"Try to keep your eyes up next time — you're getting closer."
"I can see your progress from last week."
"That didn't work this time, but it's a good attempt — try again."
"Great teamwork — you supported your teammate."
"Focus on your positioning, you're on the right track."
"What do you think you did better this time?"

- Model emotional control (especially in stressful situations)

Example actions:

- Set individual goals before matches
- Praise effort ("You kept trying under pressure")
- Avoid shouting or blaming

Referees contribute to healthy competition by ensuring that the game environment is perceived as fair, respectful, and safe. Their decisions and communication style have a strong educational impact, particularly for young players who are still learning to interpret rules and authority. When referees communicate clearly and calmly, and when they take the time to explain decisions in an age-appropriate manner, they reinforce children's understanding of fairness and respect for the game. Moreover, referees play a key role in preventing and managing conflicts. By demonstrating neutrality, emotional control, and consistency, they help de-escalate tensions and promote a culture of mutual respect among players, coaches, and spectators.

Strategies:

- Apply rules consistently and transparently
- Communicate decisions calmly and clearly
- Act as educators, not just rule enforcers
- De-escalate conflicts through tone and behaviour

Example actions:

- Brief explanations of decisions
- Neutral and respectful communication
- Reinforce fair behaviour

Families, on the other hand, shape the emotional climate surrounding children's sport experiences, both during and outside of competitions. Their attitudes, expectations, and reactions significantly influence how children perceive success and failure. When parents emphasise enjoyment, effort, and personal development rather than results, they contribute to a healthier and more supportive environment. It is equally important that families model respectful behaviour toward referees, coaches, and other players, as children are highly sensitive to these interactions. Supporting children also means helping them reflect on their experiences in a constructive way, encouraging them to recognise their progress and to view challenges as opportunities for growth.

Strategies:

- Emphasize learning and enjoyment over winning
- Avoid pressure and unrealistic expectations
- Model respectful behaviour toward all actors
- Support emotional processing after matches

Example actions:

- Ask reflective questions ("What did you learn today?")
- Avoid criticizing referees or other children
- Celebrate effort, not just results

What emerges clearly from both research and practice is that the effectiveness of these roles depends on their alignment. When coaches promote effort and reinforce learning, referees reinforce fairness and calm communication, and families support emotional development, children receive consistent messages that strengthen the internalisation of healthy competitive behaviours. On the other hand, when these actors convey conflicting expectations, such as prioritising winning over learning, the educational value of sport is weakened.

For this reason, healthy competition must be understood as a shared responsibility. It is not enough for each actor to act positively in isolation; rather, it is the coherence between their actions that creates a meaningful impact. Establishing common principles, maintaining open communication, and reinforcing similar messages across different contexts (training, matches, and home) are essential conditions for fostering a truly educational sporting environment.

Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that children experience competition not as a source of pressure, but as a constructive challenge, a challenge that supports their development not only as athletes, but also as individuals.

4. COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT

Effective communication plays a crucial role in shaping how children experience competition. The way adults speak, react, and provide feedback influences not only children's behaviour, but also their emotional responses, motivation, and self-perception. For this reason, promoting healthy competition requires a conscious and consistent use of language by coaches, referees, and families.

A key principle emerging from both research and practice is the importance of focusing communication on effort, improvement, and learning, rather than only on results. Children benefit from feedback that helps them understand what they did well, what they can improve, and how they can continue progressing. This type of communication supports the development of a growth mindset and reduces the fear of making mistakes.

At the same time, it is essential that adults maintain a calm and respectful tone, especially in emotionally intense situations such as matches or competitions. Children closely observe adult reactions, and these behaviours often become models that they replicate. Demonstrating emotional control, even in moments of disagreement or frustration, is therefore a fundamental component of healthy competition.

In practical terms, this means encouraging a communication style that reinforces positive behaviours and creates a safe environment for learning. Adults should avoid overly critical or result-oriented comments, as well as negative comparisons between children, which can undermine confidence and motivation. Instead, they should guide children toward reflection, helping them recognise their own progress and encouraging them to take ownership of their learning process.

DO'S: To support this approach, some key orientations can be highlighted. Communication should:

- emphasise effort and personal improvement rather than winning
- encourage reflection and self-awareness
- remain respectful toward all actors involved in the game
- reinforce positive behaviours immediately when they occur

Sample phrases to communicate:

- "I noticed how hard you kept trying, even when it was difficult."
- "What do you think you did well today?"
- "What did you learn from that situation?"
- "You stayed focused after the mistake — well done."
- "That was a respectful way to respond."
- "It's okay to feel disappointed. What can you take from this experience?"
- "Let's focus on what you can improve next time."
- "I can see the progress you've made since last week."

DON'TS: At the same time, certain communication patterns should be avoided, such as:

- focusing exclusively on results or performance outcomes
- reacting with anger or frustration to mistakes
- criticising referees, opponents, or teammates
- comparing children in a way that creates pressure or insecurity

Examples of phrases to avoid:

- "You should have won that game."
- "Why did you make such a mistake?"
- "The referee ruined the match."
- "Look how much better the other player is."
- "You always make the same errors."
- "If you don't win, all the effort is wasted."
- "You let the team down."

In addition to general communication principles, it is useful to provide concrete examples of language that adults can use in everyday situations.

For instance, coaches can support learning by asking questions such as: “What did you improve today?” or by reinforcing effort with comments like: “You kept trying even when it was difficult.”

Referees can contribute to a positive climate by explaining decisions calmly, for example: “I saw what happened. Here’s the rule”, “Let’s continue calmly.”

Parents, in turn, can help children process their experience by asking reflective questions such as: “Did you enjoy the game?” or “What are you most proud of?”

Reframing negative messages: When adults notice themselves using result-oriented or critical language, they can consciously reframe it into learning-oriented communication.

Instead of… → Try saying...
"Why didn't you score?" → "What could you try differently next time?"
"You have to win." → "Focus on doing your best and applying what you've learned."
"That was a terrible mistake." → "Mistakes help us understand what we can improve."
"The referee was wrong." → "Sometimes we don't agree with decisions, but we can still respond respectfully."
"You were better than the others." → "I noticed how much effort and concentration you showed today."

Ultimately, the goal of this communication toolkit is not to prescribe rigid formulas, but to promote a shared communication culture among adults. When children consistently hear messages that value effort, respect, and learning, they are more likely to internalise these principles and apply them during competition.

MODULE B – PRACTICAL & NFE SESSIONS

1. SESSION OVERVIEW

SESSION NAME: The challenge within the game

PURPOSE OF THE EXERCISE

The primary goal of the exercise is to help coaches, referees, and families recognise how competition can be structured as a learning process that supports children's emotional regulation, motivation, and respectful interaction. Rather than approaching competition as a purely performance-driven experience, this session encourages participants to explore how behaviours, communication, and relational dynamics shape children's experiences in sport. Through direct involvement in adapted game situations, participants are guided to reflect on their own role in fostering a positive and educational competitive environment.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Participants are expected to develop a clearer understanding of the difference between outcome-oriented and process-oriented competition (knowledge), to practice strategies such as goal-setting, constructive communication, and emotional self-regulation (skills), and to develop a more reflective and supportive attitude toward competition (attitudes). The exercise is implemented to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application, ensuring that participants leave with tools they can immediately use in real sport contexts.

2. LOGISTICS & RESOURCES

Target group: the session is designed for a mixed target group, including coaches, referees, and families, in order to reflect the integrated approach promoted by the project. Bringing these stakeholders together allows for a shared understanding of roles and encourages the development of consistent practices and communication.

Group size: a group size of approximately 12 to 24 participants is recommended to ensure both active participation and effective facilitation.

Duration: the session has an overall duration of around 90 minutes.

Space requirements: the session can be conducted in either indoor or outdoor sport facilities, provided there is sufficient space for small-sided game activities.

Materials: in terms of materials, only basic sports equipment is required, such as cones and balls, complemented by simple tools to support reflection and interaction, including flipcharts, markers, and personal goal sheets. These materials are used not only to structure the activity but also to facilitate the development of a shared language among participants.

Human resources: the session requires at least one trained facilitator, with the option of an assistant to support the management of the activity and observe group dynamics. The facilitator plays a key role in guiding reflection, modelling communication, and ensuring that the experience remains aligned with the educational objectives.

3. PREPARATION

Instructions for the technical setup of the field and the "mental setup" of the participants

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The preparation phase involves both the technical organisation of the activity and the creation of a shared mindset among participants.

From a practical perspective, the facilitator prepares a small-sided playing area (volleyball, football…) and ensures that all materials are ready for use. The facilitator defines and explains simple rules of the game and prepares individual and also team goal sheets.

However, the most important aspect of preparation is the “mental setup” of the participants.

At the beginning of the session, the facilitator introduces the core idea that competition will be explored as a tool for learning and development, rather than simply as a way to achieve results.

Participants are invited to reflect briefly on their current approach to competition and to consider how their behaviours may influence children’s experiences. To support this process, a simple group agreement is established, based on respect, openness, and active participation.

At this stage, the facilitator also introduces the concept of shared language, emphasising that the way adults communicate plays a crucial role in shaping children’s attitudes. Participants are encouraged to pay attention not only to what they do during the activity, but also to how they communicate.

4. DEVELOPMENT

Detailed step-by-step description: Warm-up (15%), Development/Core Activity (70%), and Cool-down (15%).

Warm-up (15%) - Personal best
The session begins with a short warm-up phase that combines physical activation with initial reflection. Participants engage in simple physical exercises and are asked to set a personal goal related to their performance or behaviour. This step encourages them to focus on self-improvement rather than comparison with others, modelling a key principle of healthy competition.

