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**About our front cover:** Young players were asked for just 3 words that capture their feelings and experiences of playing the game. Our player word cloud represents those responses.

## INTRODUCTION

Football is Scotland's national sport and around 325,000 children and young people participate in the game. Football can be found in every community; it creates lifelong friendships and memories and inspires achievement and celebration.

The Scottish Football Association (Scottish FA) is the governing body for Scottish football. The Scottish FA has a five-year strategy **Getting it Right for Every Child in Scottish Football (2019-2023)**<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of the strategy is to ensure that children and young people are safe, that they have their rights adequately promoted and that their wellbeing is safeguarded across all Scottish football. The Scottish FA state: **This is a strategy for all Scottish football. It is everyone's responsibility to protect the children and young people who play our national sport.**

The Scottish FA wants to understand the progress that is being made to deliver on commitments to young players. This means hearing from young players who play football across Scotland. This is the first time the Scottish FA has undertaken such a process of reflection and engagement; it is envisaged that this project will establish a baseline that can be built on in future years.

This work is also taking place at an important time for children and young people. Scotland is on the verge of something profoundly important in terms of realising children's human rights and ensuring wellbeing; the incorporation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) into Scot's law. Incorporation and subsequent implementation is a game changer for children and young people, and for every agency in receipt of public monies. For our national sport, with a commitment to rights, wellbeing and listening to the views of young players, incorporation is also a time to shine as a leader in the sector.

The engagement with children and young people has been facilitated by Children's Parliament. As an independent body with understanding of rights, wellbeing and participatory methodologies, Children's Parliament was tasked with capturing and reporting on the experience of young players. This would not have been possible without the support of young players themselves, the adults who support the game, and their clubs. **Our thanks to them.**

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<sup>1</sup> The strategy sits alongside the Scottish SFA commitment to relevant Standards for Child Wellbeing and Protection in Sport, launched by sportscotland in 2017.  
<https://sportscotland.org.uk/safeguarding-in-sport/child-wellbeing-and-protection/standards-for-child-wellbeing-and-protection-in-sport/>

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

In this report, we present what we have heard directly from children and young people aged 8 to 18 years old who play the game. We use what we have found to help the Scottish FA and adults and young players across the game to reflect on how we further efforts to ensure that children and young people are safe, have their rights adequately promoted and their wellbeing safeguarded across all Scottish football.

In the first part of the engagement work with young players, Children's Parliament staff visited 10 settings, with initial visits to help us orientate ourselves to the experiences of being part of the game. This was followed up with further visits to host small group discussions about being a young player. The children and young people who took part talked about being healthy, happy, safe, and having their say. They talked about what they love about their football and helped us understand how we can make taking part an even better experience.

Having found out about young players' experiences of the game, this information was used to develop a national survey that gives us a wider reach across the country. This national survey was live for 5 weeks in April/May 2023 and received 1,565 responses. The survey will be a key legacy for the work, providing the Scottish FA with a tool for further assessment of children and young people's experiences in years to come.

Any questions about the report or the processes described can be directed to the Scottish FA Wellbeing and Protection Team: [childrenswellbeing@scottishfa.co.uk](mailto:childrenswellbeing@scottishfa.co.uk)

# ABOUT THE ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUNG PLAYERS

## Part 1: Face-to-face engagement

The Children's Parliament team visited 10 clubs across Scotland between October 2022 and March 2023. Children, young people, and clubs were offered anonymity, so that there was no sense that we were reporting on them; rather we were capturing a whole range of individual and group experiences up and down the length of the country. After an initial orientation visit, 102 young players took part in small group conversations with Children's Parliament facilitators where three themes were explored: safety, wellbeing, and participation. Several questions helped us structure discussions.

### Theme 1: Safety

What are children and young people's understandings of safety? Do children and young people feel safe in their football setting? What makes them feel safe? Who makes sure that they are safe? What would they do if they, or someone else, didn't feel safe? What could Scottish football do to make them feel safer?

### Theme 2: Wellbeing

What are children and young people's understandings of wellbeing in football? What are the parts of football that impact positively on their wellbeing? What parts have a negative impact? What could Scottish football do to promote and enhance their wellbeing in football?

### Theme 3: Participation

Are children and young people involved in decisions that affect them at their club? How are they involved? What helps and hinders their participation? What could Scottish football do to promote the participation of young players in decision-making?

The knowledge and insight gained from visits and conversations then informed the development of the national survey.



## Part 2: The national survey

A review of the findings of the face-to-face engagement with children and young people led to the drafting and testing of a national survey called: **What is it like to be a young player in the game?** Learning from the orientation visits and group discussions led to the following decisions about structure and content for the survey:

- At the start of the survey young players were asked to click through to the version appropriate for their age, with three options: 8- to 11-year-olds; 12- to 15-year-olds; 16- to 18-year-olds. The content of each was largely the same, but images used gave a message about appropriateness of the survey to those completing it.
- Young players were assured that the survey was voluntary and confidential. They were not asked anything that would identify them.
- The support of parents/carers was welcomed.
- Young players were asked where they play their football, with options given as: their local/grassroots football club; a school team; a professional club or Academy; at school say in PE or during breaks; or with friends in the playground, street, or park.
- Young players were then offered a series of statements about training and playing football, all of which sought to find out how safe, supported, encouraged, and respected they feel as part of the game.
- There were questions that help us to find out more about what motivates young players to play the game and what they enjoy when they play.
- Young players were asked about what can worry them when they are training or play a game; they were asked to identify who they go to with any questions or worries they might have.
- There were also options to find out what young players think helps them and their peers to be happy and safe and have their say.

The **What is it like to be a young player in the game? (2023)** survey was live for 5 weeks in April/May 2023. It received 1,565 responses from young players. We can report the following detail about those who responded.



## WHAT YOUNG PLAYERS TOLD US

In this section of the report, we draw on the group conversations with young players and the national survey. We report using these themes:

1. Where do young players play their football?
2. Why play football?
3. Being part of a team
4. Having fun and enjoying the game
5. Feeling safe
6. Feeling respected and having my say
7. Adults at my club
8. Having worries
9. Sharing worries
10. Inclusion
11. Other themes of interest:
  - Costs as a barrier/a lack of local facilities
  - Age/age categorisation
  - Young players on elite route/the goal of professionalism
12. What can we do to make sure young players are safe, happy and have their say?

In the following pages all direct quotes from young players will be in **purple text** and will be accompanied by information about age category, sex and the source of the quote; from a group session or national survey.

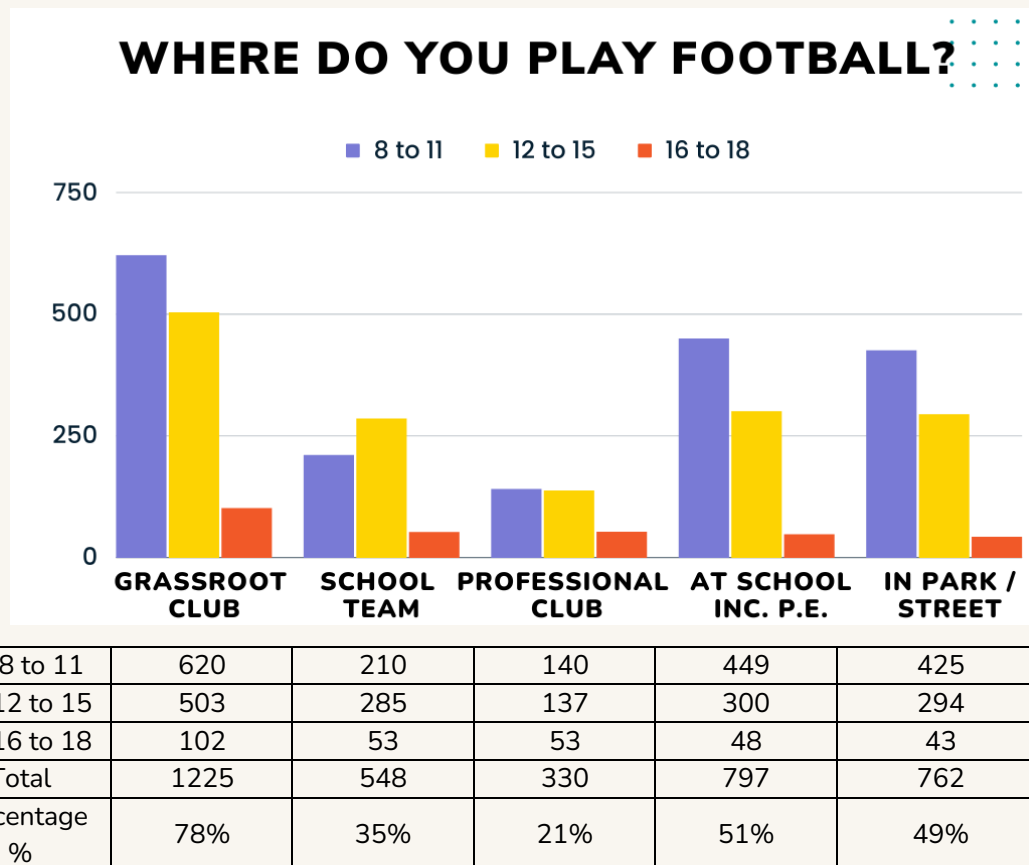
When we refer to the national survey results, the following words are used to describe numbers and proportions:

- *Almost all* means over 90%
- *Most* means 75% to 90%
- *The majority* means 50% to 74%
- *Less than half* means 15% to 49%
- *Few* means up to 15%



## 1. Where do young players play their football?

From the national survey we can find out more about where children and young people play the game. Many play football in multiple settings.



While the graphic tells us how many children and young people play the game informally in their local park or in the street when it comes to subsequent reporting on the national survey in this report, we have removed responses from those children and young people who *only* report playing the game as such (n= 40). This is so that we can look at the responses and experiences of young players who are engaged via organised football provision where the Scottish FA strategy and commitments to children and young people should have impact.

## 2. Why play football? What do you enjoy most?

Throughout this engagement process young players have shone a light on why they play the game. We can report from both the face-to-face engagement and the national survey on a range of themes. To begin, contributions directly from young players:

Football allows me to be myself, feel free and fit, and meet like-minded people.

(8-11/girl/survey)

Playing football makes me very happy and clears my mind especially if I've had a bad day at school.

(8-11/boy/survey)

It's the great teammates and coaches.

(12-15/boy/group session)

I feel sad when we lose a game but I like to play football to keep fit.

(8-11/boy/survey)

It's absolutely amazing being part of a football team. It's great and all worries or stress goes away when we play.

(12-15/girl/survey)

Enjoyment. You'll only want to do it if you're enjoying it, otherwise there's no point.

(8-11/boy/group session)

I love playing football because it's a team playing game and you make friends with children from different places. It makes me feel strong and confident. I have nice coaches who make me feel happy.

(8-11/boy/survey)

I love playing football. It makes me feel focused on improving my fitness, skills abilities, I always want to do well. I also think it helps me be more aware of my health and things I should be eating to help. I think being able to focus on football also helps me want to do well at schoolwork also. Football helped me through Covid, and I am so glad I had football again to keep me focused.

(12-15/boy/survey)

Being a girl, I love it. It's becoming more popular and so good to meet different friends from different places.

(12-15/girl/survey)

I love that football brings me together with other kids, wherever I am in the world, even when we don't speak the same language.

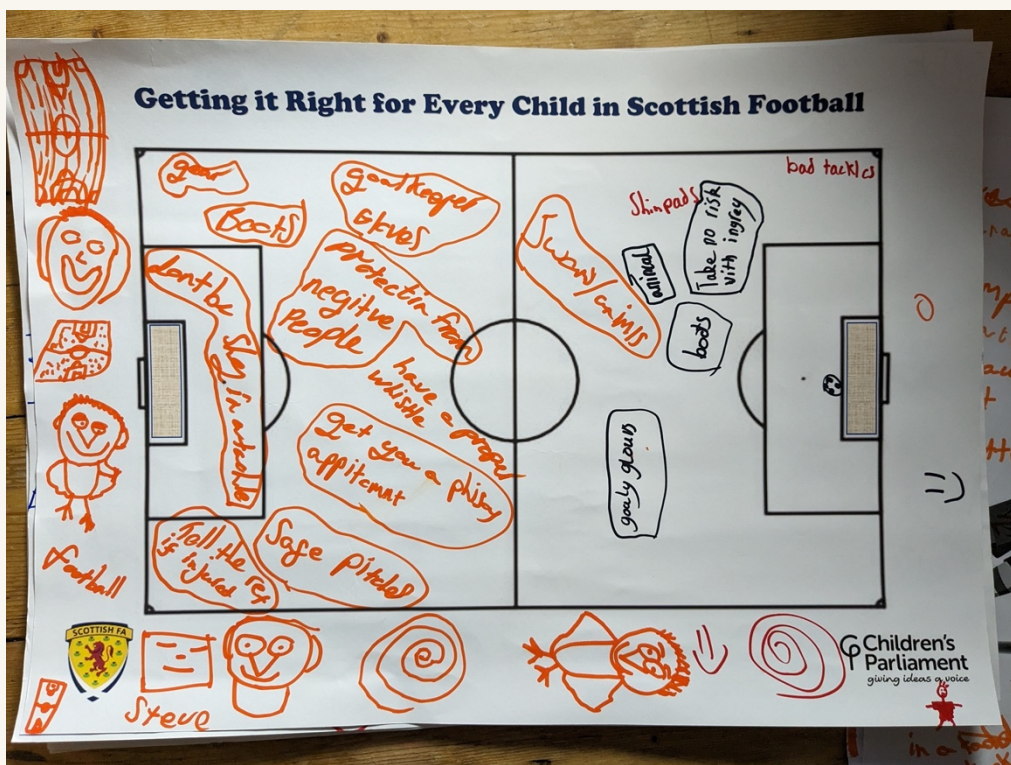
(12-15/boy/survey)

It helps me with my anxiety.

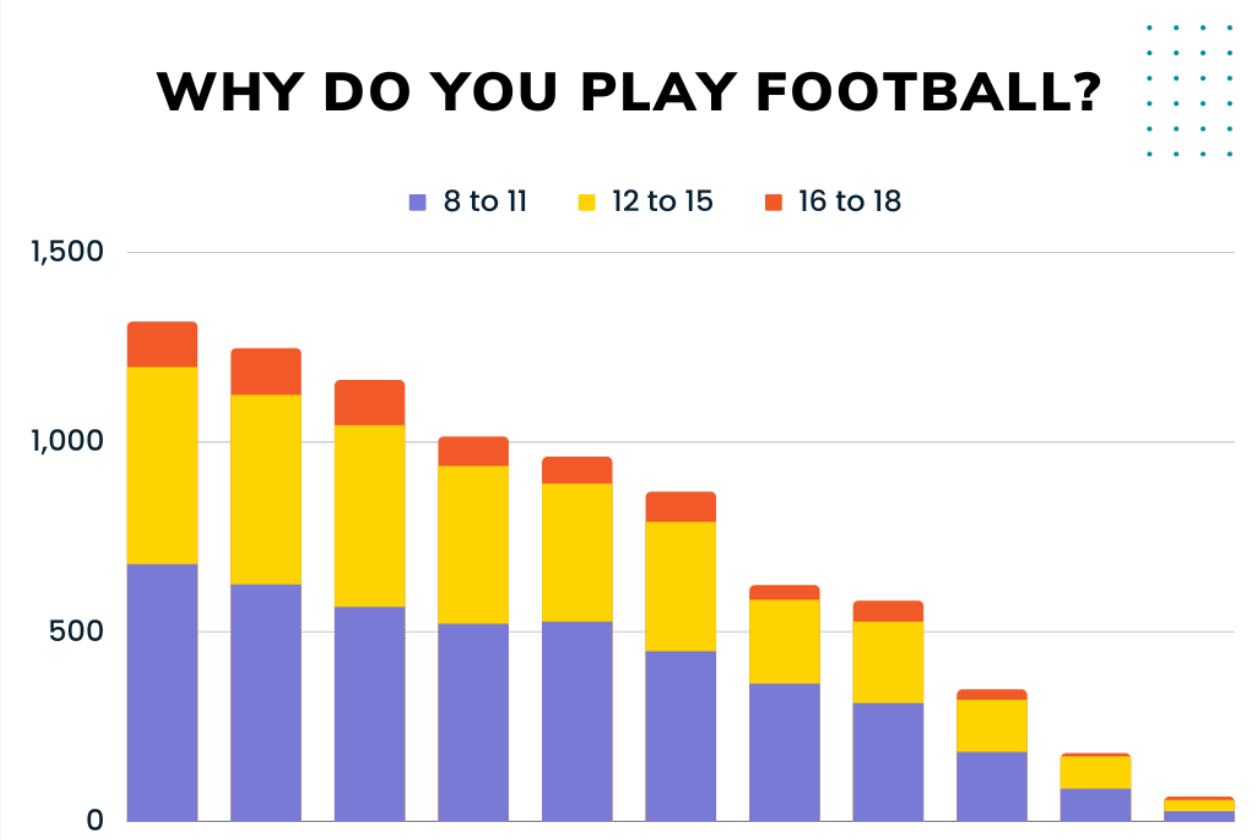
(12-15/boy/survey)

I look forward to my game every week and think about it through the week. I want to know that I put in everything, even if we lost the game.