The facilitator starts with 5 minutes of light physical activation (e.g. jogging, mobility exercises, or simple sport-specific drills).
Participants are then asked to define one specific personal goal in relation to the activity, which can be written on a small post-it or shared verbally.
Examples of personal goals:

- “I will stay calm after making a mistake”
- “I will encourage at least one teammate”
- “I will focus on my effort rather than the result”

The facilitator may prompt reflection by asking questions such as:

- “What do you want to improve during this activity?”
- “What is your goal today?”

Participants can briefly share their goal with a partner to reinforce engagement and accountability.

This initial phase helps create a mindset oriented toward learning and prepares participants for the core activity.

Core Activity (70%) – Dual scoring game

The core of the session is based on a modified small-sided game that introduces a dual scoring system. In addition to the traditional match score, participants can also earn points based on behaviours related to healthy competition, such as effort, teamwork, respect, and emotional control.

This structure allows participants to directly experience how competition can be reframed to include both performance and personal development. During the activity, participants may rotate roles or observe specific behaviours, allowing coaches, referees, and families to reflect on their respective responsibilities.

Game organisation and roles (Integrated Approach):
Participants are divided into small teams (2–3 teams depending on group size) and play on a reduced field to maximise interaction.

In addition, participants are assigned rotating roles:

- Coaches (observers): focus on effort, feedback, and learning behaviours
- Referees (observers): focus on rule application, fairness, and communication
- Families (observers): focus on emotional reactions and supportive behaviours

Roles are rotated every 10–15 minutes so that all participants experience different perspectives.

Dual scoring system (detailed):

- Performance score:
- +1 point for each goal or successful action (depending on the sport)
- Behavioural score:
- +1 point → visible effort (e.g. continuing after a mistake)
- +1 point → respectful behaviour (e.g. helping an opponent, positive communication)
- +1 point → emotional control (e.g. calm reaction after frustration)
- -1 point → negative behaviour (e.g. complaining, blaming, shouting)

Scoring process:
Observers note behaviours during the game, and the facilitator (or a designated participant) confirms points every 5–10 minutes. Scores are briefly shared to reinforce awareness and reflection.

A key element of this phase is the explicit connection between values and actionable behaviours.
For example, participants are encouraged to practice:

- reinforcing effort immediately ("Keep trying, you're improving")
- responding constructively to mistakes ("Focus on the next action")
- communicating calmly in moments of tension

Participants are encouraged to actively use these phrases during the game, linking practice to the Communication Toolkit from Module A.

Concrete role-based examples are also explored. Coaches may practice setting process-oriented goals and giving specific feedback, referees focus on clear and calm explanations of decisions, and families reflect on how to support children emotionally without adding pressure.

At the same time, participants are guided to recognise less effective behaviours, such as focusing only on winning, reacting negatively to mistakes, or criticising others. Rather than being presented as abstract rules, these behaviours are identified through direct experience during the game.

An important outcome of this phase is the gradual development of a shared communication language, with participants identifying phrases that can be consistently used across roles to reinforce healthy competition.

Cool-down (15%) – Post-match circle
The final phase of the activity focuses on slowing down and reflecting on the experience. Participants gather in a circle and are invited to share key observations, both about their own behaviour and that of others.

To structure reflection and ensure effective learning, the facilitator guides the discussion through key steps:

1. Description: “What did you notice during the game?”
2. Emotions: “How did you feel in difficult or competitive moments?”
3. Learning: “What helped you stay focused or react positively?”
4. Transfer: “What would you do differently in a real match situation?”

They may also be encouraged to:

- identify one behaviour they managed effectively
- recognise a positive action from a teammate or opponent
- reflect on how communication influenced the game

Link with Module A → Participants are invited to reflect on the language used during the activity:

- “Which phrases did you use?”
- “Which ones were most effective?”

This phase helps consolidate learning and prepares participants for the more structured debrief.
Closing action → Each participant is asked to identify:

- one behaviour they want to maintain
- one communication strategy they will apply
- one concrete action to improve alignment with other adults

This ensures a direct transfer of learning into real sport contexts.

5. EVALUATION & DEBRIEF

The debriefing phase is essential for transforming the experience into learning. The facilitator guides participants through a reflective discussion aimed at analysing what happened during the activity and why.

Participants are invited to reflect on questions such as:

- What influenced your behaviour the most during the game?
- How did you react to mistakes or difficult situations?
- What helped you stay focused or calm?
- What did you notice about your reaction when the score was unfavourable or when things did not go as planned?
- How did you manage moments of frustration, pressure, or disappointment?
- What strategies, thoughts, or behaviours helped you regain focus and continue behaviouring positively?
- Did the behaviour or communication of others influence your emotional response? If so, how?
- How did communication affect the overall experience?

Particular attention is given to the interaction between roles, helping participants understand how coaches, referees, and families collectively shape the competitive environment.

The facilitator then supports participants in connecting the experience to real-life situations, encouraging them to identify specific actions they can implement in their daily practice, in real matches. This includes defining one concrete behaviour, one communication strategy, and one action to improve alignment with other adults.

6. EXPECTED IMPACT

Description of the specific behavioral or attitudinal change expected after the session.

As a result of the session, participants are expected to develop a more conscious and intentional approach to competition. In particular, they are likely to shift their focus from purely outcome-based thinking toward a more process-oriented perspective, where effort, learning, and respect are central. At the same time, participants are expected to increase the awareness of their role as adult role models.

The session is also expected to strengthen participants' ability to use consistent and constructive communication, contributing to the development of a shared language across different roles. This, in turn, supports greater coherence in the messages children receive. In addition, participants are expected to improve their emotional self-regulation.

From a behavioural perspective, participants are expected to adopt more supportive and reflective practices/attitudes, creating sport environments that enhance children's motivation, wellbeing, and positive engagement in competition.

7. ANNEX: TECHNICAL SHEET

The activity is based on a small-sided game format that integrates a dual scoring system, combining performance outcomes with behavioural indicators. It is designed for groups of approximately 10 to 20 participants and can be adapted to different sports and contexts.

The playing area is intentionally reduced to increase interaction and engagement, while the duration of the core activity is approximately 45 minutes. What characterises the exercise is the explicit inclusion of behaviours such as effort, respect, and emotional control as part of the evaluation criteria.

This approach allows participants to experience directly how values can be translated into practice, making the concept of healthy competition both visible and actionable.

Exercise name: Dual Scoring Game

Objective: Promote healthy competition

Players: 10–20

Field: Small-sided pitch

Duration: 45 minutes

Key Rules:

- Two scoring systems
- Bonus for fair play behaviours
- Mandatory reflection

KEY VALUE: TEAMWORK / COOPERATION

MODULE A – THEORETICAL & AWARENESS

SUB-VALUES ADDRESSED

- Communication & Trust: Sharing information, active listening, relying on teammates, and maintaining respectful communication during training and competition.
- Shared responsibility: Fulfilling one's role, supporting weaker members, prioritising team objectives over individual recognition.
- Inclusive participation: Involving all members, valuing diversity in skills and personalities, supporting new or less experienced players.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE VALUE

Teamwork and cooperation are central pillars of children's sport, not only as performance-enhancing factors but as essential educational tools that shape children's personal, social, and emotional development. In the context of sport, teamwork refers to the ability of individuals to work collectively toward shared objectives, while cooperation emphasizes mutual support, communication, trust, and shared responsibility within a group.

Although closely connected, the two concepts are not identical. Teamwork is often reflected in coordinated actions that help the team achieve a common goal, such as passing the ball to involve all teammates in the game or working together to organize a defensive strategy. Cooperation, on the other hand, is more closely related to the quality of interpersonal relationships and the willingness to support others. This can be seen when players encourage a teammate after a mistake, help a less experienced player improve, or resolve conflicts respectfully during training or competition. When both teamwork and cooperation are intentionally promoted, children are more likely to develop a sense of belonging, mutual respect, responsibility, and confidence, while also learning how to positively interact with others.

For children aged 6–12, sport represents a particularly important developmental environment. At this stage, children are forming their sense of identity, learning how to relate to others, and developing key socio-emotional competencies. Through structured sport participation, children are exposed to situations that require collaboration, negotiation, emotional regulation, and problem-solving. Teamwork, when intentionally fostered, supports the development of skills such as empathy, respect, accountability, and resilience.

However, teamwork should not be understood as an automatic outcome of participation in sport. Simply placing children in a team does not guarantee cooperation or inclusion. On the contrary, without intentional guidance, sport environments may reinforce individualism, exclusion, or excessive competitiveness. Therefore, teamwork must be actively taught, modelled, and reinforced by all adults involved in the child's sport experience.

Within the MENTORS project, teamwork is approached through the principle of cooperation at eye level. This concept emphasizes respectful, transparent, and development-oriented interactions between all actors involved in youth sport: children, coaches, parents, and referees. While roles and responsibilities differ, all actors contribute to a shared educational ecosystem. Authority is not removed but exercised in a pedagogical and supportive way, ensuring that children feel heard, respected, and included.

Sport, in this sense, becomes a structured learning environment where children can experience cooperation in real-life situations. Training sessions, matches, and informal interactions all provide opportunities to practice communication, build trust, and assume responsibility within a group. A positive team climate, characterized by psychological safety, mutual respect, and inclusive participation, is essential for enabling children to engage fully in this process.

Furthermore, teamwork contributes to broader social inclusion. By valuing different abilities, backgrounds, and personalities, sport can promote a sense of belonging and reduce exclusion. When cooperation is embedded in the culture of the team, children learn that success is not only measured by results, but by how individuals contribute to collective progress.

Ultimately, teamwork and cooperation are not only values to be promoted but also methods through which sport becomes an educational experience. When supported by aligned adult guidance and intentional practice, these values help children develop competencies that extend far beyond the sports field and into their everyday lives.

These principles form the foundation for the following modules, where teamwork and cooperation are further developed through both theoretical understanding and practical application.

2. RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Evidence collected through the MENTORS project's cross-national research, based on literature review, focus groups, and analysis of sport programmes across multiple European countries, confirms that sport has strong potential as an educational environment for value development. However, this potential is not always realized in practice.

One of the most consistent findings is that the transmission of values in sport environments is often inconsistent and fragmented. While cooperation, respect, and teamwork are commonly promoted during training sessions, these values are not always maintained during competition. In many cases, the emphasis shifts toward performance, results, and winning, leading to behaviours that contradict previously promoted values. This creates confusion for children, who struggle to understand which behaviours are truly expected.

The research highlights the central role of key psychosocial agents—coaches, parents, referees, and peers—in shaping children's experiences in sport. Coaches influence the structure of the learning environment and the dynamics within the team. Parents shape the emotional climate and expectations surrounding sport participation. Referees contribute to children's understanding of fairness, rules, and respect. Peers also play a significant role, particularly in reinforcing behaviours related to cooperation and belonging.

Despite this, the research shows that these actors often operate without sufficient coordination. Messages delivered by coaches, parents, and referees may differ or even contradict one another. For example, a coach may emphasize teamwork during training, while parents may focus on individual performance after a match. Similarly, referees may be expected to educate through communication yet are often pressured to act purely as authority figures. These inconsistencies weaken the educational impact of sport.

Another key finding is that some actors, particularly families and referees, are under-recognized as contributors to value development. While coaches are generally seen as responsible for teaching values, parents and referees are often not included in structured educational approaches, despite their strong influence on children's behaviour.

The research also confirms the relevance of social learning theory, which suggests that children learn behaviours primarily through observation and imitation. This means that the way adults communicate, handle mistakes, respond to pressure, and interact with others becomes a model for children. Positive role modelling is therefore essential for fostering teamwork and cooperation.

In addition, while values such as teamwork and fair play are widely acknowledged, related aspects such as empathy, inclusion, and emotional support are less consistently addressed. This indicates a gap between the recognition of values and their practical implementation.

Finally, the research identifies several barriers to effective value transmission, including excessive competitiveness, lack of pedagogical training for adults, and limited communication between stakeholders. At the same time, it highlights key facilitating factors, such as structured routines, shared goals, and open communication.

These findings underline the need for a coordinated and intentional approach, where all actors work together to create a consistent, supportive, and value-oriented sport environment. Without such alignment, the educational potential of sport remains limited.

3. INTEGRATED GUIDELINES

The development of teamwork and cooperation requires a coordinated and consistent approach among all adult actors involved in children's sport. Coaches, referees, and families each play a distinct role, but their impact is strongest when their actions are aligned. Children learn not only from what adults say, but from how they behave, communicate, and respond in everyday sport situations.

The following guidelines provide both practical direction and concrete examples to support each group individually while ensuring a shared and coordinated approach across all actors

Coaches-Structuring cooperation in daily practice
Coaches are central figures in shaping the daily experience of children in sport. Their role extends beyond technical instruction to include the creation of a learning environment where cooperation is actively practiced.

What coaches should focus on:

- Embedding cooperation in training design (e.g., group tasks, shared objectives).
- Creating a safe environment where children feel comfortable expressing themselves.
- Balancing performance goals with developmental objectives.
- Encouraging reflection, not just execution.

How this looks in practice:

- Involving players in simple decisions (e.g., setting team rules, choosing warm-ups).
- Rotating responsibilities (e.g., team leader, equipment coordinator).
- Using moments after exercises to reflect: "What worked well as a team?"
- Pairing players to support each other's learning.

Key coaching mindset:
Coaches should move from control-based leadership to guidance-based leadership, where children are active participants in the team process.

Referees- Supporting a respectful and educational game environment
Referees are often perceived primarily as rule enforcers, but they also have an important educational role. Their behaviour during matches contributes significantly to the emotional climate and to children's understanding of fairness and respect.

What referees should focus on:

- Communicating clearly and calmly, even in tense situations.
- Maintaining consistency in decisions to build trust.
- Using respectful language toward all participants.
- Managing conflicts through communication, not only authority.

How this looks in practice:

- Giving brief, age-appropriate explanations when needed.
- De-escalating conflict situations with calm interventions.
- Acknowledging respectful behaviour (e.g., fair play, helping others).
- Remaining composed under pressure, modelling emotional regulation.

Key referee mindset:
Referees should see themselves as educators in action, contributing to children's understanding of fairness, respect, and cooperation.

Families- Reinforcing team values beyond the field

Families shape the emotional and social context in which children experience sport. Their role is essential in reinforcing teamwork values outside training and competition. Their attitudes, expectations, and communication shape how children perceive success, failure, and relationships within the team.

What families should focus on:

- Emphasizing effort, learning, and cooperation over results.
- Supporting all children, not only their own, by developing an "extended team identity" that promotes collective support and shared responsibility within the team. This way parents see themselves as part of the wider team support system, encouraging collective support, inclusion, and shared responsibility within the team environment.
- Aligning with coaches' educational approach.
- Promoting respectful attitudes toward referees and opponents.

How this looks in practice:

- Asking reflective questions after matches: e.g. "What did your team do well together?"
- Encouraging children to support teammates during difficult moments.
- Avoiding criticism or pressure from the sidelines.
- Participating in meetings or communication with coaches.

Key family mindset:

Parents should act as supporters of the team environment, not external evaluators of performance.

Alignment and cooperation between adult agents

The effectiveness of teamwork development depends on the alignment of all adult actors. When coaches, referees, and families communicate consistent messages and model similar behaviours, children receive clear guidance and are more likely to internalize cooperation as a core value.

This process is strongly connected to the concept of modeling, as children learn not only through instruction but also through observation. The way adults communicate and cooperate with one another becomes a powerful “live lesson” for children on how teamwork and respect should be practiced in real situations. For example, when a coach and a parent both encourage effort, inclusion, and respectful behaviour during a match, children receive a consistent message about the importance of cooperation.

On the contrary, when messages are inconsistent, children may become confused and disengaged. For example, a coach may promote teamwork and equal participation during training, while a parent focuses only on winning or criticizes teammates and referees from the sidelines. Such contradictions can weaken the educational impact of sport and create uncertainty about which values are truly important.

For this reason, regular communication, shared expectations, and mutual respect between all adult agents are essential to ensure a coherent educational experience.

4. COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT

Communication is one of the most powerful tools for reinforcing teamwork and cooperation. The way adults respond to success, mistakes, and interactions between children shapes how values are understood and internalised. Consistent, supportive, and reflective communication helps create a positive team climate and strengthens children's sense of belonging.

DOs

- Encourage effort, collaboration, and mutual support.
- Use respectful, calm, and constructive language.
- Include all team members regardless of ability.
- Reinforce positive behaviors immediately.
- Publicly acknowledge and respect the role of coaches, referees, and families as partners in the child's sporting experience.

DON'Ts

- Shout, blame, or publicly criticize.
- Focus exclusively on winning or individual performance.
- Exclude or ignore less skilled players.
- Undermine the authority of coaches or referees.

Actionable communication behaviors

Adults should aim to:

- Provide feedback that highlights teamwork rather than only individual performance.
- Encourage children to reflect on their experiences, by asking reflective questions instead of immediately correcting behavior (e.g. "What could we do differently as a team next time?").
- Use calm and clear language in moments of tension.
- Reinforce positive behaviors immediately, ideally within a few seconds, so children clearly connect the behavior with the feedback received.
- Address conflicts through dialogue and understanding, rather than punishment or blame.
- Create space for all children to express themselves, and feel heard within the group

Communication should not only correct behaviour but also guide learning and reflection and positive interaction between children and adults.

Sample Phrases

Providing adults with concrete language supports consistent communication. Examples include:

- *"Good teamwork, I saw how you supported each other."*
- *"What helped your team work well today?"*
- *"Let's think together about how we can improve as a team."*
- *"Everyone plays an important role, even in small moments."*
- *"How did you help a teammate today?"*
- *"Mistakes are part of learning—what can we do better next time together?"*
- *"I like how you encouraged each other during the game."*

These phrases are not intended to be used mechanically, but as examples of a communication style that promotes reflection, inclusion, and shared responsibility. Over time, consistent use of this type of language contributes to a common communication culture across coaches, referees, and families.

To align with the principle of communication "at eye level," this communication style should also be consistently practiced between adults themselves. When coaches, parents, and referees communicate respectfully, listen to one another, and model constructive dialogue, children observe a real-life example of cooperation, mutual respect, and teamwork in action.

MODULE B – PRACTICAL & NFE SESSIONS

1. SESSION OVERVIEW

SESSION NAME: Team in Action – Building cooperation through shared responsibility

PURPOSE OF THE EXERCISE

This session aims to equip coaches, referees, and families with practical strategies to strengthen teamwork and cooperation among children through communication, shared responsibility, and inclusive participation.

The activities presented are designed as practical examples that can later be adapted and implemented with children aged 6–12 in different sport settings.

The session also aims to help adult participants understand how cooperation-based activities can be facilitated and reflected upon in real youth sport settings.

The session follows a Non-Formal Education (NFE) approach, meaning that learning occurs through experience, participation, and reflection. Rather than being instructed about teamwork, participants actively experience cooperation and reflect on their behaviour.

In line with the Integrated Approach, the session encourages aligned involvement of coaches, referees, and families, reinforcing consistent messages across all actors.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

Knowledge: Participants understand the importance of teamwork in achieving shared goals, the role of each individual within a team and how communication influences cooperation.

Skills: Participants practice effective communication (verbal and non-verbal), cooperation and coordination, basic conflict resolution strategies and supporting teammates with different ability levels.

Attitudes: Participants develop trust in teammates, a sense of shared responsibility, inclusive and supportive behaviours and openness to reflection and feedback.

2. LOGISTICS & RESOURCES

This session is designed to be flexible and adaptable across different sport settings.