(12-15/boy/survey)

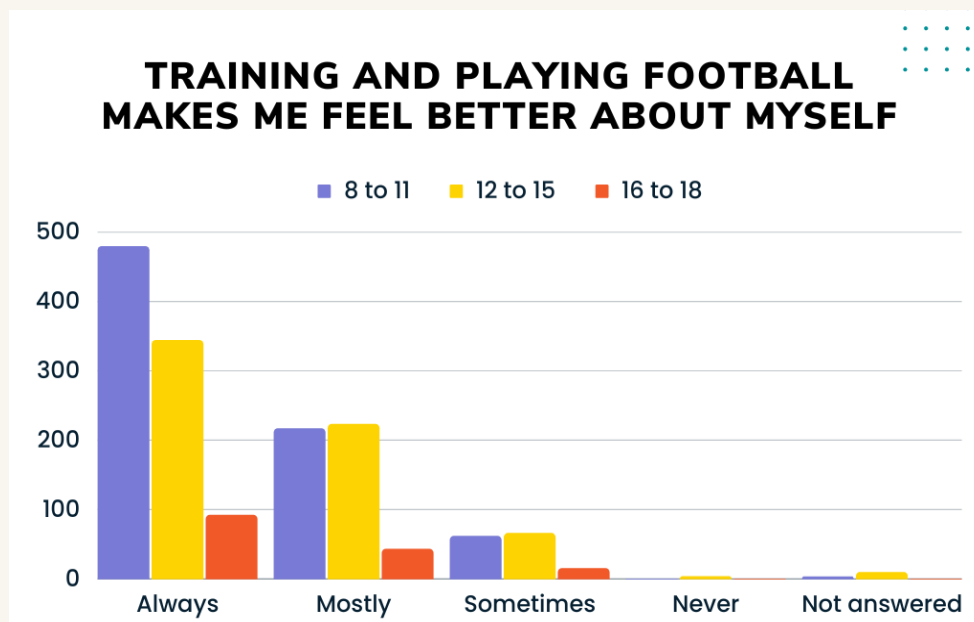


From the national survey we can report young players cite the following reasons as to why they play the game. As reflected above and throughout this report young players play the game for a multitude of positive reasons and with a range of motivations; in the survey they could give as many affirmative responses as they wished from a list of options developed during the group sessions. Across all our age groups and for both boys/young men and girls/young women the top 3 responses were the same.



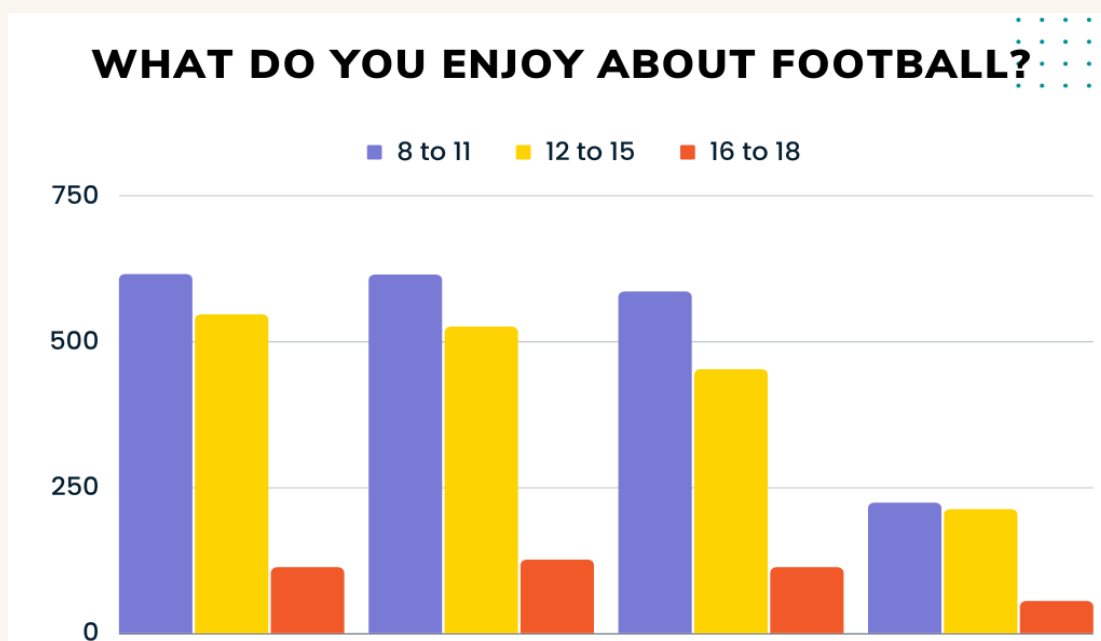
	It's fun	I want to play	It helps me to be fit and healthy	I want to be a professional football player	I get to be with my friends	I like it when we win	I see my idol or the people I like play football on TV	Helps me meet other people	My family wants me to play	My school wants me to play	Another reason
16 to 18	120	123	119	77	71	80	39	55	27	8	9
12 to 15	518	499	478	415	363	340	220	214	137	85	29
8 to 11	678	624	565	521	526	448	363	312	183	86	27
Total	1316	1246	1162	1013	960	868	622	581	347	179	65
Percentage %	84%	80%	74%	65%	61%	55%	40%	37%	22%	11%	4%

The survey asked young players to report on the degree to which their participation in the game makes them feel better about themselves. The prompt statement used response options that were used across much of the survey: *always*, *mostly*, *sometimes* and *never*. From this prompt we find that almost all young players agree to some extent with the proposition.



8 to 11	479	217	62	1	4
12 to 15	344	223	66	4	10
16 to 18	93	44	16	1	1
Total	916	484	144	6	15
Percentage %	59%	31%	9%	0%	1%

As part of the national survey, we also asked young players: *What do you enjoy about football?* In this question the responses focused on the nature of the training offered and how much young players enjoyed official matches.



	Official matches	Training sessions with a ball passes, shooting and dribbling	Training in small sided games, like 2v2, 5v5, 7v7	Training sessions without a ball, like jogging or running
8 to 11	615	614	585	223
12 to 15	546	525	452	212
16 to 18	113	126	113	55
Total	1294	1265	1150	490
Percentage %	83%	81%	73%	31%

From our orientation visits, group sessions and national survey we can identify several important findings and themes when considering why children and young people play the game.

## **It's fun**

This is one of the key messages from our orientation visits, small group conversations with young players and the national survey. They play the game because it is fun, and they love it. One note, however, is that those young players who only responded that they play the game at a professional club or academy (n= 330) were less likely to say they play because it is fun (67% compared to the overall result of 84%) and far fewer (34% compared to the overall result of 61%) play to be with friends.

## **Physical health**

Young players recognise the benefit of football to their physical health. They said football keeps them physically fit while doing something they like. At the same time, they feel football gives them motivation to stay healthy. Because they want to play well, they make conscious healthy choices. They make sure they have a balanced diet, enough rest and exercise regularly. Older young players also talked about health and wellbeing related inputs at their clubs, for example exploring tobacco/smoking and substance misuse.

## **Mental wellbeing**

Young players across age groups said playing football makes them happy. Many young players over 12 said the dedicated time for themselves when playing football means they can focus on the training or the game and forget about any worries. They told us that winning a game or seeing their own skills improved have had a positive impact on their self-confidence, not just on the pitch but in general. They feel motivated to do things better. They believe the support and recognition from their teammates and adults in the club contribute to that.

## **Friendships and social benefits**

We learned from orientation visits and group sessions that the social aspect of playing the game is particularly important for children and young people. They develop friendships, meet with peers and adults who share the same interests. They emphasised having fun together. Young players talked about how when they win and do well as a team, they celebrate as a family. Friendships often continue outside football, so children and young people enjoy doing things together. They also like it when their clubs organise other social outings and fun activities.

## Life skills

During orientation visits and in group sessions young players talked about the life skills they have acquired through football such as effective communication, following instructions, and giving constructive feedback. There was also talk of general wellbeing off the pitch, which sees clubs organise workshops, talks and presentations for young players and parents on a variety of subjects including online gaming, internet safety and gambling.

## The aspiration to be a professional player

For some young players involvement in their football is seen as a route to becoming a professional player. This is a positive and exciting prospect for many young players, but pressures do have a downside which we will return to later in the report.

### 3. Being part of a team

Football is a team sport, and young players have told us about their experiences of being part of a team.

I have anxiety problems. Football is good for me to meet people and keep fit. My parents help me and stay with me so I feel secure to join in. My teammates and coaches are kind.

(8-11/girl/survey)

Being part of a game makes you feel like you are useful and having a football team is like having a second family.

(12-15/girl/survey)

It's a big family here. People around you who can relate to you.

(12-15/boy/group session)

I love my football team, I have made lots of friends and love being part of a team whether we win or lose it doesn't matter, I'm still proud to be part of a team.

(12-15/girl/survey)



I love playing football. I don't care that I'm the only girl in the boys team. I just want to play.

(12-15/girl/survey)

Playing football is my favourite thing to do! My team is full of my friends and we have the best time. It's good for us and keeps us healthy and happy.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Everyone should be allowed to play.

(12-15/boy/survey)

Doesn't matter how bad or good the player is!! Everyone in the team should get a game. #Letthemplay

(12-15/boy/survey)

I love being in my team and although we might not win every game, nobody feels they are to blame and I really think more teams should start doing things like that.

(16-18/boy/survey)

A great feeling when you work as a team at training and games.

(16-18/girl/survey)

I always get left out because I'm a girl.

(8-11/girl/survey)

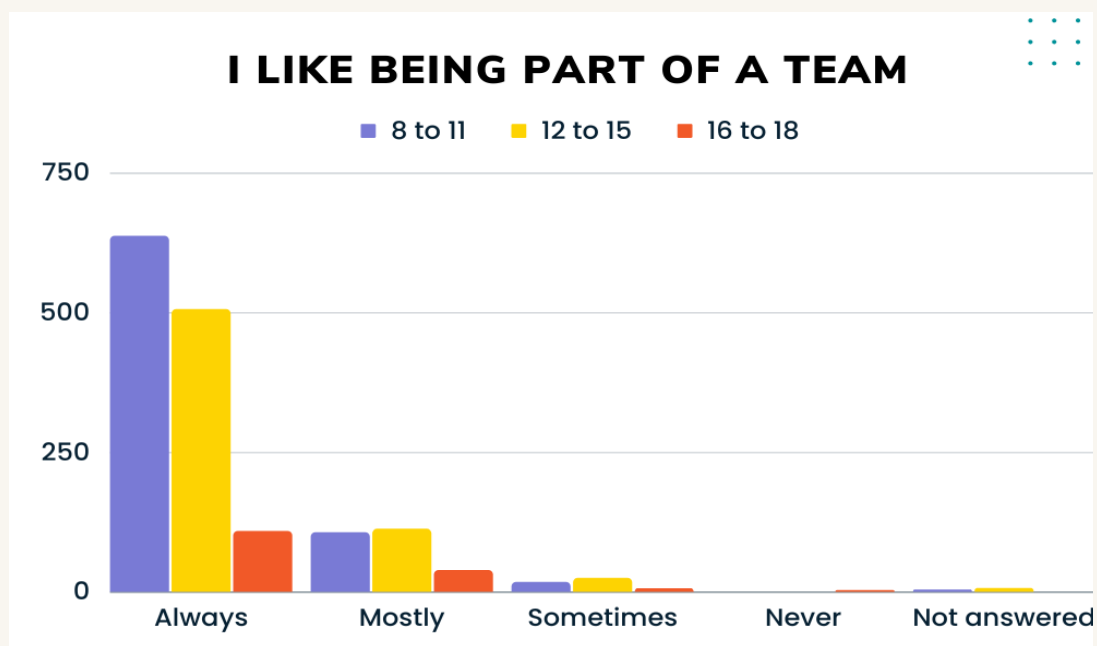
Grown-ups and some kids are too serious. I just want to play and get a bit better. Coaches always pay attention to the players they think will play for the senior club. I just want to play and have fun.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Yes, everyone has strengths and weaknesses. And it would be best if we try to help each other overcome those weaknesses and get better at our strengths.

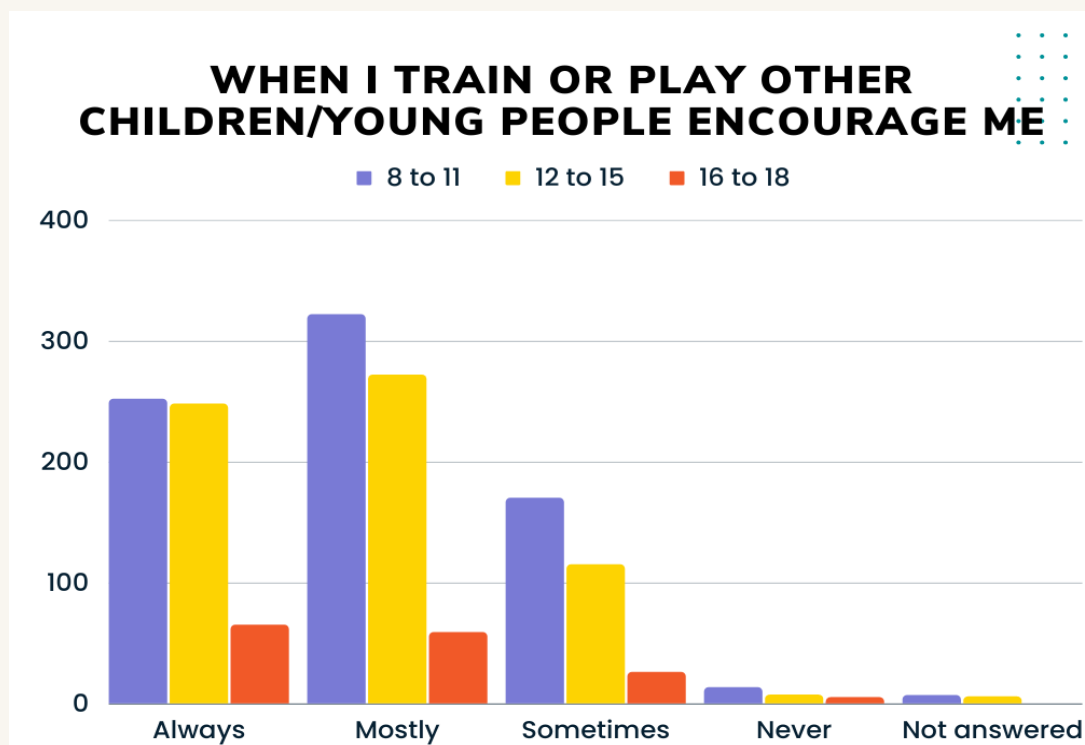
(12-15/boy/survey)

From the national survey we find that almost all young players like being part of their team, although with age the percentage of those players affirming with the response of 'always' is lower: 83% of 8-to-11-year-olds respond always; 78% of 12-to-15-year-olds; 70% of 16-to-18-year-olds.