Target Group:
Primary target group: coaches, referees, and parents.
Children aged 6–12 are involved as the indirect beneficiary group during the practical implementation.

Group Size:
10–16 participants (ideal for interaction and inclusion)

Duration:
60–75 minutes

Space Requirements:
Indoor or outdoor sport field (e.g., volleyball court, gym, or open play area). Space should allow division into smaller working groups

Materials:

- Balls (adapted to sport)
- Cones or markers
- Net (if applicable)
- Optional: flipchart or board for reflection

Human Resources:
1 coach/facilitator (mandatory)
Optional: referee (observer/support role)
Optional: parent (observer for Integrated Approach reinforcement)

3. PREPARATION

Technical setup:
Before the session begins, the facilitator prepares:

- 2–3 small playing zones to allow parallel activities
- Equipment distributed evenly across zones
- Clear visual boundaries using cones

Activities should be simple, adaptable, and focused on cooperation rather than technical complexity (e.g. passing, coordination, problem-solving drills)

Mental setup:
This step is crucial as it creates psychological safety and aligns expectations. The facilitator gathers participants and sets the tone of the session.

S/he explains clearly:
“Today we are not focusing on winning, but on how we work together as a team.”
S/he establishes 2 simple group rules:

- Respectful communication.
- Everyone participates.

S/he encourages openness:

- Mistakes are allowed.
- Learning comes through trying.

4. DEVELOPMENT

The following activities are presented as practical examples that coaches, referees, and parents can later adapt and implement with children aged 6–12 in their own sport environments.

1. Warm-up (10–15 minutes): Building trust & communication
Participants work in pairs.

Activities:

- Passing exercises (adapted to sport)
- Mirroring movements (one leads, one follows)
- Balance or coordination tasks

Facilitator role:

- Encourage communication between pairs and prompt with questions, e.g.:

“Did you talk to each other?”
“How did you coordinate your movements?”

Objective:

- Activate body and attention.
- Build initial trust and interaction.

These activities are intentionally designed to create early communication, trust, and cooperation between participants before entering more complex team tasks.

2. Core Activities (40–45 minutes)
Activity 1: Rotating Roles Game (Shared Responsibility)
Participants are divided into small teams.

Each round includes:
Leader → gives instructions
Supporters → execute and assist
Observer → notices communication and cooperation

Roles rotate after each round.

After each rotation, a short “Reflective Pause” (30 seconds) can be introduced, where the observer shares one positive example of teamwork or support noticed during the activity.

Facilitator focus:

- Ensure all children experience each role.
- Encourage observers to share feedback.

Learning focus:

- Understanding different roles.
- Developing responsibility and awareness

Activity 2: “Support the Team” Challenge (Inclusive Participation)
Teams must complete a task where success depends on all members participating.

Examples:

- Every player must touch the ball before scoring.
- Tasks adapted to include slower or less experienced players.

Facilitator prompts:
“How can you include everyone?”
“Who needs more support?”

Learning focus:

- Inclusion
- Supporting weaker or less confident teammates

Activity 3: Mini-Match with Cooperation Rules (Integration of All Values)
Short game with modified rules, such as points only count if all team members are involved and communication remains respectful.

Facilitator role:

- Observe behaviours.
- Reinforce positive examples.
- Pause briefly if needed for reflection.

Learning focus:

- Applying teamwork in a realistic context.
- Linking behaviour to outcomes.

3. Cool-down (10–15 minutes) – Reflection Phase
Participants form a circle.
Each child shares:

- One positive team moment
- One thing they learned

No writing required, only focus on verbal reflection.

Facilitator role:

- Encourage equal participation
- Connect experiences to values:
  - teamwork
  - inclusion
  - responsibility

5. EVALUATION & DEBRIEF

Evaluation and debrief are central components of the Non-Formal Education (NFE) approach. In this session, learning does not end with the activity itself but is consolidated through structured reflection. The purpose of this phase is to help participants become aware of their behaviour, understand the role of teamwork in their experience, and connect actions with outcomes.

The debrief should take place immediately after the activities, while the experience is still fresh. Participants are invited to gather in a circle, creating an inclusive and non-hierarchical space where everyone has the opportunity to speak. The facilitator's role is not to evaluate performance, but to guide reflection in a supportive and open manner.

Rather than focusing on "what went right or wrong," the discussion should encourage participants to explore how and why certain behaviours influenced the team dynamic. This helps children move from simple participation to meaningful learning.

To support this process, the facilitator can use guiding questions such as:
-When did you feel most supported by your team?
-What helped your team work better together?
-How did communication affect what happened in the game?
-Did everyone feel included? Why or why not?
-When did you feel most included during the activity?
-How did you feel when working as a team?
-What would you do differently next time as a team?
These questions should be adapted depending on the group's age and level of engagement. The facilitator should ensure that all children are given the opportunity to contribute, without forcing participation. Sort responses are acceptable, especially for younger children.

An important element of this phase is linking the discussion back to the three sub-values:

- Communication & Trust
- Shared Responsibility
- Inclusive Participation

For example, if a child mentions that *"we talked more and it worked better"* the facilitator can reinforce this by connecting it explicitly to communication and trust.

In addition to participant reflection, the facilitator (coach) should conduct a brief internal evaluation immediately after the session. This does not require formal tools or documentation, but rather a quick structured reflection on key aspects of the activity:
Were all participants actively involved throughout the session?
Did the activities encourage cooperation rather than individual dominance?
Was communication generally respectful and constructive?
Were there moments of exclusion or disengagement? How were they addressed?
Did participants demonstrate understanding of shared responsibility?

If referees or parents are present, they can also be briefly involved in the reflection phase. Their observations can provide valuable external perspectives, particularly regarding communication styles, emotional responses, and inclusion.

Finally, the debrief phase should close with a short summary by the facilitator, highlighting key positive behaviours observed during the session. This reinforces learning and ensures that children leave with a clear understanding of what teamwork looks like in practice.

6. EXPECTED IMPACT

This session is expected to create both immediate and longer-term changes in how children behave and interact within a team environment.

In the short term, children begin to communicate more actively with their teammates and show greater willingness to support each other during tasks and challenges. Through participation in the activities, they develop a clearer understanding of their role within the team and become more aware of the importance of including all participants. Teamwork is no longer perceived simply as “playing together,” but as a way of interacting, cooperating, and contributing to shared goals.

As a result of both the activities and the reflection phase, noticeable behavioural changes may emerge. Children tend to demonstrate increased trust in their teammates and respond more positively to mistakes, both their own and those of others. They begin to take more responsibility for shared outcomes and adopt more respectful and constructive communication patterns during play.

At the level of the team environment, the session contributes to a more positive and supportive atmosphere. Interactions become more inclusive, and instances of exclusion are reduced. Children are more likely to experience a sense of belonging within the group, which in turn enhances both their motivation and enjoyment of sport. Importantly, they begin to recognise that cooperation improves not only relationships but also overall team performance.

The session also has an impact beyond the children themselves. Coaches, parents, and referees who are involved in or observe the process gain a clearer understanding of how teamwork can be actively developed through structured activities. They become more aware of how communication influences children's behaviour and of the importance of providing consistent messages across different sport contexts. This supports stronger alignment between all adult actors, which is essential for reinforcing the value of cooperation.

When sessions of this type are implemented regularly, their effects extend over time. Cooperation gradually becomes part of the team culture, and inclusive behaviours become more natural and consistent. Children develop stronger social and emotional skills, including empathy, responsibility, and emotional regulation. In the long term, this contributes to the creation of sport environments that are not only performance-oriented but also educational, inclusive, and focused on the holistic development of the child.

7. TECHNICAL SHEET

Session duration: 60–75 minutes

Group size: 10–16 participants

Equipment: minimal (balls, cones, optional net)

Setting: adaptable to any sport

Facilitator: 1 coach (minimum)

Replicability: high – can be implemented in different sports and contexts

KEY VALUE: COMPANIONSHIP / SOLIDARITY

MODULE A – THEORETICAL & AWARENESS

SUB-VALUES ADDRESSED

- Empathy and care: Ability to understand the role of others (especially referees and opponents).
- Loyalty and Support, means sharing responsibility and integrity. Facilitating the assumption of shared responsibility by identifying, for each social agent involved, areas for improvement or contribution; seeking concrete commitments.
- Mutual respect for the efforts and work of other agents involved in sporting behavior. This includes dealing with authority while bearing in mind that leadership should be shared.
- 3. Social inclusion and equality, openness to diversity: Ensuring that all individuals involved in the sporting context have equal opportunities for participation and interaction, regardless of role, sex, age, socioeconomic status, ability, etc. Valuing different ways of seeing and understanding the world and relationships; applying critical thinking to personal and cultural differences.

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE VALUE

From a psychopedagogical perspective, companionship and solidarity are not merely personality traits, but relational constructs that emerge within the social context of sport.

Different Authors propose definitions of that concepts:

- Companionship (Peer Relationships): Smith (2003) defines it as the bond of friendship and functional support among peers, characterized by reciprocity and emotional intimacy. In sport, it is expressed as both technical and emotional support in the face of mistakes.
- Solidarity (Prosocial Behavior): Vallerand et al. (1996) link it to prosocial behavior and sportspersonship, defining it as the willingness to act for the benefit of others or the group, even when there is no immediate individual gain.

For its operationalization on the playing field, this tandem breaks these macro-units down into three fundamental sub-values:

- **Empathy and Care**: Defined as the ability to understand the roles and perspectives of others, with particular emphasis on referees and opponents. It requires cognitive decentration (understanding that the referee also processes information under pressure).
- **Loyalty and Support**: Involves sharing responsibility and integrity. It translates into mutual respect for the efforts and work of all agents involved in sporting behavior. It promotes shared leadership, moving away from egocentric views of success.
- **Social Inclusion and Equality, Openness to Diversity**: Consists of ensuring that all individuals have equal opportunities for participation and interaction, regardless of their role, gender, age, socioeconomic status, or ability. It requires applying critical thinking to personal and cultural differences in order to deconstruct prejudices within the group environment.
-

These values align with Hellison's (2011) Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility (TPSR) model (see Figure 1). Specifically, companionship corresponds to Level 1 (Respect for the rights and feelings of others), and solidarity to Level 4 (Helping others and leadership); in relation to the sub-values, empathy and care are situated at Level 1 (Respect for the rights and feelings of others), inclusion and openness to diversity are developed at Level 2 (Participation and inclusive effort), and loyalty, support, and solidarity reach Level 4 (Empathic leadership and helping others), where the athlete takes on a proactive role in the well-being of the sporting ecosystem.



Figure 1. Hellison Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility Model

A child's capacity for solidarity is not static; it evolves with neurocognitive and social maturation. Taking into account the major developmental stages, and with regard to solidarity:

1. During childhood (6-12 years), and according to Piaget's theory (Piaget, 1932), children move from a heteronomous morality (based on obedience to external rules) to an autonomous morality based on cooperation. At this stage, sport is an ideal setting to practice role reversibility and decentration (understanding that opponents and referees also have goals and feelings).
2. Adolescence, with the development of abstract thinking and identity formation, solidarity becomes a mechanism for group cohesion and social validation. The peer group replaces parents as the main reference point, making the "team climate" a key factor.

For these values to crystallize into real behaviors, different learning strategies must be used:

- **Observational Learning** (Bandura, 1977) is the most powerful tool. Children do not imitate what adults say, but what they do. For example, if the reference adult respects the referee in the face of an error, the child learns solidarity in response to human fallibility.

- **Operant Conditioning (Social Reinforcement)**: positive reinforcement of "invisible behaviors" is crucial (Porto et al., 201). The adult should reward (praise, public recognition) not only goals scored, but also gestures such as helping an opponent up or supporting a teammate after a mistake.

- **Classical Conditioning (Emotional Climate)**: associating sports practice with positive emotions of safety and belonging (Duda & Ntoumanis, 2005). A hostile environment generates defensive or selfish responses; a safe environment fosters openness and solidarity.

Within sport settings, companionship and solidarity acquire a functional meaning that goes beyond interpersonal harmony; they operate as key psychosocial mechanisms influencing both performance and long-term social development. From a scientific perspective, these values are closely linked to constructs such as team cohesion, motivational climate, and prosocial behavior, all of which have been widely studied in sport psychology.

First, companionship—understood as the quality of peer relationships—has a direct impact on athletes' motivation, enjoyment, and persistence in sport. Research shows that positive peer interactions foster intrinsic motivation and reduce dropout rates, particularly in youth sport contexts (Smith, 2003; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2009). Companionship contributes to what is termed "task cohesion," which reflects the degree to which team members work together toward common goals. High levels of cohesion have been consistently associated with improved collective performance and individual satisfaction (Carron et al., 2002). Moreover, emotionally supportive peer environments buffer stress and facilitate adaptive coping strategies during competition (Nicholls et al., 2012).

Second, solidarity—expressed through prosocial and cooperative behaviors—plays a crucial role in shaping moral functioning in sport. Prosocial behaviors such as helping opponents, respecting officials, or prioritizing team success over individual recognition are linked to moral development and ethical decision-making (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009). Athletes exposed to climates that emphasize solidarity are more likely to internalize sportspersonship values and less likely to engage in antisocial behaviors such as cheating or aggression (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007). This suggests that solidarity acts as a protective factor against the normalization of unethical conduct in competitive environments.

Importantly, the effects of companionship and solidarity extend beyond sport into broader social contexts. Longitudinal studies indicate that participation in sport programs emphasizing personal and social responsibility fosters transferable life skills, including empathy, cooperation, and civic engagement (Gould & Carson, 2008). These competencies are associated with positive youth development outcomes, such as improved social integration, reduced risk behaviors, and increased community involvement. In this sense, sport becomes a "laboratory of social life," where individuals rehearse behaviors that are later generalized to educational, professional, and civic domains.

Additionally, inclusive and solidarity-based sport environments contribute to social equity by promoting interactions across diverse groups. Research in sport for development highlights that inclusive practices can reduce prejudice and enhance intercultural understanding, particularly when guided by intentional pedagogical frameworks (Spaaij, 2012). Thus, values like empathy, inclusion, and mutual support are not only beneficial for team functioning but also for fostering more cohesive and tolerant societies.

In summary, companionship and solidarity in sport contexts function as multidimensional constructs with measurable effects on performance, moral behavior, and social development. Their pedagogical promotion is therefore not only justified from an educational standpoint but also from a societal perspective, as they contribute to the formation of responsible, empathetic, and socially engaged individuals.

2. RESEARCH INSIGHTS

2.1. Companionship and Team Spirit as the Core Axis

Companionship (camaraderie/team spirit) emerges as the most prominent and frequently cited value across nearly all the national contexts analyzed.

- **Centrality of the value**: In Spain, companionship is the most emphasized value by coaches, families, and referees, reflecting the importance of group cohesion and mutual support.
- **Practical manifestation**: It is expressed through selfless help toward teammates, empathy in response to others' mistakes, and the construction of a sense of belonging.
- **Transnational dimension**: In Portugal, Croatia, and Italy, team spirit is considered essential for both success and personal growth, allowing sport to function as a "school of life."

2.2. Empathy, Solidarity, and Loyalty: The Ethical Fabric

The research highlights that these values are not learned through theory, but through lived experience and behavioral modeling.

- **Empathy in practice**: Coaches in Italy and Spain associate it with the ability to understand mistakes not as failures, but as learning opportunities, thereby fostering an emotionally safe climate.
- **Solidarity**: Countries such as Germany and Spain emphasize the promotion of solidarity and community commitment, although it is acknowledged that these socio-emotional values are often addressed less explicitly than general ethical values.
- **Loyalty and Integrity**: Loyalty is closely linked to honoring commitments and respecting rules. In France and Italy, honesty with oneself and others is emphasized as the foundation of Fair Play.

2.3. Social Inclusion, Equality, and Openness to Diversity

Grassroots sport is perceived as a privileged tool for social cohesion, although its effectiveness depends on the organizational structure of the club.

- **Mixed communities**: Coaches describe their teams as small communities where children from diverse cultural backgrounds, religions, and abilities coexist, naturally fostering openness to diversity.
- **Inclusion vs. results**: There is a critical tension between the "results-driven culture" (which excludes less talented participants) and social inclusion. The report stresses that "well-delivered sport" ensures playing time for all, preventing early dropout.
- **Gender and economic equality**: Persistent gaps are identified in girls' participation in certain sports, as well as economic barriers limiting access to facilities, requiring stronger institutional intervention.

2.4. Psychosocial Support: The Role of Mediating Agents

The transmission of values depends on a coordinated "educational triad": coaches, families, and referees.

- **The Coach as Mentor**: The coach is the central figure of emotional support and a behavioral role model. Their ability to provide corrective feedback without humiliation is vital for children's self-esteem.
- **The Family as Support and Risk**: Parents provide essential practical and emotional support, but may become a barrier if they exert excessive pressure to win.
- **The Referee as Educator**: Traditionally seen only as a regulatory authority, there is a growing recognition of the referee's role as an agent of civility and justice, capable of teaching respect and emotional self-regulation.

2.5. Critical Barriers and Recommendations

The main barrier is an obsessive focus on results and winning at all costs undermines the development of solidarity and empathy. Also the lack of coordination, with contradictory messages between parents and coaches confuse children about which behaviors are truly valued.

Some facilitators are the use of structured routines (greetings, punctuality, care of equipment) and the creation of post-game reflection spaces (such as the "third half"), wich are the most effective practices for consolidating companionship and respect.

3. INTEGRATED GUIDELINES

The effective development of companionship and solidarity in youth sport does not emerge spontaneously from participation alone; rather, it requires intentional, coordinated actions by the main social agents involved in the sporting environment (coaches, referees, and families). Contemporary sport psychology research consistently demonstrates that young athletes' moral behavior, empathy, and social responsibility are shaped by the motivational climate and the congruence of messages transmitted by these agents (Mossman et al., 2021; Gu & Cheng, 2026).

Drawing on Hellison's Teaching Personal and Social Responsibility -TPSR- (Hellison, 2011) model and recent empirical findings, the following guidelines articulate how each agent can contribute synergistically to fostering empathy, loyalty, inclusion, and solidarity in children aged 6–12.

3.1. Coaches: Structuring Training as a Context for Moral and Social Learning

Coaches constitute the most influential social agent in youth sport due to their continuous presence and authority in training environments (Chu & Zhang, 2019). Recent intervention studies confirm that when coaches intentionally integrate TPSR principles into daily practice, athletes show significant improvements in prosocial behavior, responsibility, and empathy, even in competitive contexts (Carreres-Ponsoda et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2025). Evidence-based strategies include:

1. **Modeling empathy and respect**. Consistent with social learning theory, children imitate observable behaviors rather than verbal prescriptions. Coaches who display respectful communication toward referees and opponents reduce athletes' antisocial conduct and normalize solidarity as a core team norm (Danioni & Barni, 2019).

2. **Creating a mastery-oriented motivational climate**. A task-involving climate where effort, learning, and cooperation define success—serves as a protective factor against cheating, aggression, and social exclusion (Gu & Cheng, 2026). Meta-analytic evidence shows that mastery climates exert the strongest effects on psychological and moral outcomes, surpassing performance-oriented environments (Gu & Cheng, 2026).