8 to 11	637	106	17	0	3
12 to 15	506	112	24	0	5
16 to 18	109	39	6	1	0
Total	1252	257	47	1	8
Percentage %	80%	16%	3%	0%	1%

Also, from the national survey we find that most young players report that other players encourage them *always* or *mostly*. However, we find the opposite trend compared to the earlier question, so that now with age the percentage of those players affirming most strongly with the response of ‘always’ increases: 33% of 8-to-11-year-olds respond always; 38% of 12-to-15-year-olds; 42% of 16-to-18-year-olds.



8 to 11	252	322	170	13	6
12 to 15	248	272	115	7	5
16 to 18	65	59	26	5	0
Total	565	653	311	25	11
Percentage %	36%	42%	20%	2%	1%

We can identify several important findings and themes when developing our understanding of the value and importance of being part of a team.

### A sense of belonging

Having a sense of belonging, feeling part of a team, is crucial to young players. In group sessions young players acknowledged that there can be competition for a game or a particular position, but they still want to feel and offer support to each other and encourage each other to become better players. Young players identify that it is the adults in the game who set the tone for these feelings and experiences.

## **Having a game**

Young players talk about the importance of having game time; there is an acknowledgment of the competitive element of the game but that being part of a team also means playing your part, win or lose. They also recognise however, that this emphasis on everyone having a game is not the philosophy in every setting, we will return to this later.

## **Being included**

Young players also talked about being able to 'fit-in' and being 'liked' by teammates, and that this is connected to whether players are happy playing football. Because of this, they would like adults, especially coaches, to treat them fairly and openly. This will help create a healthy team dynamic; when adults are seen to be fair this is good for the team. When exploring being part of a team girls/young women playing the game talked about experiences of both being and not being included and respected as a player. We will return to this in more depth across several parts of this report.

## **Being together off the pitch**

In their group sessions young players talked about the benefits of social time together, having fun and getting to know each other. They appreciated the extra effort that this requires from adults who support them.

## **Progressing through the game**

Older young players talked about the importance of the connections between phases of their involvement in the game, and the need to feel part of a team that continues to have a positive experience of playing as you get older. There are challenging aspects to having ambitions to be a professional which we will return to.

# **4. Having fun and enjoying the game**

Building on what we have already identified, the joy of taking part is about having fun and enjoying the game.

**I like the passion of everybody at the club.**

(12-15/boy/group session)

**It's good and I can express myself and it helps me relax.**

(12-15/girl/survey)

Hard work makes me happy as I put in effort and get 'well done's!'.  
(8-11/boy/group session)

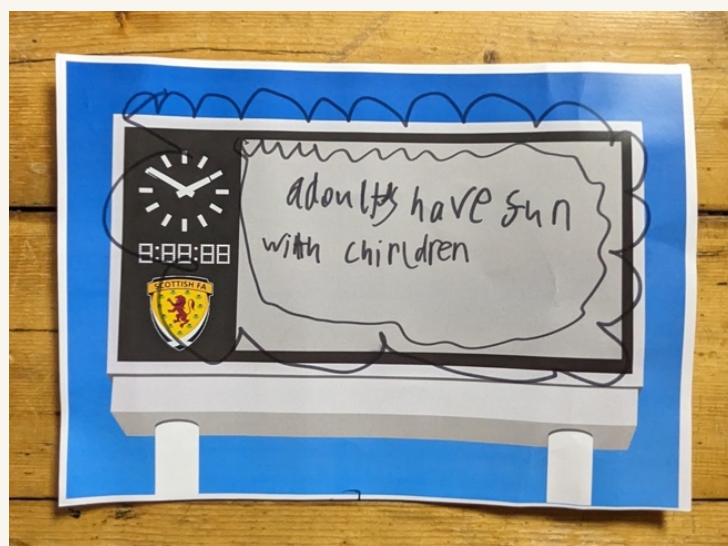
Encouragement is massive.  
(16-18/boy/group session)

There's a serious side but also having fun.  
(12-15/boy/group session)

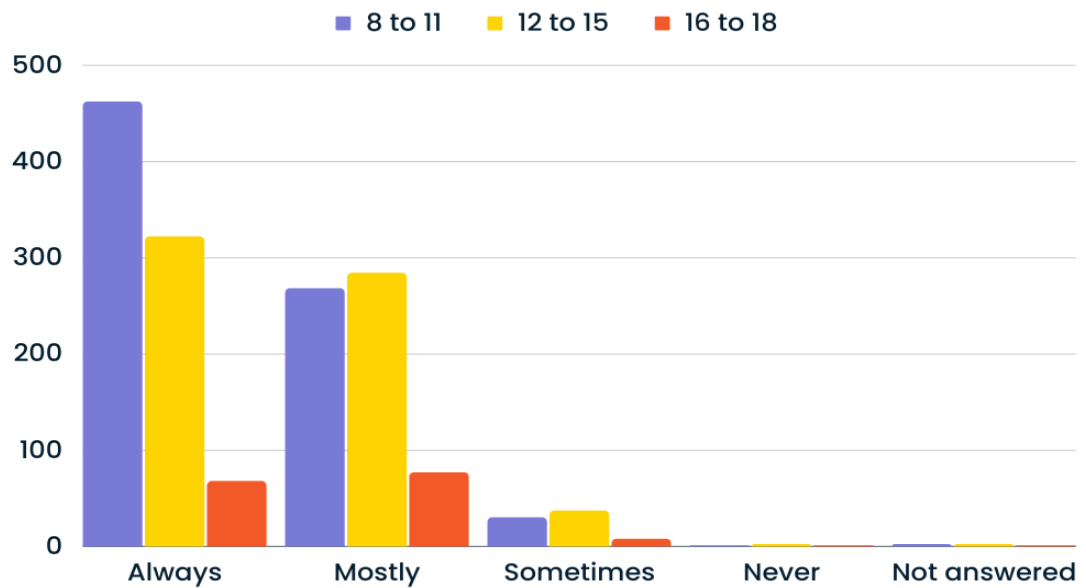
From the national survey we find that almost all young players have fun when they play and train, however, we must also reflect on the experience of a small but important number of young players who do not.

The coaches sometimes swear badly at us and take it out on the whole team punishing us with laps if we lose. They bring in new players all the time and it makes me worry they will get rid of me. It is not a nice atmosphere sometimes and I love playing football. I don't understand why they can't be kind and positive all the time.  
(12-15/boy/survey)

I stopped and feel a lot better since - my coach has favourites and could be really mean to some of us.  
(12-15/boy/survey)



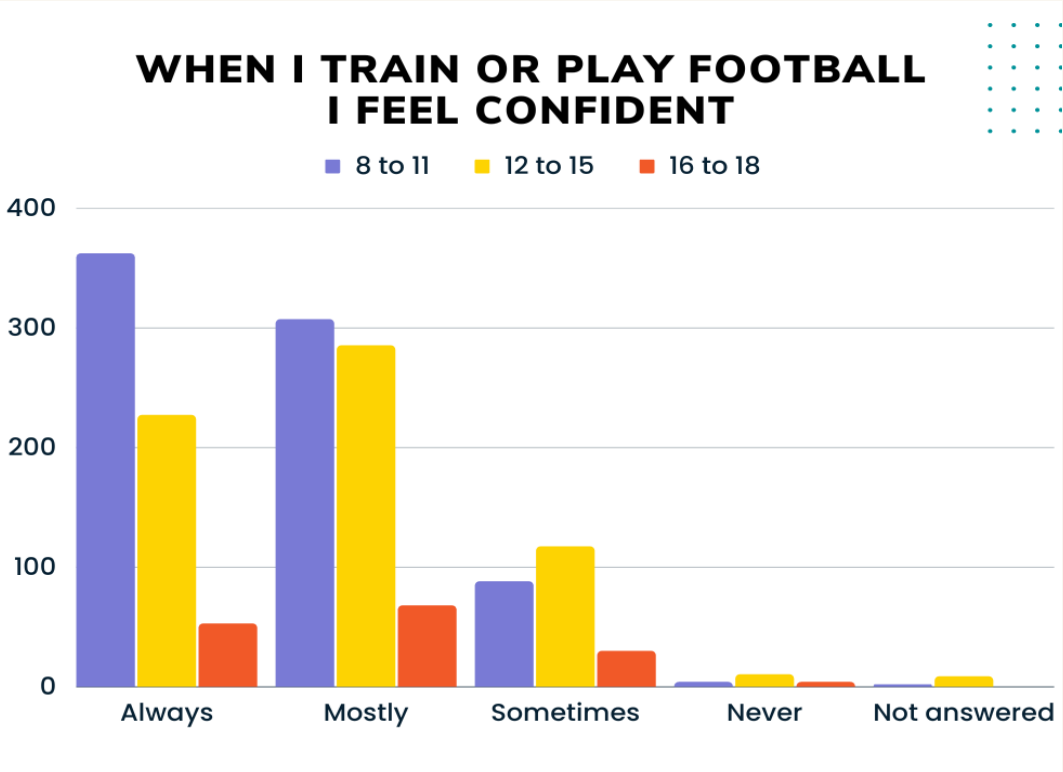
## WHEN I TRAIN OR PLAY FOOTBALL I HAVE FUN



8 to 11	462	268	30	1	2
12 to 15	322	284	37	2	2
16 to 18	68	77	8	1	1
Total	852	629	75	4	5
Percentage %	54%	40%	5%	0%	0%

Doesnt matter what age you  
are as long as you enjoy it  
you can participate

Also from the national survey, we find that most young players feel confident when they train and play; although those responding with the most affirmative response of *always*, diminishes with age: 47% of 8-to-11-year-olds respond always; 35% of 12-to-15-year-olds; 34% of 16-to-18-year-olds.



8 to 11	362	307	88	4	2
12 to 15	227	285	117	10	8
16 to 18	53	68	30	4	0
Total	642	660	235	18	10
Percentage %	41%	42%	15%	1%	1%

We can identify several important findings and themes when focusing on the need to ensure that participation in football is fun and enjoyable.

**Key elements: participation, skill development and fun**

Young players describe playing football as a fun thing to do. They laugh a lot when playing the sport. Young payers enjoy football most when participation, skill development and fun are fundamental to the experience. When teammates are supportive and encouraging, they get the best experience. Counter to this is the pressure they can feel when competition and winning is the focus, then they can feel under pressure and feel not good enough. Young players enjoy the game when adults show their support by attending, cheering on, and giving words of encouragement, even when they are not winning.

## The balance between participation and winning

Football is of course a competitive sport, but for young players there can be different experiences in terms of the focus of their team/club. Some young players talked about their football club as being a place that prioritises participation over winning. While they might play a competitive game the focus remains on everyone having a game, and everyone being valued equally, win, or lose. However, this is not always the case and young players talked about the pressure to win, and that some peers and adults do prioritise winning over fun and participation.

## 5. Feeling safe

A key commitment of the Scottish FA is that children and young people should be and feel safe when they play. We can learn about the experiences and views of young players from both the group sessions and the national survey. There are things to celebrate here and elsewhere in this report about how adults support the game; but in this section of the report we begin to identify where there are issues that adults need to understand, reflect on, and consider if commitments to safety are to be realised.

You feel safe when teammates have your back.

(8-11/boy/group session)

Our coaches are so fair and kind, I hate when other coaches are not like this in a game and encourage bad behaviour or don't correct their kids when wrong.

(8-11/boy/survey)

A safe environment is when everyone is able to speak to each other and just feel safe and not feel different or left out.

(16-18/boy/group session)

Good leadership from the coaches to show that there is people to speak to that could result in you feeling safe at the club.

(16-18/boy/group session)



It's difficult when losing confidence but my new coaches have really brought it back.

(16-18/girl/survey)

I wanted to play with friends, but some boys take it very seriously. They swore and called me names if I made a mistake. I stopped playing.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Football is great way to experience new things. Adults can make football scary and not fun by shouting and swearing at the side or assuming the gender of children. I experienced this I have short hair and a man was not happy that I played in a girls team he said I was a boy and was very unkind to me while I was playing football.

(12-15/girl/survey)

Love football but adults watching can behave very badly and we have had games stopped because of this. Our coach wouldn't let us continue for our safety.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Please, please, please start doing something with all the bad coaches and parents at the side of pitches on game days, shouting and swearing at children, referees, other coaches and parents. Ban them and take their coaching certificates and licences away from them.

(12-15/boy/survey)

Adults have bullied me before. Nobody checks on the adults. I love football but wish every single mistake didn't mean a comment or moan.

(12-15/boy/survey)

It's really tough when people at the club don't believe in you. You get picked for squads, even Scotland and then get dropped without

anyone explaining why this has happened. Coaches ridicule players and say you won't make it if you can't take it. They say they care about mental health, but they don't. Coaches say they need to shout, ridicule and embarrass you to build mental toughness.

(12-15/boy/survey)

I love playing football, but sometimes coaches on the other team make some unfriendly comments about me or my teammates especially if we are winning. Feel we should be able to report this to the referee as well as our coach.

(12-15/boy/survey)

Other team players laughing if they win. Other teams' parents laughing and parents arguing across the pitch is a horrible feeling. It feels like getting bullied.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Coaches tell us what we do wrong and humiliate us. They don't tell us what we do right. They use game time to push us out. They don't develop us. They bring in other players they like from other teams and leave us on the bench. They humiliate me.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Coaches sometimes don't actually like kids and swear at us.

(12-15/boy/survey)

I get annoyed by parents shouting at the Ref and arguing with other parents - it's not the Champions League and we don't have VAR and the Ref only has 2 eyes - some parents should be banned they get way to excited.

(16-18/boy/survey)

If you're not as good as others you shouldn't have another child tell you that "you need to quit because you're no good". That's bullying

and makes me feel uncomfortable, but I don't want to quit, I love football, I want to get better and be accepted by the others.

(8-11/boy/survey)

I want to play football not battle/fight.

(16-18/girl/survey)

I don't like my coaches because they shout and scream at me and some of the other boys and make us cry.