3. Reinforcing “invisible” prosocial behaviors. Recent reviews emphasize the importance of explicitly reinforcing helping, inclusion, and emotional support behaviors, which often go unnoticed compared to scoring or winning (Porto et al., 2021). Public recognition of such behaviors increases their recurrence and integrates solidarity into the team’s value system.
4. Ensuring inclusive participation. Equal playing time and role rotation are not merely ethical choices; they are pedagogical tools. Inclusive practices are linked to higher relatedness satisfaction and lower dropout rates, especially among less skilled or marginalized children (Mossman et al., 2021).

3.2. Referees: From Rule Enforcers to Educational Agents

Although historically underexplored, recent research highlights referees as key co-educators in youth sport moral development (Andersson, 2019). The referee’s behavior communicates implicit messages about authority, justice, and respect under pressure. Key pedagogical functions supported by research include:
1. **Calm, explanatory communication**. Referees who briefly explain decisions in age-appropriate language transform rule enforcement into learning opportunities, fostering perspective-taking and empathy toward authority figures (Andersson, 2019).
2. **Conflict mediation and emotional regulation**. Pausing play during emotionally escalated moments teaches children that self-regulation precedes performance. This practice aligns with findings linking supportive authority figures to lower moral disengagement in sport (Boardley & Kavussanu, 2007).
3. **Consistent impartiality as moral modeling**. Consistency and perceived fairness in officiating are associated with greater acceptance of rules and reduced antisocial reactions among young athletes (Kavussanu & Boardley, 2009).
4. **Humanizing pre-match interactions**. Short pre-game greetings with teams and coaches increase mutual trust and reinforce the referee’s role as a guardian of fair play, not an adversary (Andersson, 2019).

3.3. Families: Aligning Emotional Support with Developmental Goals

Systematic reviews published in the last five years confirm that parents profoundly shape children's sport experiences, either as protective or risk factors, depending on their values and behaviors (Gao et al., 2023; Ntalachani et al., 2025). Recommended family guidelines include:

1. **Promoting a mastery-focused narrative at home**. Parental emphasis on enjoyment, effort, and learning predicts higher intrinsic motivation and lower antisocial behavior, whereas a status-oriented focus on winning increases moral disengagement (Danioni & Barni, 2019; Gao et al., 2023).
2. **Positive sideline behavior.** Observational studies demonstrate that verbal aggression toward referees or opponents by parents is rapidly mirrored by children, undermining empathy and solidarity (Andersson, 2019).
3. **Reinforcing reflective dialogue after competition**. Asking reflective questions ("What did you learn?" rather than "Did you win?") supports moral reasoning and emotional processing, strengthening life-skill transfer beyond sport (Mossman et al., 2021).
4. **Trusting and supporting the coach's pedagogical decisions**. Research on coach–parent relationships shows that alignment between these agents reduces confusion and anxiety in young athletes and enhances their sense of shared responsibility (Santos et al., 2024).

3.4. Cooperative Integration: Preventing Axiological Dissonance

Across all reviewed studies, message consistency among coaches, referees, and families emerges as the strongest predictor of positive moral outcomes (Mossman et al., 2021; Santos et al., 2024). Contradictory cues—such as coaches promoting respect while parents emphasize winning—create axiological dissonance that weakens value internalization. Recommended integrative mechanisms include:

- Structured parent and coach education programs focused on motivational climate and child development.
- Shared rituals (e.g., post-game "third half") that humanize competition and reinforce mutual respect.
- Institutional recognition of referees as pedagogical agents through training in communication and child psychology.

Only through this coordinated, culturally sensitive approach can grassroots sport function as a genuine context for companionship, solidarity, and social inclusion.

4. COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT

4.1. Communication Toolkit for Coaches

What to say

- “We succeed when everyone contribute, how can we support each other today?”
- “I appreciate how you helped your teammate; that shows leadership.”
- “Let’s focus on learning from this moment, not on blaming.”
- “Everyone deserves a chance to participate, let’s make space for each other.”
- “Respecting the referee is part of respecting the game.”

What NOT to say

- “Winning is all that matters.”
- “Don’t pass to them; they always mess up.”
- “The referee is ruining the match.”
- “If you keep making mistakes, you’ll sit out.”
- “We don’t have time to include everyone today.”

What to do

- Use cooperative drills where success depends on teamwork.
- Praise prosocial behaviors publicly (“Great job helping your opponent up”).
- Provide corrective feedback privately and respectfully.
- Ensure equal playing time and rotate roles to promote inclusion.
- Model calm reactions to referee decisions.

What don’t:

- Reward only scoring or physical talent.
- Use humiliation, sarcasm, or shouting as feedback.
- Allow exclusionary cliques or “star player” hierarchies.
- Ignore discriminatory comments or behaviors.
- Undermine referee authority.

Situational Scripts

- **After a mistake:** “What did you learn from that? Let’s try again together.”
- **When a child feels excluded:** “Everyone belongs here, how can we make sure you feel part of the team?”
- **During conflict:** “Let’s hear both sides; we solve problems with respect.”

4.2. Communication Toolkit for Referees

What to Say.

- “This is a foul because… Let’s keep playing fairly.”
- “Take a moment to breathe, we’ll restart when everyone is ready.”
- “I appreciate your effort; remember to respect your opponents.”
- “Good sportsmanship means helping each other, even in competition.”
- “Thank you for listening, let’s enjoy the game together.”

What NOT to say

- “Stop complaining or I’ll punish you.”
- “You’re wrong, end of discussion.”
- “I don’t care what you think.”
- “You’re being difficult.”
- “Just play and don’t talk.”

What to do

- Use calm, brief explanations to turn decisions into learning moments.
- Pause play when emotions escalate to model emotional regulation.
- Greet players and coaches before the match to humanize your role.
- Apply rules consistently and transparently.
- Acknowledge positive behaviors (“Nice job helping your teammate up”).

What don’t:

- Shout, use sarcasm, or show frustration.
- Ignore disrespectful behavior.
- Engage in arguments with children or parents.
- Show favoritism or inconsistency.
- Allow unsafe or exclusionary conduct to continue.

Situational Scripts

- During tension: “Let’s pause. Everyone take a breath. We’ll continue when we’re calm.”
- When a child questions a call: “I hear your concern. Here’s what I saw…”
- Before the match: “We’re here to enjoy the game and respect each other, let’s work together.”

4.3. Communication Toolkit for Families

What to Say

- “I loved watching you try your best today.”
- “What did you enjoy most about the game?”
- “I’m proud of how you supported your teammates.”
- “Everyone makes mistakes, what matters is learning.”
- “Let’s respect the referee; they’re doing their best.”

What NOT to say

- “Did you win?” (as the first question)
- “Why didn’t you score more?”
- “The referee was terrible.”
- “You should be better than that player.”
- “If you don’t play well, there’s no point in coming.”

What to do

- Cheer for effort, teamwork, and fair play, not only results.
- Encourage routines: punctuality, equipment care, preparation.
- Support the coach’s decisions at home to avoid mixed messages.
- Celebrate prosocial actions (“I saw you help your teammate, that was great”).
- Promote inclusion by welcoming all families and children.

What don’t:

- Coach from the sidelines or contradict the coach.
- Compare children to others.
- Show anger toward referees or opponents.
- Pressure children to win or perform beyond their developmental level.
- Reward only goals, victories, or individual achievements.

Situational Scripts

- After a loss: “I’m proud of your effort. What did you learn today?”
- When a child is upset: “Your feelings matter, let’s talk about what happened.”
- On the sidelines: “Great teamwork! Keep supporting each other.”

MODULE B – PRACTICAL & NFE SESSIONS

1. SESSION OVERVIEW

SESSION NAME: Learning Fair Play, Communication and Emotional Regulation through Game
Target group: Children aged 10–12
Duration: 60 minutes
Setting: School playground / sports session

PURPOSE OF THE EXERCISE

This session is designed to introduce children to the fundamental principles of fair play, respect, communication, and emotional regulation through concrete and familiar game situations. Rather than focusing on theoretical instruction, the session is built on experiential learning, where participants actively engage in realistic scenarios, observe outcomes, and reflect on their behaviours and decisions.

The activities are based on simple and accessible contexts such as a running race, an informal football game in the playground, and a basic gymnastics evaluation exercise. These situations are intentionally chosen because they reflect environments that children naturally encounter in their daily school life, where rules are often implicit, roles are not always clearly defined, and emotional reactions can emerge quickly.

In these contexts, children are not only players but are also progressively introduced to roles of responsibility such as referee, observer, or mediator. This allows them to experience directly the challenges associated with decision-making, fairness, and group regulation. They are confronted with situations where they must communicate clearly, manage disagreement, and take responsibility for their choices, even when these choices may be uncomfortable or contested.

The session also aims to highlight the importance of having a clear framework in any game situation. When rules are unclear or when no one is identified as responsible for enforcing them, misunderstandings and conflicts tend to arise. Conversely, when communication is precise and roles are clearly defined, interactions become more structured, and decisions are more easily accepted. Through guided activities and debriefing moments, participants progressively understand that fairness is not only a result of rules but also of the way these rules are applied and communicated.

This approach is fully aligned with the theoretical framework developed within the project. It draws in particular on social learning theory (Bandura), where children learn behaviours by observing others and by experiencing situations themselves. It also integrates key elements of emotional regulation, helping participants recognise and manage their reactions in situations of tension or disagreement. Finally, it reflects principles of communication theory, showing how clarity, consistency, and shared understanding are essential to avoid conflict and ensure fairness.

By the end of the session, participants will have developed a better understanding of how their behaviour influences the game and the group dynamic. They will also have experienced the role of a neutral and responsible actor within a group, which is a key step in the development of empathy, respect, and social responsibility.

PURPOSE OF THE EXERCISE:
To help children understand how rules, communication and roles contribute to fair and enjoyable play, and to develop their ability to regulate interactions in game situations.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES:
Participants will be able to:
- Communicate clearly in a game situation
- Understand the importance of shared rules
- Identify and regulate conflict situations
- Make fair and independent decisions
- Assume simple roles such as referee or mediator

2. LOGISTICS & RESOURCES

The session is designed to be easily implemented in a standard school environment, without the need for specialized infrastructure or expensive equipment. The objective is to ensure that the activities can be reproduced in a wide range of contexts, including schools, sports clubs, or informal youth settings.