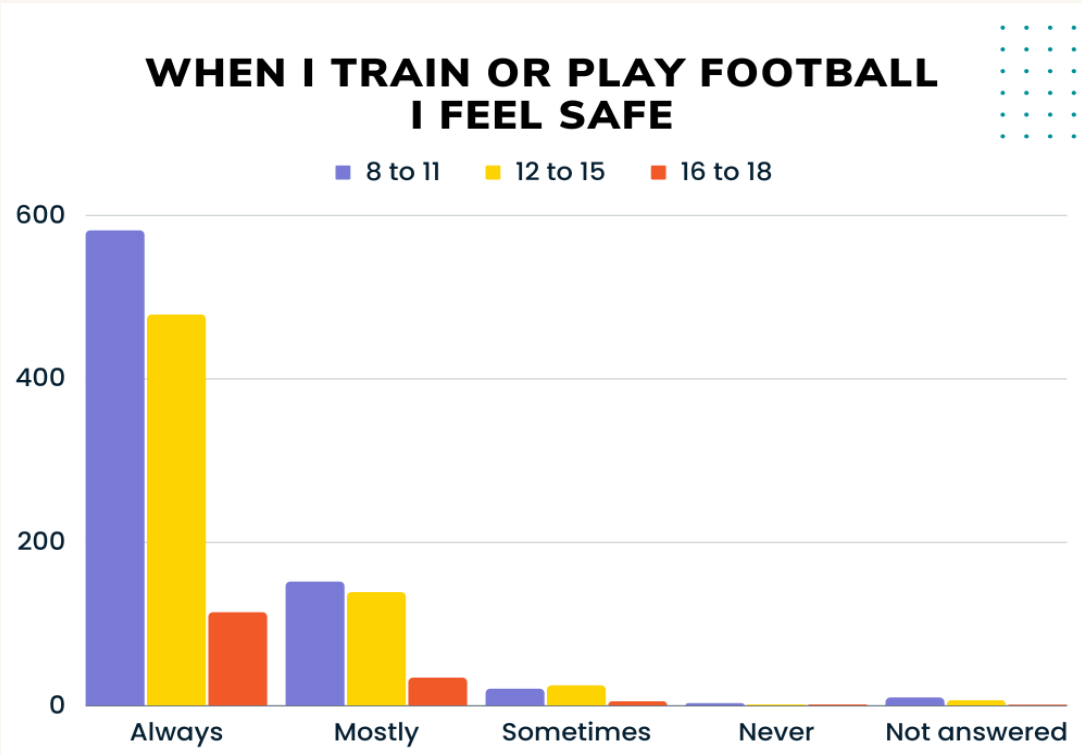
(8-11/boy/survey)

There needs to be more injury support for grassroots teams.

(16-18/boy/survey)



From the national survey we find that almost all young players feel safe when they play and train; this is the case across age groups.



8 to 11	581	151	20	2	9
12 to 15	478	138	24	1	6
16-18	114	34	5	1	1
Total	1173	323	49	4	16
Percentage %	75%	21%	3%	0%	1%

We can identify several important findings and themes when focusing on the need to ensure that young players are safe when they play.

**Young players feel safe playing football most of the time**

As the graphic above shows 75% of young players always feel safe and 21% mostly feel safe, with consistency across the age categories. In our small group conversations younger players (under 12s) said they would tell their parents or coaches when they feel unsafe; older players (over 12s) said they would tell their coaches or the Wellbeing Officer in the club.

## **What makes them safe**

When considering the elements that contribute to ensuring their safety in football, young players taking part in our group sessions identified a combination of key elements. These include a well-maintained pitch and facilities, proper clothing and protective gear like gloves and shin guards, trusted adults include coaches, referees, volunteers, parents, medical and physio team who look after them. Feelings of safety were also built, young players identified, on being and feeling included.

## **Shouting and abuse**

There are occasions when young players feel vulnerable. While adults are supportive and encouraging most of the time, some adults, especially parents from an opposing team, can be abusive during the heat of a game. Young players tell us that on occasion adults swear and shout abuse in front of other adults. Young players report that other adults present either ignore them or give them disapproving looks, these behaviours can go unchallenged. As the match goes on this behaviour can escalate and feel frightening.

## **Injuries**

Many young players who participated in the group sessions said one of their biggest fears is having injuries during training or a game. Depending on the seriousness, they worry that the injury could lead to them having to stop playing for a while or permanently. When asked what happens when they are injured playing football, most young players had positive experiences saying the coaches and their parents were very understanding and comforting, they were looked after immediately and well. However, some said their parents would tell them to 'shake it off' or 'just to get on with it'. They feel they had no option but to carry on.

## **Kindness**

Young players talked with us about the importance of kindness, and the need to tackle a lack of kindness in interactions, whether between players or between children and adults. There was an identified need for everyone in the game to know that they should not be mean or angry; rather they should be encouraging, helpful and careful with other people.

## **Adults set the tone**

For young players it is the adults in the club that set the tone and help create a sense of safety. Older young people taking part in the group discussions talked about the value of good leadership and that this included giving a clear message that there is always someone to speak to if a player had a worry or was unhappy.

## 6. Feeling respected and having my say

Young players participation in decision making is an essential part of Scottish FA's commitment to children and young people. In both the face-to-face engagement and national survey young players have reported on a range of themes that help us understand the ways in which they feel respected and have their say, and ways in which this is not their day-to-day experience.

We get asked to come back in and get a drink- what went well,  
what could be better?

(8-11/boy/group session)

We rewatch clips of games and decide what we could do better.

(8-11/boy/group session)

Being treated fairly and equally – it has an impact on your mental health  
more than your physical health.

(16-18/boy/group session)

As a girl playing in what is seen as a boys sport it can be  
really hard and lots of sexism still exists especially from  
parents. I play in a school team and I am the only girl and  
parents often comment. I play at academy level for my club  
and I am good but never get treated the same when  
playing with the boys I have to fight so much harder for it.

(12-15/girl/survey)

On the day of the game, the decisions around positions and  
things are made by the coaches but at the next training or  
game you could say that you didn't like where you were  
played or a thing that happened and you can bring it up with  
them and that's how we go about it.

(16-18/boy/group session)

If you have a positive relationship with team mates and coaches it helps you get on with each other better, coaches better, it can affect how you train and play and how you see each other outside of football and everything.

(16-18/boy/group session)

It's annoying when the other teams are rude and when others are rude about your gender and how that effects how you play. It's fun to be a team and I wish your team knew what you were thinking.

(12-15/girl/survey)

Sometimes boys don't like girls playing too so girls don't get the chance to play with them cause most boys think girls can't play.

(12-15/girl/survey)

The boys at our club get more chances than the girls. The boys coaching is better. The girls don't get the same chances to develop. I wanted to go to a new team, but my coaches told the new team I wasn't good enough.

This hurt me.

(8-11/girl/survey)

I am in an all-girls team and that's much better than being in a mixed team with boys. It's because boys never pass to me and I lose my confidence.

(8-11/girl/survey)

It's hard being the only girl playing in local clubs with and against boys.

There are still some negative views about girls playing with boys especially if the girl is better than a large proportion of the boys. Most boys don't like when a girl is better than them.

(12-15/girl/survey)



I don't like it when other boys call me names.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Adults make most decisions - they are wiser.

(12-15/boy/group session)

They might ask how we feel about formations, but we don't decide.

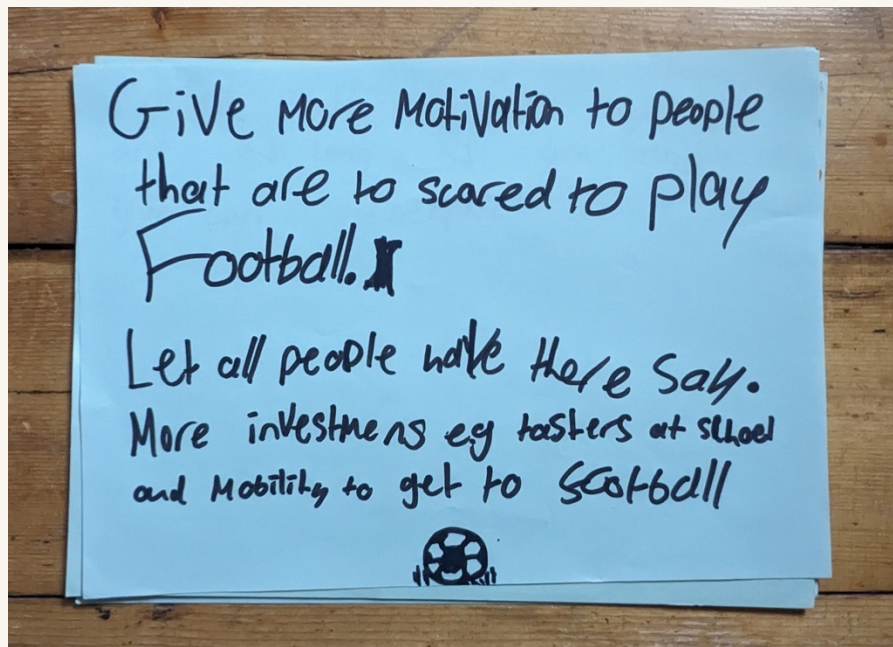
(12-15/boy/group session)

You don't get a say in wherever or not you get released...

I don't want to get released.

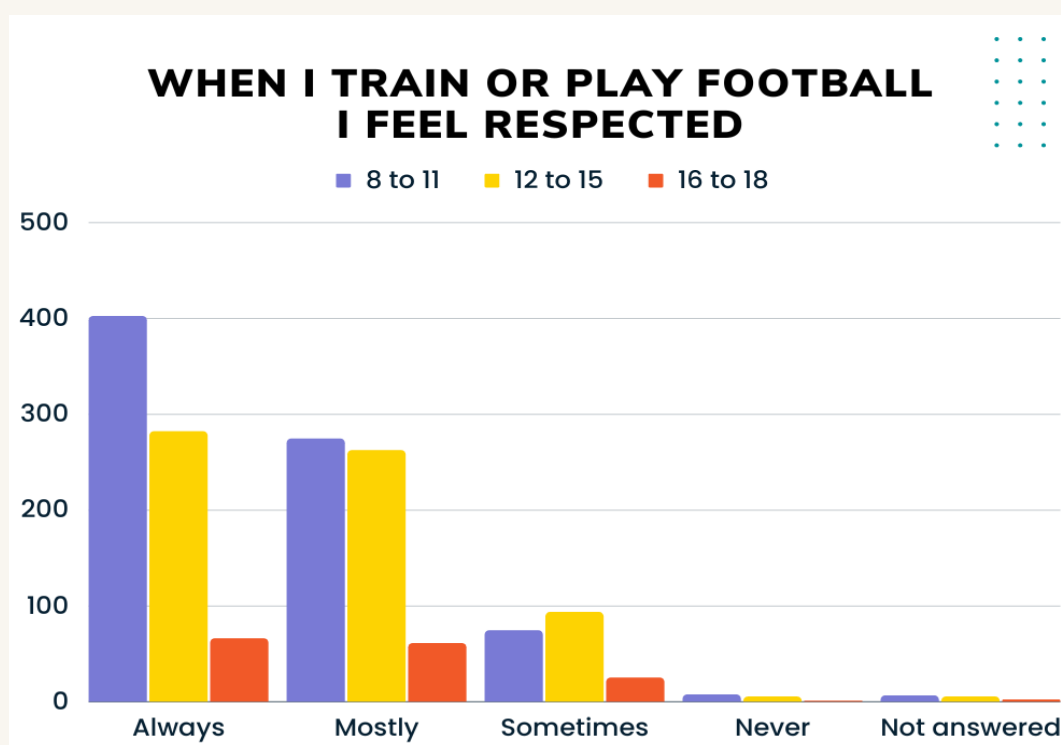
(8-11/boy/group session)

Several questions in the national survey help us to explore the culture of the game when it comes to how young players contribute opinions and feel heard.



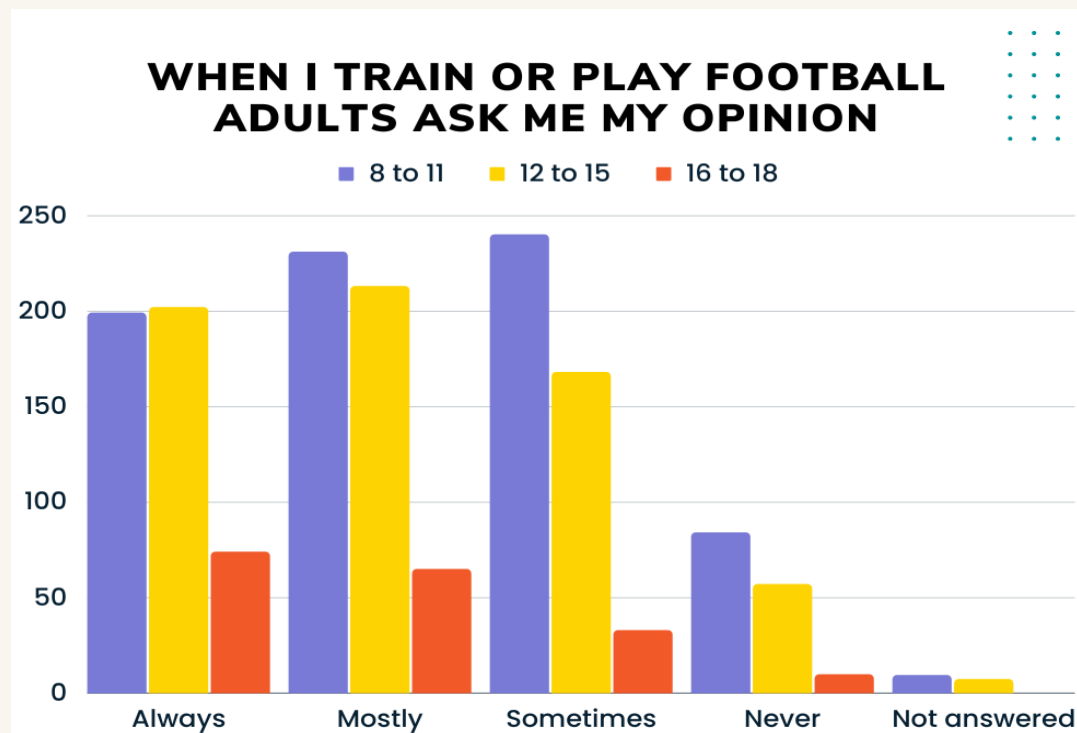


From the national survey we find that most young players feel respected to some extent when they play and train, however it is less than half of young players that respond with the most affirmative ‘always’. When we look across age categories, and at both *always* and *mostly* responses, there are differences by age: 89% of 8-to-11-year-olds respond *always* or *mostly*; 84% of 12-to-15-year-olds; and 82% of 16-to-18-year-olds.



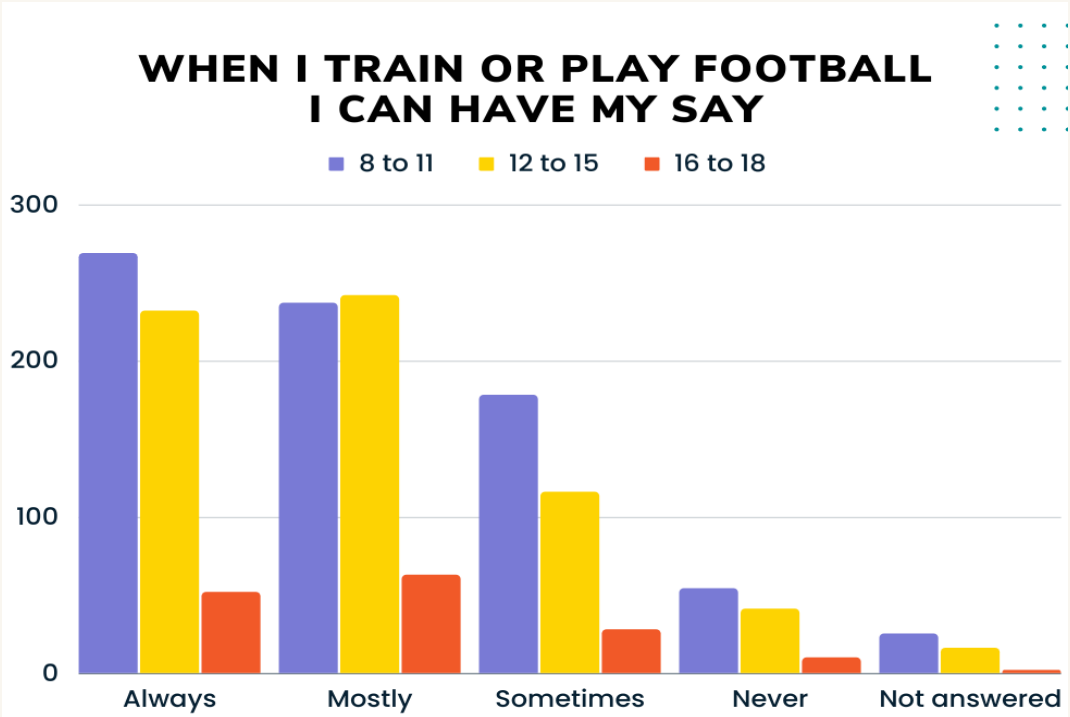
8 to 11	402	274	74	7	6
12 to 15	282	262	93	5	5
16 to 18	66	61	25	1	2
Total	750	597	192	13	13
Percentage %	48%	38%	12%	1%	1%

Also, from the national survey we find that a majority of young players feel that adults at their club *always* or *mostly* ask their opinion, in this case those responding as such increases with age: 56% of 8-to-11-year-olds respond *always* or *mostly*; 64% of 12-to-15-year-olds respond *always* or *mostly*; and this increases to 72% of 16-to-18 year-olds responding *always* or *mostly*.



8 to 11	199	231	240	84	9
12 to 15	202	213	168	57	7
16 to 18	47	65	33	10	0
Total	448	509	441	151	16
Percentage %	29%	33%	28%	10%	1%

And finally, from the national survey we find that a majority of young players report that when they train or play, they can *always* or *mostly* have their say. Again, these responses increase with the age of players: 66% of 8-to-11-year-olds respond *always* or *mostly*; 73% of 12-to-15 year-olds respond *always* or *mostly*; and this increases to 75% of 16-to-18 year-olds responding *always* or *mostly*.



8 to 11	269	237	178	54	25
12 to 15	232	242	116	41	16
16 to 18	52	63	28	10	2
Total	553	542	322	105	43
Percentage %	35%	35%	21%	7%	3%

These results are interesting in that while older players are less likely to report *feeling respected*, they are more likely to report they are *asked their opinion* and *can have their say*.

We can identify several important findings and themes when we consider the commitment Scottish FA has made to ensuring that young player’s experience their right to participation in decision making.

## Gender equality

From our group sessions and the national survey, we learned that girls and young women feel they are often not respected. As players in mixed gender teams, they can be ignored and denied the ball, or an equal chance to play. Girls are often the subject of teasing, described and excused as 'banter'. To get respect and a game, girls can feel they have to work much harder than a boy to prove their worth.

Girls and young women shared the perception that there is still an assumption that girls are not as good as boys at football; this feeling comes from some adults including teachers or coaches and boys/young men across the game. Although girls/young women have positive experiences of playing in all-female teams, they also feel that the choice of where they play should be theirs, with opportunities for mixed gender teams available to them if they want them.

## Expressing a view

Young players do not always feel they can have a say. Across group sessions we heard the view that the expectation of adults can be that young players turn up and follow instructions; that the adults/coach knows best. There is a perception that players should deliver the managers' plan. There is also fear that voicing an opinion might lead to consequences such as losing game time. From the survey results above, we can see that while 29% of young players report that adults *always* ask their opinions and 35% report that they can *always* have their say, there may be some room to further normalise this experience.

With that in mind it is important to acknowledge that in our group sessions we also heard from young players about being encouraged to talk about how they feel and what they want from being part of the team or from a game. Some coaches are more likely to engage with player's views than others; for young players we have heard how conversations, reviews and opinion seeking bolster confidence on and off the pitch.

## Communication

Young players said that they understand that adults, especially their coaches, must make decisions for what is best for the team. And they trust them to do so. That means some players might not have game time. However, young players would feel more respected if adults talked to them as equals and are better at explaining decisions.

## 7. Adults at my club and in the game

Football depends on the support of adults: parents and carers support their child's involvement and other adults in volunteer roles make the game possible. Young players have shared their views of adults that support the game. In group sessions and via the national survey young players have acknowledged the care, support and encouragement they receive from adults; but they also ask us to tackle adult behaviours which no one would seek to defend.

I love when you finish and parents at the side compliment  
you as you walk by, it makes you feel happy.

(8-11/boy/group session)

Coaches definitely make themselves approachable with any problems  
or making the effort to get everybody together and to bond together  
and everything.

(16-18/boy/group session)

My coach is really encouraging and super nice.

(12-15/boy/survey)

Coaches and parents need to remember it's a game.

(16-18/boy/survey)

Coaches can be harsh – drain confidence.

(12-15/boy/group session)

My coach is a bully. He leaves me out because he doesn't like me.  
He has done this before to other kids.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Sometimes our coach just shouts what we are doing wrong and I don't like that. My mum and dad watch and shout nice things when we are trying hard and say well done and they don't mind if we win or lose even if I'm cross we've lost.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Some parents put too much pressure on their kids.

(8-11/girl/survey)

Coaches need to continually check up on their players who have suffered injuries and have been out for a while, if they don't the players start to lose touch with the team and feel very left out and forgotten.

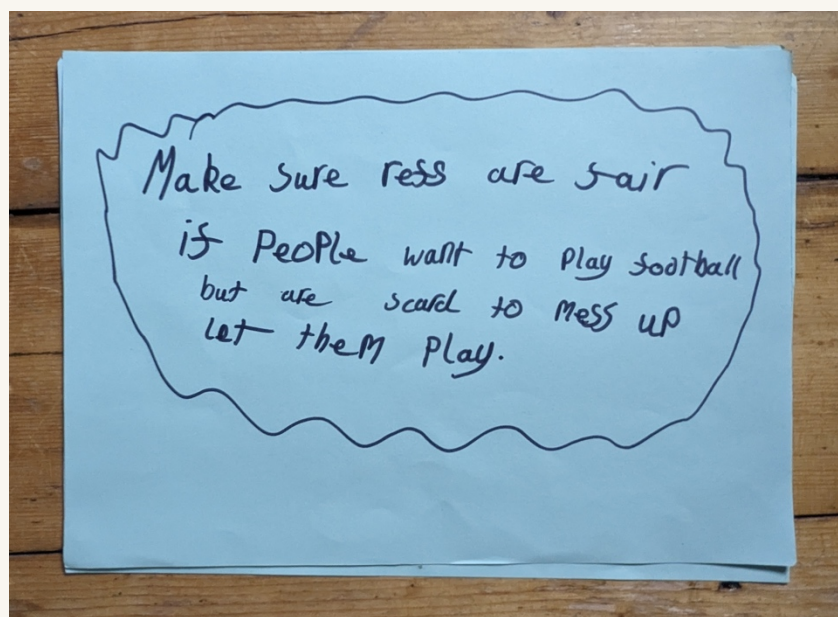
(16-18/girl/survey)

Referees should be stricter. No back chat. No questioning- make it clear before a game that will not be tolerated and [players] carded if [they] transgress. If rugby can do it, so can football.

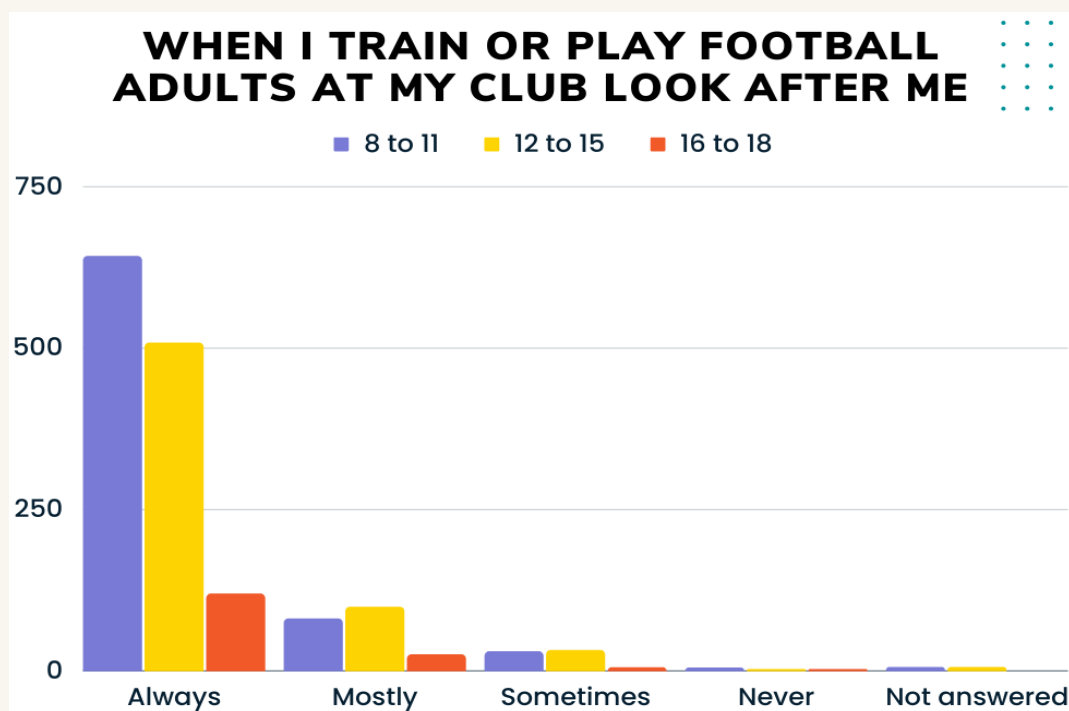
(16-18/boy/survey)

Referees need to protect players on the pitch better.

(12-15/boy/survey)

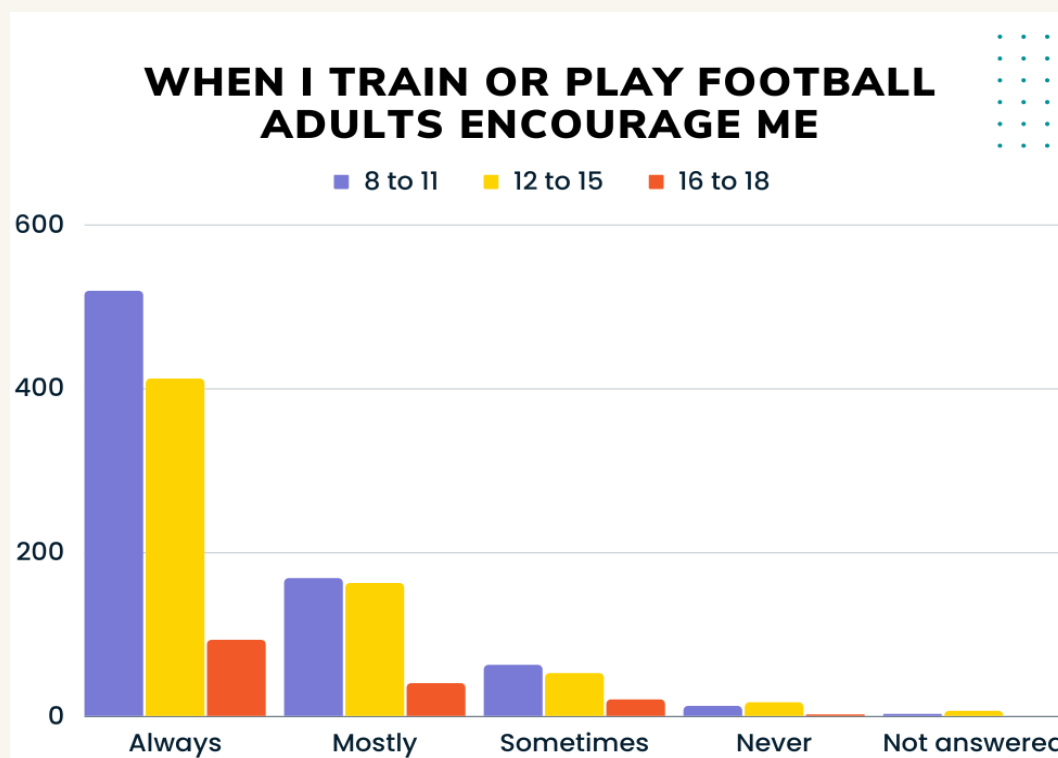


The national survey posed the statement: *Adults at my club look after me when I am training or playing football*. Across all responses, almost all young players (81%) feel that adults at their club look after them, although with age the percentage of those players affirming most strongly with the response of ‘always’ is lower: 84% of 8- to 11-year-olds respond always; 79% of 12-to-15-year-olds; 77% of 16-to-18-year-olds. For those young players who play at professional or academic settings, fewer have responded ‘always’ to this prompt (74% compared to the overall result of 81%).



8 to 11	642	81	30	5	5
12 to 15	508	99	32	3	5
16 to 18	120	26	6	3	0
Total	1270	206	68	11	10
Percentage %	81%	13%	4%	1%	1%

Also, from the national survey we find that most young players feel that adults at their club are encouraging, although with age the percentage of those players affirming most strongly with the response of *always* is lower: At age 8-11, 82% respond *always*; at age 12-15, 63% respond *always*; by age 16-18, only 48% respond *always*.



8 to 11	519	168	62	12	2
12 to 15	412	162	52	16	5
16 to 18	93	40	20	2	0
Total	1024	370	134	30	7
Percentage %	65%	24%	9%	2%	0%

There are positive approaches and concerning issues that we can consider in progressing the commitments made to children and young people to feel safe, participate and enjoy the game.

## Fairness and transparency

Most young players have positive experience with the adults at their club; whilst also suggesting things that can be improved. Many of the grassroot/community clubs have parents as volunteer coaches. The advantage is that coaches know the players well. However, on the other hand, young players recognise this can create a dilemma. It can be perceived as favouritism when the parent coach gives their



children game time over others. Alternatively, their own child might feel their parent gives others more game time because they do not want to be seen as unfair. In this scenario, young players suggested communication is invaluable, so that decisions made by coaches are transparent. Of course, this depends on adults having confidence and communication skills to be open about how decisions are being made.

### **Kindness and support**

Amongst all adults at the club, young players mentioned that the role of the coach as most significant. They said a kind coach who is empathetic and willing to listen makes a difference. Young players tell us that positive feedback inspires them, that improvement comes from being encouraged, not being criticised. Young players told us that they are willing to be challenged, to have any mistakes pointed out, but there are subtle and respectful ways to do this, for example taking a young player to the side and chatting quietly.

### **Referees**

Young players want and need the referee to be fair, consistent, and confident in their role. They also recognise how difficult the job is, especially when having to deal with adults on the touchline who are shouting or otherwise being aggressive. They do however need match officials to play their role in making football a safe, positive experience.

## **8. Having worries**

To help us understand the experience of playing the game, young players have told us about worries they have. Group sessions helped us to construct the options that were later presented in the national survey.

Keep it going and keep it safe and help give everyone the chance to play  
for teams and help their dreams come true.

(12-15/boy/survey)

I worry about injuries as if you're out a long-time other players take your  
spot or position.

(8-11/boy/group session)

I worry I won't make it as a professional.

(8-11/boy/group session)

You need to encourage people, so they don't get sad.

(8-11/boy/group session)

I have a loving family life because they are like a safety net and support me very much and if I am struggling, I can always speak to them.

(12-15/boy/group session)

Coaches favourites, unfair coaches with own children priorities over others, children playing through injuries.