Equipment
The required equipment is deliberately simple and accessible:

- Whistle: used by the participant acting as referee to signal decisions clearly and to structure the activity. It also helps reinforce the idea of authority and responsibility.
- Small flag or visual signal: used during the running activity to illustrate the importance of visual communication and synchronization with verbal instructions.
- Gym mats: used for gymnastics activity to ensure safety and provide a defined space for performance.
- Cones or improvised markers (e.g. sweatshirts, bags): used to delimit spaces, create goals in informal football situations, or mark start lines.

The use of improvised material (such as sweatshirts for goals or lines) is intentional. It reflects real playground conditions where children organise games themselves, often without formal equipment. This reinforces the realism of the scenarios and increases the transferability of learning.

Space
The session can take place in different environments, depending on availability:
School playground: ideal for running and informal football activities. It allows for natural interaction and recreates situations commonly experienced by children during breaks.
Gymnasium or indoor sports hall: preferable for the gymnastics activity, ensuring safety and controlled conditions.

The space should allow for:

- clear visibility for all participants
- safe distances between activities
- the possibility to stop and gather the group quickly for debriefing

No specific layout is required in advance, but facilitators should anticipate how to organise the space dynamically between activities.

Human Resources

- 1 facilitator (teacher, coach, or adult): Responsible for guiding the session, ensuring safety, introducing scenarios, and leading debrief discussions. The facilitator plays a key role in structuring reflection rather than directing behaviour.
- Optional: 1 assistant: Can help manage group dynamics, observe behaviours, and support participants during role-play situations, especially in larger groups.

The facilitator is not positioned as a traditional instructor but rather as a guide, helping participants understand situations through questioning and reflection.)

3. PREPARATION

The preparation phase is essential to ensure that the session runs smoothly and that participants feel safe, engaged, and ready to take on different roles. It also allows the facilitator to create a clear framework that will support both learning and interaction.

Preparation of scenarios
Before the session, the facilitator should clearly prepare each of the three situations (running start, football conflict, gymnastics evaluation). This includes:

- defining the roles (players, referee, observers)
- anticipating possible reactions (confusion, disagreement, hesitation)
- planning when and how to intervene

The objective is not to script the situation completely, but to ensure that it unfolds naturally while remaining controlled.

Facilitator example (verbatim):
“We are going to play a short race. One of you will act as the referee. Your role is to start the race and manage the situation if something goes wrong.”
Creating a safe and structured environment

The facilitator must ensure that participants understand the basic rules of interaction before starting:

- no intentional physical aggression
- respect for others’ roles
- right to make mistakes

This is particularly important because some situations (especially conflict scenarios) may generate strong emotional reactions.

Facilitator example (verbatim):
“We are going to recreate situations where things might go wrong. That’s normal. What matters is how we react, not being perfect.”

Clarifying roles and responsibilities
Participants need to clearly understand their roles before each activity:

- what is expected from a player
- what is expected from a referee or mediator
- what observers should pay attention to

This clarity is key to avoid confusion during the activity.
Facilitator example (verbatim):
"If you are the referee, your job is not to be liked by everyone. Your job is to make the game clear and fair."

Emphasising respect and non-violence
The facilitator should explicitly state that physical or verbal aggression is not acceptable and that the purpose of the session is to learn how to manage difficult situations.

Facilitator example (verbatim):
"We can disagree, but we don't push, we don't insult, and we don't escalate. If something happens, we stop and we talk."

Normalising mistakes and uncertainty
It is important to remove the fear of failure, especially for participants taking on referee or judging roles.

Facilitator example (verbatim):
"You are allowed to make mistakes. Even referees make mistakes. What matters is how you handle the situation afterwards."

This helps participants engage more freely and take responsibility without fear of judgment.

Preparing observation criteria
To support learning, the facilitator should prepare simple observation criteria adapted to each activity.
Examples:

- Was the signal clear?
- Did someone try to calm the situation?
- Was the decision explained?

Observers can use these criteria to structure their attention and contribute to the debrief.
Facilitator example (verbatim):
"If you are observing, don't try to judge people. Just look at what is happening: what was clear, what created confusion, and how people reacted."

4. DEVELOPMENT

SESSION 1 – Running Start Situation

Context
The activity takes place in a school playground. A group of children is preparing for a short sprint (approximately 60 metres). The starting line is marked informally on the ground. The participants are positioned in a crouched starting position, with their hands placed on the line, focused and waiting for the signal.
One child is designated as the referee (starter). They stand slightly to the side of the group, holding a small flag and a whistle.

Situation
The referee gives the start using a countdown ("3, 2, 1, go"), raises the flag, and slightly after blows the whistle. The timing between the verbal instruction, the visual signal, and the whistle is not fully synchronised.
One of the runners starts slightly before the flag is clearly raised. The referee immediately blows the whistle and announces a false start.
The runner reacts by contesting the decision:
"I didn't start early!"
"Your signal was not clear!"
Other participants hesitate and are unsure about what actually happened.

Observed difficulties
- Lack of synchronisation between signals (voice, gesture, whistle)
- Different perceptions of the same moment
- Immediate contestation of the decision
- Hesitation of the referee, unsure how to justify the call

Facilitator intervention
The facilitator stops the situation and gathers the group.
Verbatim example:
“Let’s pause. What did you see? Did everyone receive the same signal?”

Participants are invited to describe their perception of the start.
The facilitator highlights that:

- the signal was not clear for everyone
- the issue is not only the runner’s behaviour, but also the communication

The activity is repeated with:

- a single clear signal (voice only or synchronised voice + gesture)
- a clear instruction beforehand

Key learning points

- A decision is easier to accept when the signal is clear
- Communication must be shared and understood by everyone
- The referee’s role is to create clarity, not confusion

SESSION 2 – Football Conflict Situation

Context
Children are playing an informal football game in the school playground. There are no marked lines. Goals are created using sweatshirts placed on the ground. Teams are loosely identified (for example, one team in T-shirts, the other in long sleeves).
There is no designated referee.

Situation
During a dribble, two players collide unintentionally. One of them reacts immediately and aggressively:

- stops playing
- pushes the other player deliberately
- raises their voice
- provokes the other (“You can’t do that!” “I’m stronger than you!”)

The tension escalates quickly.
Other players react differently:

- some step back
- some try to intervene
- others watch without acting

No one clearly takes responsibility for managing the situation.
Observed difficulties

- No identified authority or mediator
- Confusion about what is acceptable behaviour
- Emotional escalation
- Risk of physical conflict
- Facilitator intervention

The facilitator intervenes immediately to stop the escalation.
Verbatim example:
“Stop. We don’t push. This is still a game.”

The facilitator then structures the situation:

- assigns a referee or mediator role
- defines a simple rule: no intentional aggression
- explains that someone must be responsible for enforcing the rule

The situation is replayed with a clearly identified referee.

Debrief
Participants compare the two situations:
- without structure
- with a referee and clear rules

Verbatim example:
“What changed when someone was responsible for the rules?”
Key learning points
- Without a referee, the strongest may impose their own rules
- Conflict escalates quickly when there is no structure
- A game needs a guarantor of the rules
- Regulating is not punishing, it is restoring the game

SESSION 3 – Gymnastics Judging Situation

Context
In a gymnasium, children perform simple gymnastics routines on mats. The routines include basic elements such as rolls, jumps, and short sequences.
Other students are asked to act as judges and give a score for each performance.

Situation
Students observe their peers and are asked to evaluate their performance.
Several difficulties appear:
- uncertainty: “Was the movement correct?”
- no replay → decisions must be immediate
- self-comparison: “I can do better than that”
- relational bias: reluctance to give a low score to a friend
- hesitation and discomfort

Some students avoid making decisions, while others give very high scores to avoid conflict.

Observed difficulties
- Lack of clear evaluation criteria
- Confusion between performance and personal ability
- Influence of emotions and relationships
- Fear of taking responsibility

Facilitator intervention
The facilitator starts by asking participants to explain their choices.
Verbatim example:
“Why did you give this score? What did you observe?”
The facilitator then introduces simple criteria:

- completion of the movement
- control and balance
- continuity of the sequence

The evaluation is repeated using these criteria.

Debrief
Participants reflect on:

- the difference between the first and second evaluation
- their level of confidence
- the influence of criteria

Verbatim example:
“Was it easier to decide with clear criteria?”

Key learning points

- Judging is a skill that can be learned
- Fairness requires separating observation from personal feelings
- A fair decision is not always comfortable
- Not deciding is also a decision

5. EVALUATION & DEBRIEF

The evaluation and debrief phase is a key moment of the session. It allows participants to reflect on their experience, understand what happened during the activities, and identify how behaviours, communication and decisions influenced the situation.

The objective is not to assess performance, but to support awareness and learning. The focus is placed on how participants interact, react, and take responsibility within the group.

Debrief questions
The facilitator leads the discussion using simple and progressive questions. These questions help participants move from observation to understanding.

- What happened during the activity?
- Participants describe the situation as they experienced it, without interpretation.
- What made it difficult?
- Participants identify sources of difficulty such as unclear communication, emotional reactions, or lack of structure.
- What helped improve the situation?
- The group reflects on what contributed to restoring clarity, calm, or fairness (clear signal, intervention, role definition).
- How did you feel in your role?

Participants express their feelings as players, referees, or observers. This helps develop empathy and awareness of different perspectives.
Facilitator verbatim examples:
“There is no right or wrong answer. We are trying to understand what happened.”
“Focus on what you saw and what you felt, not on who is right.”

Evaluation indicators
Throughout the session, the facilitator observes participants using qualitative indicators. These indicators help assess the development of behaviours linked to fair play and social interaction.

Participation and engagement

- Participants are actively involved in the activities and discussions: Ability to identify problems
- Participants can recognise moments of confusion, misunderstanding, or conflict: Improved communication
- Participants progressively use clearer language and more appropriate ways of interacting: Ability to make decisions
- Participants show increasing confidence in making and explaining decisions, even when they are challenged: Respect of others
- Participants demonstrate respectful behaviour, even in situations of disagreement or frustration: Using observation to support learning

Participants who are not directly involved in the activity (observers) play an important role in the evaluation process. They are encouraged to focus on specific elements such as clarity of communication, reactions to conflict, and decision-making.
Facilitator verbatim example:
“As observers, your role is not to judge people, but to help us understand what happened during the situation.”

Link with learning objectives
The debrief allows participants to connect their experience with key principles developed during the session:

- Clear communication helps prevent misunderstandings
- A game requires rules and a person responsible for applying them
- Emotions influence behaviour and need to be managed
- Making a decision involves responsibility

6. EXPECTED IMPACT

The expected impact of this session goes beyond the immediate activity. It aims to support the development of behaviours and attitudes that can be transferred to everyday situations, both within and outside the school environment.

By engaging participants in realistic and structured game situations, the session creates opportunities to experience fairness, responsibility, and emotional regulation in practice rather than in theory. The impact can be observed at different stages.

Short-term impact
Immediately after the session, participants are expected to demonstrate a better understanding of how rules, communication, and roles influence the quality of a game situation.

- Better understanding of rules and fairness
- Participants recognise that rules are not constraints but tools that ensure fairness and shared understanding
- Improved communication between participants
- Participants begin to use clearer and more structured ways of expressing themselves during interactions
- Increased awareness of roles
- Participants understand the importance of having a referee, mediator, or responsible person within a group situation
- Initial reflection on behaviour
- Participants start to question their reactions and recognise the impact of their actions on others

Mid-term impact

With repetition of similar activities or through transfer into other contexts, participants progressively develop more stable behavioural skills.

- Increased ability to regulate conflicts
- Participants are more likely to intervene early in situations of tension and to avoid escalation
- Greater confidence in decision-making
- Participants become more comfortable taking decisions, explaining them, and accepting disagreement
- Improved ability to take perspective
- Participants better understand different roles (player, referee, observer) and develop empathy
- More structured interactions
- Participants naturally organise their games with clearer rules and roles

Long-term impact

Over time, the learning outcomes of the session can extend beyond sport and contribute to broader social development.

- Transfer of fair behaviour to school and social life
- Participants apply principles of fairness, respect, and dialogue in other group situations (classroom, playground, peer interactions)
- Development of responsibility and autonomy
- Participants take initiative in organising activities and managing group dynamics
- Strengthening of respect and inclusion
- Participants demonstrate more consistent respect for others, regardless of differences in ability or status
- Improved emotional regulation
- Participants are better able to manage frustration, disagreement, and pressure in various contexts

Conditions for impact
For these impacts to be effective, several conditions are important:

- repetition of similar experiences over time
- active involvement of participants in different roles
- consistent facilitation focused on reflection and not only action
- safe and respectful learning environment

7. ANNEX: TECHNICAL SHEET

- Starter guidelines (clear signal)
- Conflict mediation phrases
- Simple evaluation grid for gymnastics

SECTION 5: CONCLUSION

5.1 HARMONIZING THEORY AND PRACTICE: THE COMPLETED BLUEPRINT

With the architectural finalization of the four multi-actor training modules in Section 4, the MENTORS Training Format officially transitions from a conceptual blueprint into a fully engineered, operational curriculum. This developmental phase successfully bridges high-level psychosocial research with the pragmatic reality of the sports field, demonstrating that grassroots clubs can serve as highly structured environments for values acquisition. By creating a direct, operational link between the theoretical foundations and the practical layouts, this curriculum ensures that values are not merely taught through passive instruction. Instead, they are deeply woven into the child's cognitive framework through systematic exposure to adult role models who embody consistent, predictable behaviors.
The final structural synthesis of the curriculum brings together the extensive work completed across the four core modules:

- Module I: **Fair Play** (focusing on Respect for Rules, Integrity/Honesty, and Respect for Opponents) sets the indispensable ethical baseline for all sporting interactions.
- Module II: **Healthy Competition** (built around Striving for Excellence, Respectful Rivalry, and Self-Discipline) utilizes the natural intensity of athletic challenge to build resilience and emotional self-regulation.
- Module III: **Teamwork/Cooperation** (centering on Communication & Trust, Shared Responsibility, and Inclusive Participation) establishes the vital social mechanisms of collaborative group action.
- Module IV: **Companionship/Solidarity** (addressing Empathy, Loyalty, and Social Inclusion) transforms peer groups into a protective community capable of deconstructing rigid authority patterns and performance-driven exclusion.

Together, these twelve sub-values do not operate in isolation; they form a single, interconnected framework where every value strengthens the others, shifting youth sports away from an elite win-at-all-costs mindset toward a holistic growth environment.

5.2 EMPOWERING THE TARGET GROUPS: TANGIBLE PEDAGOGICAL BENEFITS

The true innovation of this finalized format lies in the direct benefits it yields for each specific target group within the sporting ecosystem. Rather than offering generic advice, the curriculum equips adults with role-specific strategies that unlock clear educational advantages.

-Coaches benefit from a profound professional upgrade, transitioning from mere technical or tactical drill instructors into skilled moral facilitators. Through the structured tools provided, they gain the capacity to establish a mastery-oriented motivational climate where tracking individual improvement and effort takes precedence over the scoreboard, dramatically lowering athlete burnout and anxiety.

-Referees receive the structural support needed to reframe their field presence entirely, moving away from the isolated role of a punitive judge to become active match mentors. The curriculum grants them practical communication tools that humanize their authority on the pitch, allowing them to de-escalate tensions calmly and utilize positive reinforcement to foster a deep, lifelong civic respect for rules and justice within young athletes.

-Families are guided through a vital cultural shift, moving from potentially disruptive sideline critics to essential partners in the club's training identity. By adopting the specialized communication frameworks, parents learn to cultivate a supportive emotional atmosphere at home. They gain the ability to conduct meaningful post-game reflections that celebrate character, character development, and inclusive peer support, effectively protecting their children from external hyper-competitive stress and reinforcing identical value expectations across every environment the child inhabits.

5.3 LAUNCHING THE WP4 PILOTING PHASE: NEXT STEPS AND FIELD IMPLEMENTATION

Moving forward, the immediate priority for the MENTORS consortium is the active, operational deployment of this Training Format during the upcoming WP4 Piloting Phase. The pedagogical structures developed in Module B—such as the Be The Ref rotation system and the Dual Scoring Game templates—will serve as live field laboratories to test and validate our methodologies within real-world sport environments across different athletic disciplines, including football, volleyball, and boxing.

To ensure strict empirical validity, these pilot implementation sessions will systematically test the practical boundaries of the Integrated Approach on the ground. Facilitators will evaluate coaches during daily practices to observe their comfort levels in executing structured, non-formal reflective routines immediately following high-intensity exercises.

Simultaneously, field observers will track referees to measure whether clear, age-appropriate explanations of fouls and the deployment of positive reinforcement mechanisms can actively minimize match hostility. Furthermore, parent behaviors will be monitored during pilot match days to verify the reduction of sideline pressure and assess the effectiveness of the process-oriented narratives carried into the home environment. This cross-border field implementation is intentionally designed to analyze the structural flexibility and replicability of the manual across diverse international grassroots networks.

5.4 EVALUATIVE METRICS AND KEY EXPECTED LEARNINGS

The qualitative and quantitative data gathered throughout this upcoming field-testing phase will generate vital feedback loops for the consortium, allowing us to measure the direct pedagogical impact of the curriculum. The validation process will look closely at three core evaluative indices:

- **Technical Replicability and Structural Clarity**: The pilot sessions will assess whether the step-by-step instructions and technical layouts are engineered clearly enough for any grassroots facilitator to execute them perfectly without external expert support. This includes validating whether the strict, non-formal timeline (15% Warm-up, 70% Core Activity, 15% Debrief) fits fluidly into standard club schedules.

- **Systemic Reduction of Axiological Dissonance**: By deploying synchronized observation grids, the project will measure the alignment of the messages delivered simultaneously by coaches, parents, and referees. The goal is to verify that contradictory educational signals are eliminated, ensuring the child experiences a predictable, unified moral front.

- **Socio-Emotional Impact on the Beneficiaries**: Through structured group reflections, such as the Post-Match Circle and Third Half routines, the consortium will evaluate children's growth in cognitive perspective-taking, autonomous moral reasoning, emotional self-regulation, and peer empathy under competitive stress.

5.5 SUSTAINABLE INTEGRATION: SHIFTING YOUTH SPORT CULTURE

The ultimate goal of the MENTORS Training Format extends far beyond the production of an educational manual or the completion of a project timeline; it targets a permanent, system-wide cultural change in how European youth sport is organized, conducted, and valued. By placing a shared communication toolkit and structured non-formal templates directly into the hands of local organizations, this curriculum provides the institutional infrastructure required to replace result-driven, performance-obsessed silos with a highly coordinated, multi-actor ecosystem focused on process-oriented growth and educational mentoring.

When this integrated training framework is fully adopted into daily operations, grassroots sports clubs are effectively transformed from mere commercial providers of physical activity into primary environments for civic, moral, and ethical education. Through this collective, long-term commitment of coaches, referees, and families working at eye-level, the MENTORS project establishes a safe, inclusive learning environment. This framework ensures that youth sport fulfills its truest promise: preparing the next generation to navigate the social complexities of the modern world with honesty, resilience, profound empathy, and an unwavering commitment to human justice.

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