(12-15/girl/survey)

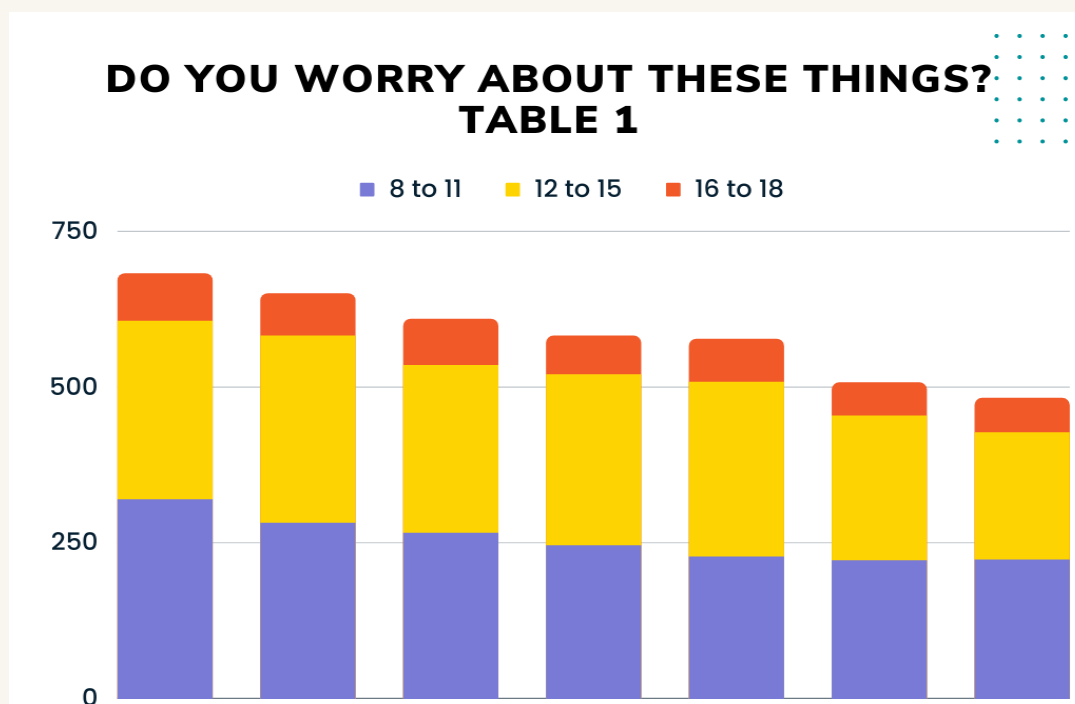
Teachers threaten to email or call the coach if you're struggling or something happens and you might get banned from training. It makes me feel annoyed frustrated.

(12-15/boy/group session)

From the national survey we find that there are aspects of being part of the game that young players have worries about. The prompt question was put as follows, and several response options were offered: *Sometimes young players can have worries about training, or playing, or being at their club. Do you ever worry about these things? You can tick as many as you want to.*

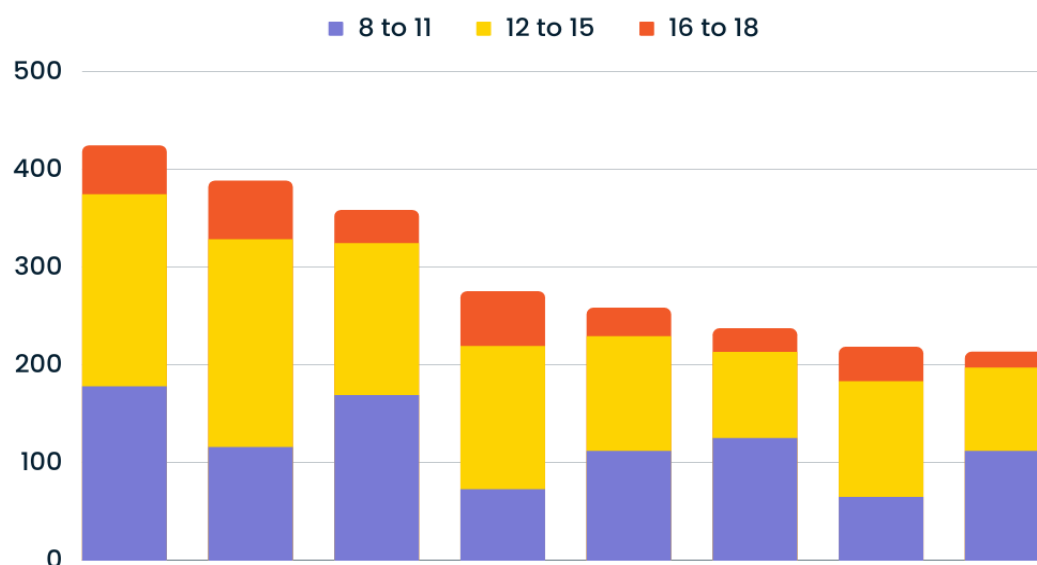


The survey results are presented over the next three tables. The option *comments about me on social media after a game* was not presented to children in the age group 8 to 11 because, at least theoretically, they should not have access to social media platforms.



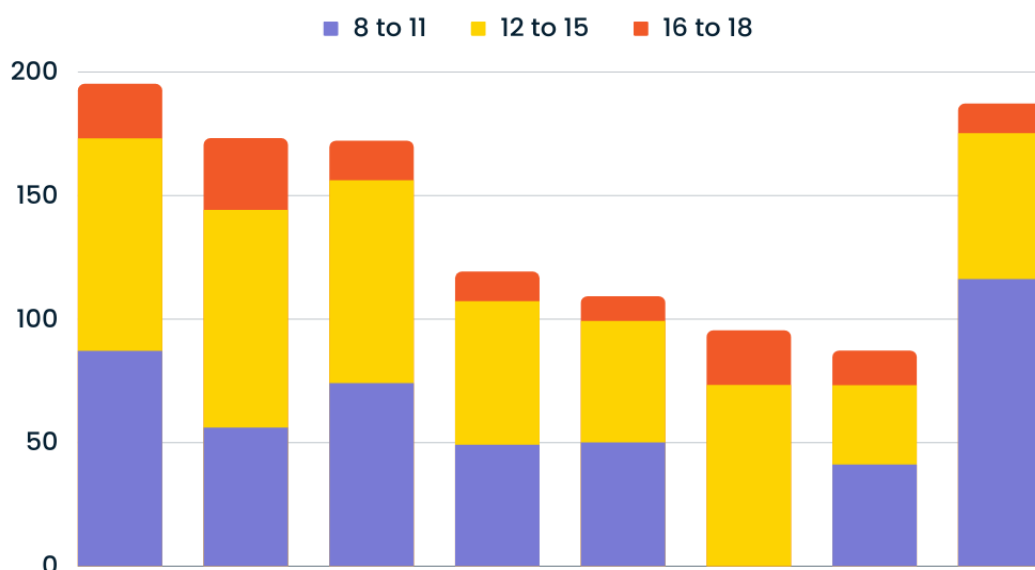
	Getting hurt or injured	Teammates being disappointed in me	Losing a game	Not being good enough to be a professional	Not getting a game	My coach being upset with me	Teammates not liking me
16 to 18	76	68	74	62	69	53	55
12 to 15	286	300	269	274	280	232	204
8 to 11	320	282	266	246	228	222	223
Total	682	650	609	582	577	507	482
Percentage %	44%	42%	39%	37%	37%	32%	31%

## DO YOU WORRY ABOUT THESE THINGS? TABLE 2



	Not being big or strong enough	Not being fit enough	Adults shouting at us	My diet	Being tired	Bullying	My weight	Being upset
16 to 18	50	60	34	56	29	24	35	16
12 to 15	196	212	155	146	117	88	118	85
8 to 11	178	116	169	73	112	125	65	112
Total	424	388	358	275	258	237	218	213
Percentage %	27%	25%	23%	18%	16%	15%	14%	14%

## DO YOU WORRY ABOUT THESE THINGS? TABLE 3



	Being treated differently because of who I am	Adults who are watching	Adults being disappointed in me	Not having the support I need to play a game	Not having the right clothing and equipment	Comments about me on social media after a game	I cannot play because no adults can take/drive me to the venue	I don't worry about these things
16 to 18	22	29	16	12	10	22	14	12
12 to 15	86	88	82	58	49	73	32	59
8 to 11	87	56	74	49	50	0	41	116
Total	195	173	172	119	109	95	87	187
Percentage %	12%	11%	11%	8%	7%	6%	6%	12%

Looking across these worries there are four which stand out in terms of an increase in levels of worry by age, so that the older the young player the more likely they are to worry about *not having a game, getting hurt or injured, losing a game, and teammates being disappointed in them*.

We can highlight several themes coming from group sessions and the national survey which we should consider further as part of a commitment to ensuring that we understand the worries that children and young people may have when participating in football.

## **Letting people down**

As has already been identified, being part of a team is very important to young players, and they fear that their teammates will be disappointed, or they will be blamed or disliked because of a mistake they make. In group sessions, young players talked about worrying about losing future game time because their coach was upset or disappointed. Young players report that parents can also be unhelpful; they want their parent to be supportive, but this can tip over into pressure when a parent expresses unhappiness with their performance.

## **Being injured or not fit enough**

Regardless of age, this is a shared worry amongst young players. They worry about getting injured, not only because of the pain, but also because it might mean they have to stop training and playing. Young players also see time out for injury as meaning they cannot spend time with their friends on the pitch, and they will have to catch up on fitness and skills following recovery. Young players also fear an injury will also have an impact on other parts of their active life, with many players we spoke with being involved in other sport in addition to football.

## **Younger players thinking about being good enough to make it a career**

Although not all young players want to become professional footballers, those who aim to have it as their career path tell us they live with constant pressure that they will not be able to make the mark. The sense is that competition to make it professionally is tough. From an early age young players fear the disappointment of not being signed by a club after many years of investing time and effort in training. We will return to this theme again.

## **Balancing school demands**

In group sessions young players talked about the pressure of balancing study and training and game time. During exam periods, it is a massive challenge to commit fully to both. Some young players at school have also faced threats from teaching staff that unless they up their academic work they will limit access to their football; this feels like an injustice, withdrawing a child's access to sport cannot be appropriate, and is concerning for the child.

## **When playing the game becomes a pressure to ‘make it’ professionally**

During orientation visits and in group conversations young players talked about the pressures of being on the verge of a professional football career. At this point, some young players feel that football has become a job and that relationships with the club, coaches, and other officials are more like employer and employee. Young players recounted experiences of not taking a sick day unless they literally could not get out of bed. They worried about the consequences of being late for training. They described feeling very lonely. Young players are also aware that although they work as a team, they can be competing for the same contract, this impacts on the possibility of making friendships. These pressures, young players say, have negative impacts on relationships and mental health.

From the survey results on having worries, when we compare responses from those young players who play at professional settings or academies with the full set of responses from all young players, we can see that those on a professional route are more likely to worry about several issues: worry about not having a game (43% compared to the overall result of 37%) worry about their coach being upset with them (40% compared to the overall result of 32%); worry about adults being disappointed in them (20% compared to the overall result of 11%).

## **9. Sharing worries**

When a child or young person has a worry, it is essential that they have a trusted person they can go to. Young players have told us who they share worries with, and where they get support. Across the group sessions and from the survey, we can see that children and young people draw their support from adults at home and across the game.

You need loving parents who gave you confidence.

(12-15/boy/group session)

You can go to your water and have a chat on a chair to have a breather.

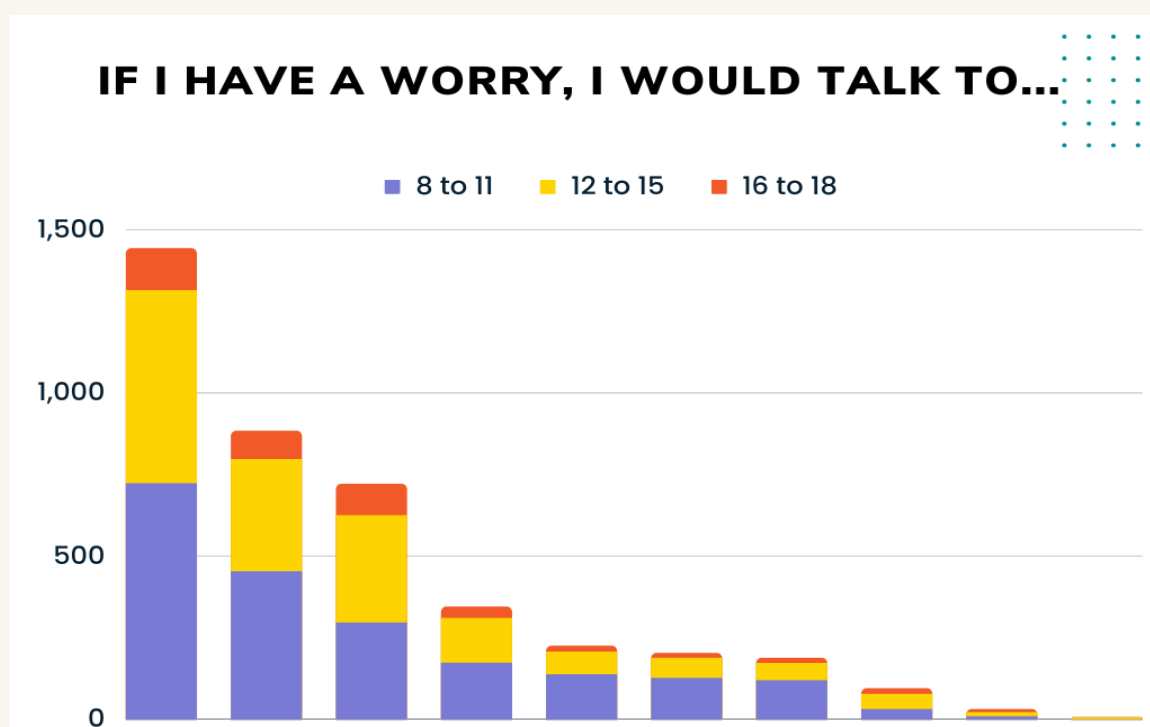
(8-11/boy/group session)

100% we have people to speak to if we need to, definitely.

(16-18/boy/group session)

The national survey drew on group sessions to build a list of options as to who a young player can go to with a worry. The prompt question was posed as follows:

**If you have a worry who would you talk to? You can tick as many people as you want to. We understand it might depend on what the worry is. But who might you go to with your worry?**

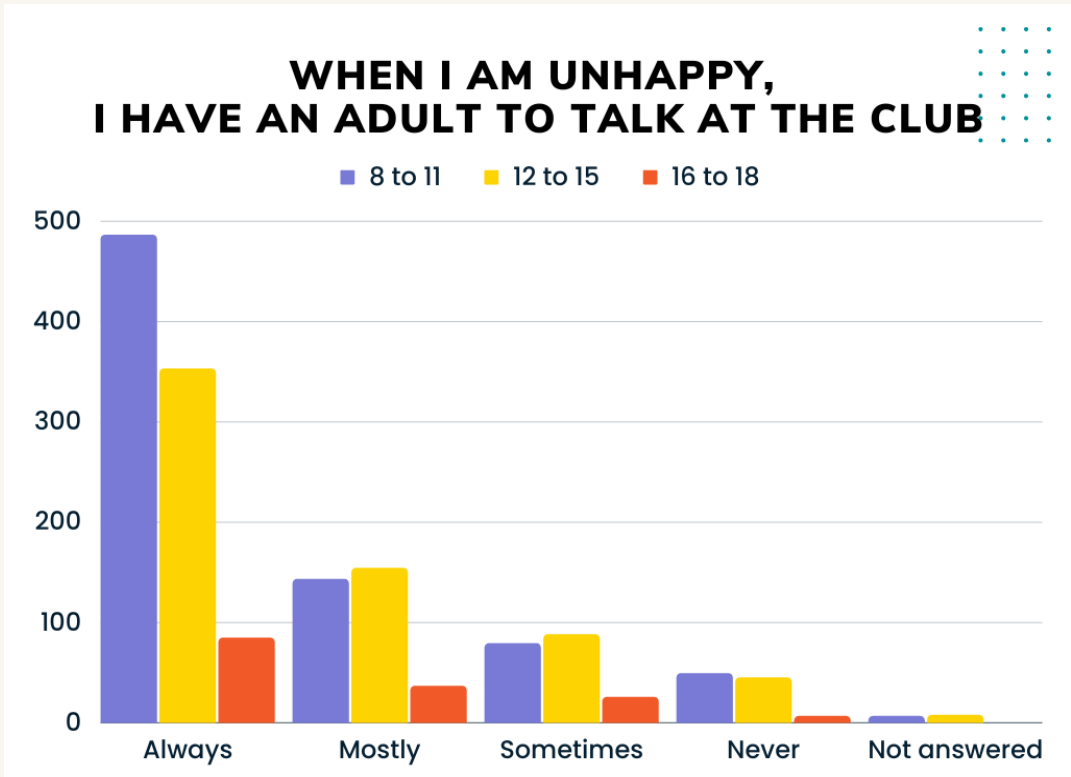


	Ad adult at home	Coach	A friend	A brother/sister	An adult at school	A parent of one of my friends	A helper at my club	Wellbeing/Safeguarding Officer at my club	A physio	There is nobody I can talk to
16 to 18	128	86	96	35	18	15	16	17	9	1
12 to 15	591	343	328	136	69	61	52	46	12	4
8 to 11	723	454	297	174	138	127	120	32	10	1
Total	1442	883	721	345	225	203	188	95	31	6
Percentage %	92%	56%	46%	22%	14%	13%	12%	6%	2%	0%



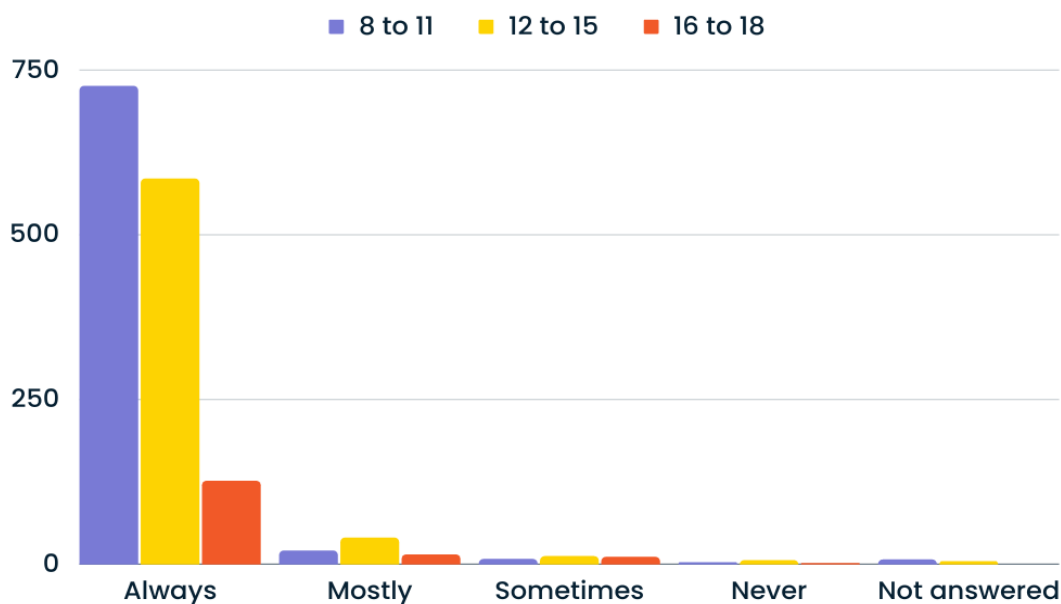
Coaches, an adult at home and friends are identified most strongly as people to talk to. We can also identify that girls/young women (88%) are less likely to talk to an adult at home, compared to boys/young men (93%), and they are more likely to talk to a friend (55%) compared to male counterparts (42%).

In addition to this question, we also used the national survey to ascertain whether young players had at least one person they could talk to at their club and at home, should they have a worry. From the graphics below we see that when it comes to their club 59% of young players respond *always* and 21% *mostly*. Support at home is also strongly evident, with 92% of respondents reporting that they *always* have someone to talk to; this diminishes however by age.

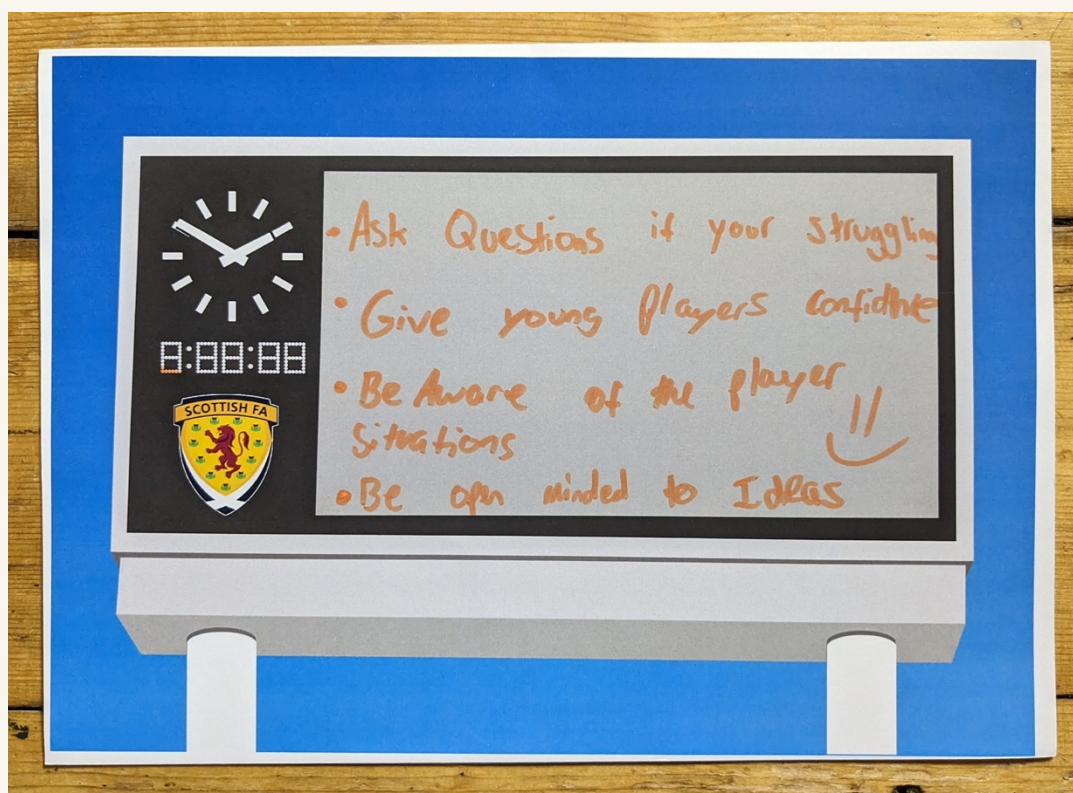


8 to 11	486	143	79	49	6
12 to 15	353	154	88	45	7
16 to 18	85	37	26	7	0
Total	924	334	193	101	13
Percentage %	59%	21%	12%	6%	1%

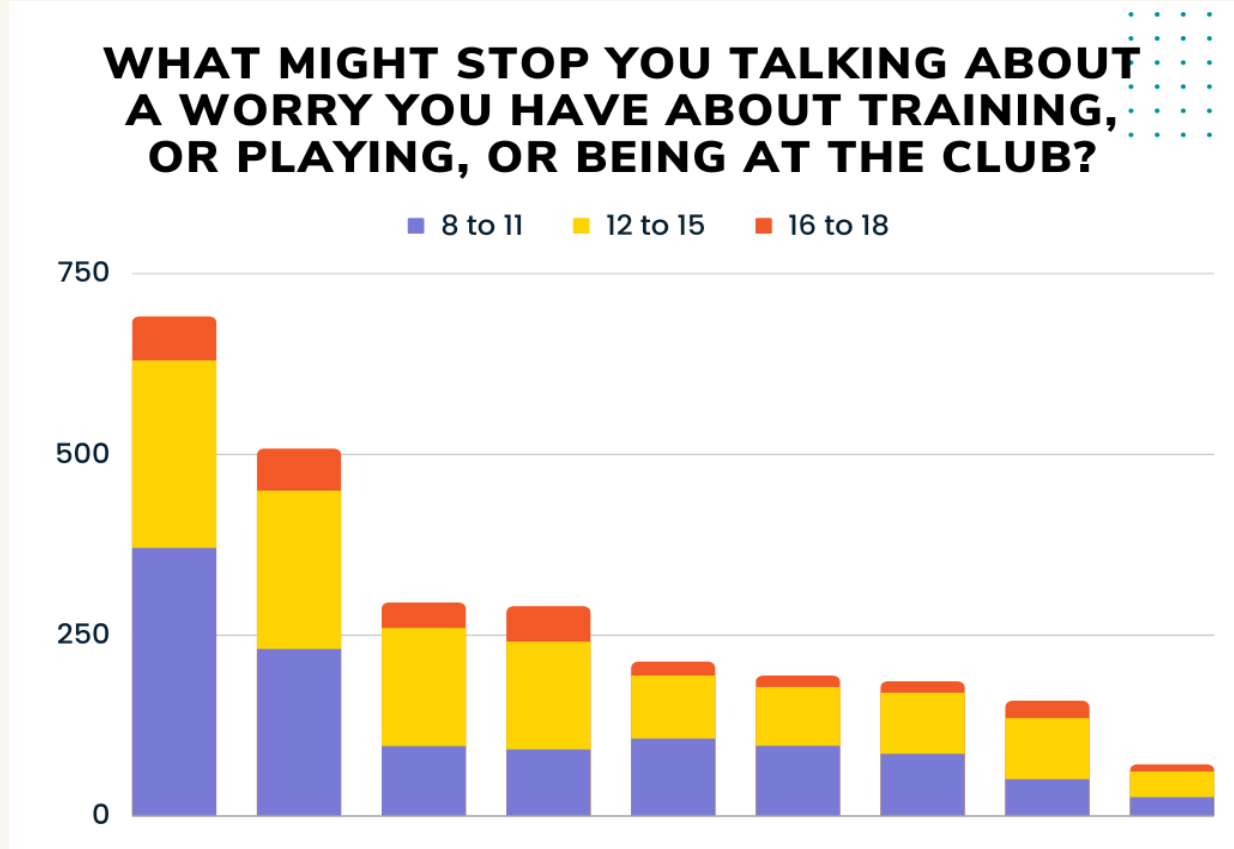
## WHEN I AM UNHAPPY, I HAVE AN ADULT TO TALK AT HOME



8 to 11	725	21	8	3	6
12 to 15	585	40	12	6	4
16 to 18	127	15	11	2	0
Total	1437	76	31	11	10
Percentage %	92%	5%	2%	1%	1%



While young players report that they have people to go to with worries, we were also keen to explore whether there might be barriers to sharing worries, seeking help or support. We posed the following question:



	Nothing would stop me from talking about a worry	I feel embarrassed	I might not get a game	People might judge me	I might get someone else into trouble	I might get into trouble	People might not believe me	It might not be confidential	I don't know who I can talk to
16 to 18	61	58	35	49	19	16	16	24	10
12 to 15	259	219	163	149	87	81	84	84	35
8 to 11	370	230	96	91	106	96	85	50	25
Total	690	507	294	289	212	193	185	158	70
Percentage %	44%	32%	19%	18%	14%	12%	12%	10%	4%

There are several barriers to seeking help or talking about a worry; with the most common responses being a concern for feeling embarrassed, that game time might be affected, a concern about being judged, and the possibility of getting someone else into trouble. We can also identify a difference in response based on sex, more

girls/young women report embarrassment as a block to sharing a worry (37%) compared to boys/young men (30%). Girls/young women are also more concerned that sharing a worry might not be treated as confidential (13%) than male players (9%). Finally, they are more concerned that they might get someone into trouble (16% compared to 12%).

## 10. Inclusion

This report has already identified much to celebrate about the experience of young players in the game. It is also beholden upon us to acknowledge where progress is required to make the game inclusive of all children and young people. In terms of the strategic context, and an understanding of fairness and equality as expressed in [Getting it Right for Every Child in Scottish Football \(2019-2023\)](#) we know that the Scottish FA “...is fully committed to the principles of fairness, dignity and justice. We respect each other, adopt an inclusive approach, address inequalities, and remove barriers.”

To consider inclusion further, we can draw on what young players have told us about sex and sexism, disability and discrimination, race and racism, and rurality and exclusion. Some of this is challenging to hear. The reality is that Scottish football reflects Scotland, and some of these issues are cultural, complex problems. However, when they are evident in the game and impacting child/youth participation then we need to work together to make it better for the children and young people who play, and those who do not for fear of these factors.

### Sex and sexism

In many sections of this report, we have heard the from girls and young women about both the joys and the evident sexism that can be part of the game, day-to-day. In addition to all that we have already heard, here are more voices. They articulate experiences of bullying and exclusion, of boys and young men behaving in unacceptable ways and of adults either condoning or not challenging such behaviours. There are also needs identified in terms of support for women's football.

I don't like how the boys treat me for being a girl. I stopped playing for a boys' team because they bullied me. Now I get it at school, I can't play at lunchtime because it's all boys and they say I shouldn't join in because I'm a girl.

(8-11/girl/survey)

There is not the same resources going into the girls game as there is the boys - there is a lack of coaches for girls and it feels like the boys still have priority and attention.

(12-15/girl/survey)

There is lots of sexism from boys towards girls playing football making me not want to participate in school PE class games as I have been purposely targeted by boys and hurt because they don't think girls should play.

(16-18/girl/survey)

I play in a mixed team and I have had to go to a girls' team. I don't want to have to leave the mixed team when I'm 11. I want to stay with them. Why can't we play in mixed teams all the time?

(8-11/girl/survey)

The SFA do not show enough support for woman's football, looking at the under 18s league my team have played one game this season. The SFA should have made a better suited league with the closer teams playing in the same league instead of separating the teams who would actually be able to play each other.

(16-18/girl/survey)

The system in women's football isn't the best. Personally, I have always played with teams in older age groups rather than better teams in my age group, I feel lost in the system and playing with older people can knock my confidence.

(16-18/girl/survey)

## Disability and discrimination

In our orientation and group sessions the research team met with young players with disabilities. It was evident that their experience of their club was positive; but this is not true across the game. There is a keen sense from the views we share below that young players with disabilities need to see greater awareness and commitments, indeed action, *across the game* to enable their participation. Participation in sport is as much the right of the disabled child and young person as it is for any other child.

I have a disability and when I started with my local club  
were not very inclusive. I had to leave after one year.

Some coaches just wanted to win and I wasn't good  
enough. It has been hard to find places to play ever since.  
I am glad that I can now play with (team named) but wish  
I could have played more when I was younger.

(12-15/boy/survey)

We are different. Understand how we learn. I need to see instructions.  
Forget them when spoken to me. Don't put me in positions I am not  
comfortable in. Or help us in training. Not during a game.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Would be nice if it was more inclusive. My mum had to buy me sports  
goggles which cost a lot of money, I worry in case I lose them or break  
them.

(8-11/boy/survey)

I have autism and it took a while to feel confident with tackling and the  
contact in football. I played in goals for a while to limit that. I feel better  
now, probably since I was 10/11 and my mum helped me get used to it  
and kept me going to training even when I felt it was hard. She  
encourages me and my Grandad does too. They come to all my games.

(12-15/boy/survey)

This is mum writing this: I am dyslexic, and probably autistic and dyspraxic, so generally not very good at football and there is nothing in any of your questions about that.

(8-11/survey)

I don't mind adults shouting at games but not when it's negative or abusive. I love playing football as it clears my mind. I have autism and ADHD I think it would be helpful for all coaches involved to know if kids have additional support needs to then provide sessions for everyone.

(12-15/boy/survey)

Coaches to understand autism and we are not being difficult we just don't always get what you mean. Coaches need to understand what I have to go through in my head before each training session and game.

(12-15/girl/survey)

## **Race and racism**

Efforts are made across the game to tackle racism. The young players we hear from below remind us how direct experience and worries about racism impact on their participation and enjoyment of the game and act as a barrier to children and young people getting involved.

Why are there not south Asian kids in clubs when there are many playing football in parks?

(8-11/boy/survey)

Difficult at times to just play free as for me I can't play free, but others can. I've been singled out because of my colour at training and it makes me sad. I've been singled out to blame for losing a game this weekend.

(8-11/boy/survey)

I am part of a really good grass roots youth team set up. My problem is with Academy teams and Scottish Youth FA not being fair and choosing players based on performance but on other things like family contacts, team contacts and even maybe skin colour. That is what I find disappointing.

(12-15/boy/survey)

## **Rurality and exclusion**

While most young players in the game will live in or near urban areas, many young people do not; rural Scotland accounts for 17% of the total population in Scotland with 6% of the population living in remote rural areas and 11% in accessible rural areas. These rural communities can be poorly served by sports facilities and opportunities to play team sports. Via the national survey young players have articulated the challenges they face and need the game to address.

I need to travel half an hour to play for the most local team (in an A league), so better setups in rural areas would be good.

(12-15/boy/survey)

I wish there were teams closer to where I live.

(8-11/boy/survey)

There is a lack of opportunity in this area or a lack of ability to get to other areas. So, you worry about getting to training or to a game.

(16-18/boy/group session)

I love playing football. I play in a rural area and our closest league structure is Glasgow. We are penalised for being rural and have to play at a level (high intermediate/advanced) above ours and the SYFA and league don't care, all they are worried about is not upsetting Glasgow teams with making them travel out of the city.

(12-15/boy/survey)

In consideration of these issues, we will return to key learning, and articulate challenge questions, in the final part of the report.



## 11. Other issues

Across group sessions and via the national survey we have heard about some specific issues that young players view as barriers to the commitment made by the Scottish FA to prioritise children and young people's safety, wellbeing and participation. In this section of the report, we consider these further.

### Costs as a barrier and a lack of local facilities

In the contributions from young players that follow we can see that a lack of facilities, limitations to access to some facilities, and increasing costs are a barrier to participation.

We struggle to get training time at our local training park which is called (name of park). And we struggle to get 2 nights training due to (local authority) leisure's charges for the parks. We only train once per week due to this.

(8-11/boy/survey)

I love playing football out with my club too, but local councils are locking pitches so there aren't many places to play.

(8-11/boy/survey)

We have to travel outside our neighbourhood to play football and it's not cheap.

(8-11/boy/survey)

For young people like me from poorer areas, we have few pitches and the ones we have aren't taken care of or they are locked up.

(16-18/girl/survey)

Talk of club folding due to pitch costs by (local authority named).

(12-15/boy/survey)

Need more places to play at night when you're not in a team. Where you can just play with your friends without adults shouting at you or getting moved on.

(12-15/boy/survey)

I love football but there isn't enough grass parks where I live to play on.

(8-11/boy/survey)

I love playing football I wish there were more pitches to play with friends at a low cost.

(8-11/boy/survey)

### **Age categorisation**

From the perspective of young players, as expressed below, age categorisation can be a barrier to participation, with young players suggesting some need for flex in this current approach.

Boys at the end of each age group should be allowed to play in the age group below.

(12-15/boy/survey)

I wish my local Club respected that I would like to play in this Club as a beginner (Beckham). I did not enjoy football when I was young enough to join the Club as had anxieties and ADHD. But now they will not accept me at my age of 11 because I am not skilled enough to join my age group in the Club, and there is no Beckham group for my age, so at the same time I am too old to start as the beginner.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Age cut offs are too strict. I'm forced to play 08s football but was born early and only make the 08 year group by 3 days. I'm always the smallest and get bounced off the ball. Since moving to 9aside it's been a constant struggle. The SFA could do more to make it easier to band players on ability and size not just on a date on the calendar. My friend who's a week younger and plays 09s has had a much better time and despite us being the same height he's not constantly getting smashed by bigger boys as he gets to play 09s football. It gets really really tough when you move up and you're physically smaller. So many of my pals have dropped out of football cos of this. Sort it out SFA!

(12-15/boy/survey)

### **Young players on elite route/the goal of professionalism**

When reflecting on the findings from group sessions and via the survey, we can better understand the pressures and worries that come with the aspiration to play the game professionally. While not every young player wants to play the game professionally, we reported in the previous section of this report that for those on a professional route 37% worried about not being good enough to make it professionally. In 2017 as part of the Independent Review of Sexual Abuse in Scottish Football, Children's Parliament conducted a small-scale consultation exercise with young players attending Performance Schools. Alongside the evident love of the game, we also reported as follows:

Children have talked with us in equal measures about the importance of encouragement and the consequences of pressure. They are perhaps two sides of a coin, and adults – in football and at home - need to reflect on whether their behaviours reflect one side or the other. The children are keen to work hard, and they are ambitious for themselves and for their team. But the pressures are also obvious – both external and internal when the child does not want to let people down. The 'prize' of a professional contract looms large for these children, and when it seems it might be out of reach or taken away, they can be worried, anxious, and unhappy. With a strong sense of how much hard work they put into their football it is with a sense of real poignancy that one child said: **"Hopefully, it's just all worth it"**.

The adults around the child make decisions about the child's football career at this young age. Children are very aware of this, and they want adults to know they are committed. The children express concerns that a bad game, a bad patch, injury can all jeopardise their dreams. When adults hold such power, and it is important to name it as such, it is beholden upon them to exercise that with care and respect for the child's greater wellbeing.

The responses that follow below represent what we have heard this time round. It seems that the pressures remain the same. There is no doubt that young players on a route to professional football require us to put a clear focus on their safety, wellbeing, and participation.

Scottish football's obsession with route 1 football is  
damaging to young people's potential and development.  
Official action must be taken to discourage this type of  
play.

(16-18/boy/survey)

Academies should not be allowed to release young players  
unexpectedly and without explanation.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Academy coaches should rotate round grassroots clubs and share  
knowledge to coaches etc from younger ages then talent scouted at  
older age groups so that kids remain happy and playing at grassroots  
longer with less pressure until more mature to handle academy level .

Ensures no great player goes under radar also that way.

(12-15/boy/survey)

I'd like to see more opportunities made available to get into football  
academies like trials and camps instead of relying on coaches to put  
your name forward.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Allow us to enjoy being part of teams and more chances to be put through academies.

(8-11/boy/survey)

Bullying culture exists in academy football but ignored as just being the way of football. Players are written off as disposable commodities.

(16-18/boy/survey)

There should be easier pathways for all to pro youth.

(12-15/boy/survey)

I had a terrible experience in Pro Youth at the end. My coaches liked me but the Director didn't. He never told me why or explained what I needed to get better at. I was left out of the team at the end and nobody told me what I'd done wrong or how I could improve. It really hurt me. I'm glad I'm playing with my friends again.

(12-15/boy/survey)

People need to stop worrying about being pro in future and focus on the game ahead.

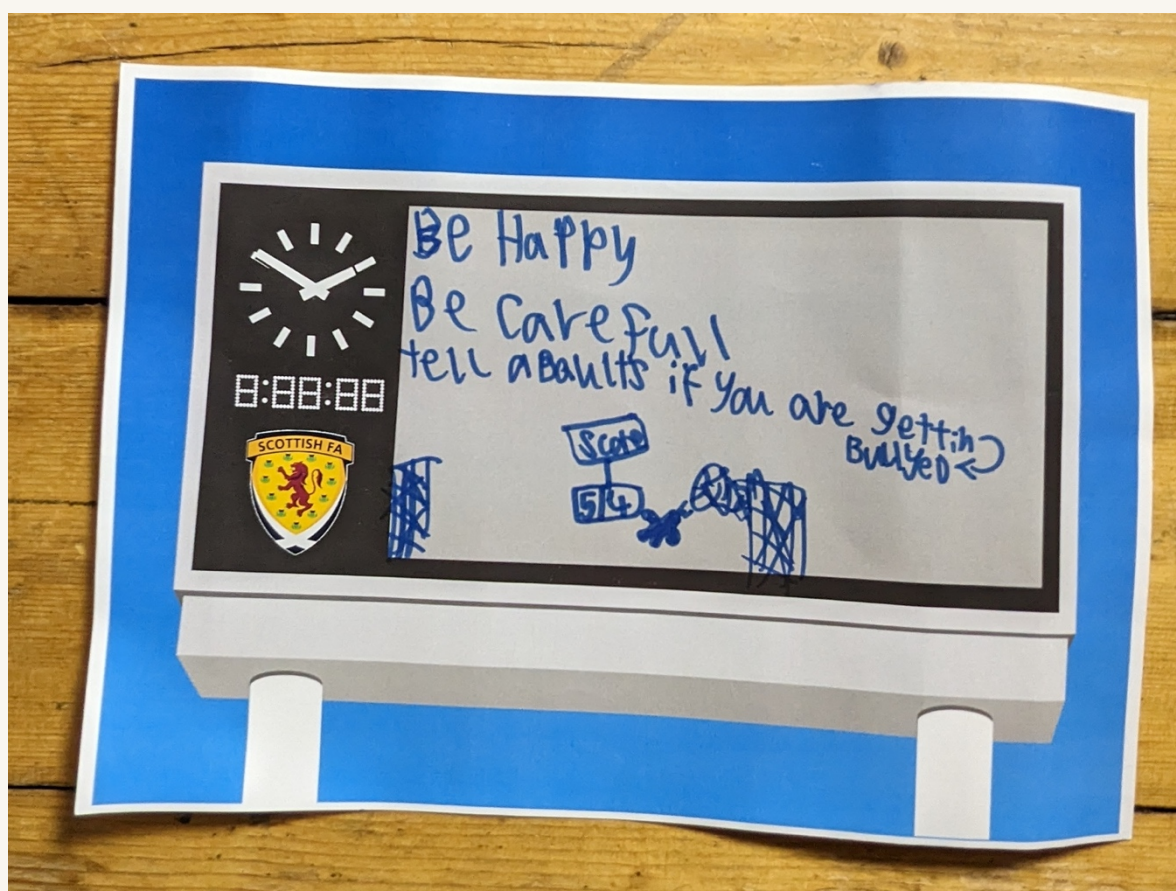
(16-18/boy/survey)

## **12. What can we do to make sure young players are safe, happy and have their say?**

In group sessions young players were asked to reflect on what we can do across Scottish football to ensure that every player is safe, happy and has their say. The discussions informed a set of questions with options that were posed in the national survey, each of which informs the future direction for the Scottish FA, teams at every level and adults involved in the game.

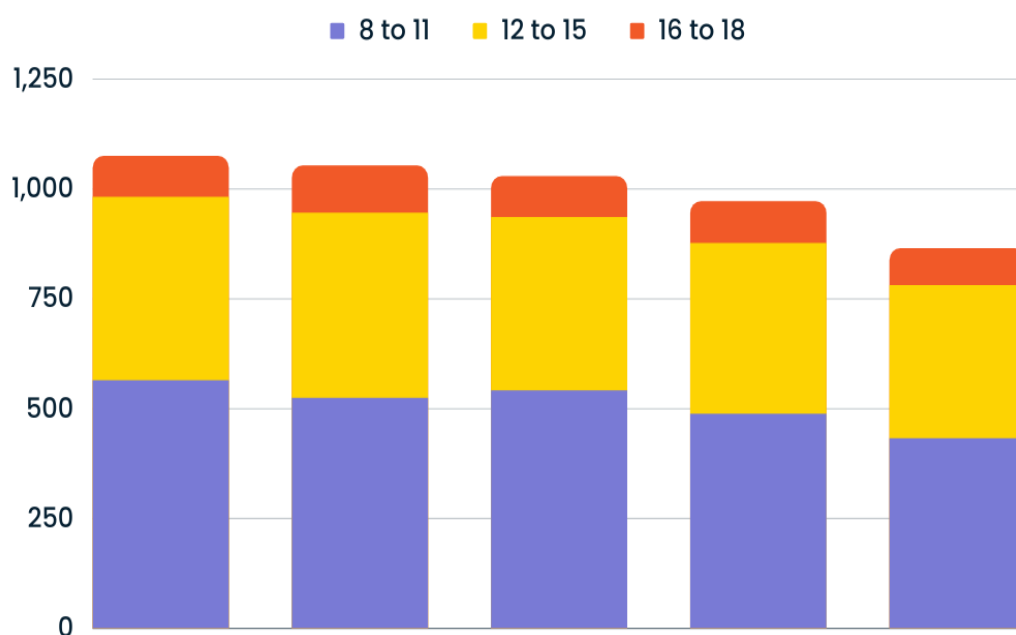
In this last section of reporting on learning from the group sessions and national survey we see further focus on many of the themes that have already emerged from earlier reporting.

In this first set of responses, considering **what young players need to be safe**, there is an echo of earlier reporting and an emphasis on having an adult that the child/young person can talk to, opportunities to talk respectfully and calmly and the importance coaches and adults play in keeping young players safe from bullying, sexism and racism and other manifestations of poor peer relationships. It is also highlighted that adult behaviour on the touchline needs to improve, with referees asserting their role in stopping bad behaviour.



Young players were given this prompt: **What would help make sure young players are safe when they play football? You can pick up to 5 things from this list that you think would help most. You don't have to pick as many as 5 unless you want to.** The options provided in response were developed from the group sessions, findings are reported over the next two tables.

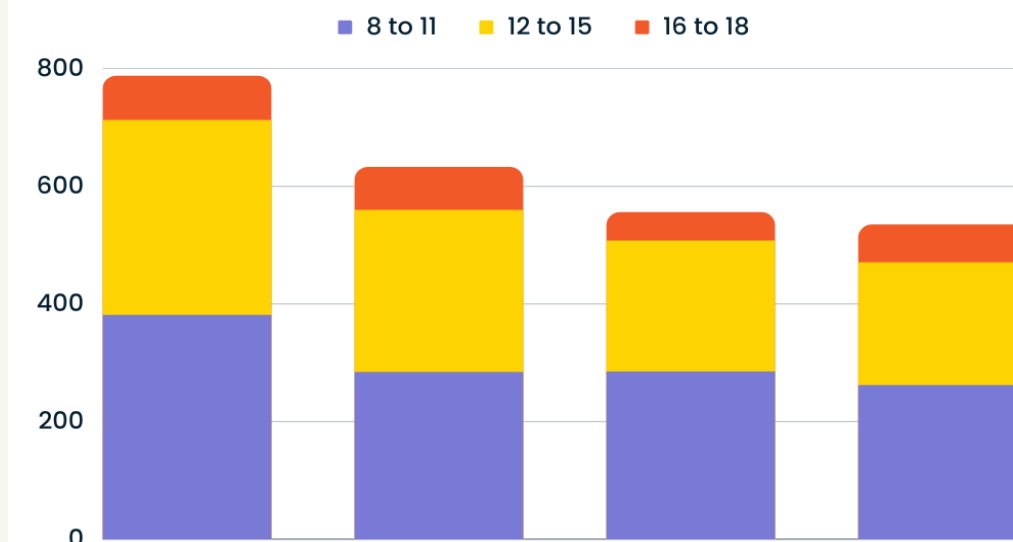
**WHAT WOULD HELP MAKE SURE YOUNG PLAYERS ARE SAFE WHEN THEY PLAY FOOTBALL?**  
**TABLE 1**



	Everyone should have an adult they trust and can talk to	If you make a mistake you can talk it through calmly	Coaches and adults stop any bullying	Referees that stop bad behaviour	Coaches and adults do something to sort a worry or a problem players have
16 to 18	93	107	93	95	84
12 to 15	417	421	394	388	348
8 to 11	564	524	541	488	432
Total	1074	1052	1028	971	864
Percentage %	69%	67%	66%	62%	55%

## WHAT WOULD HELP MAKE SURE YOUNG PLAYERS ARE SAFE WHEN THEY PLAY FOOTBALL?

TABLE 2

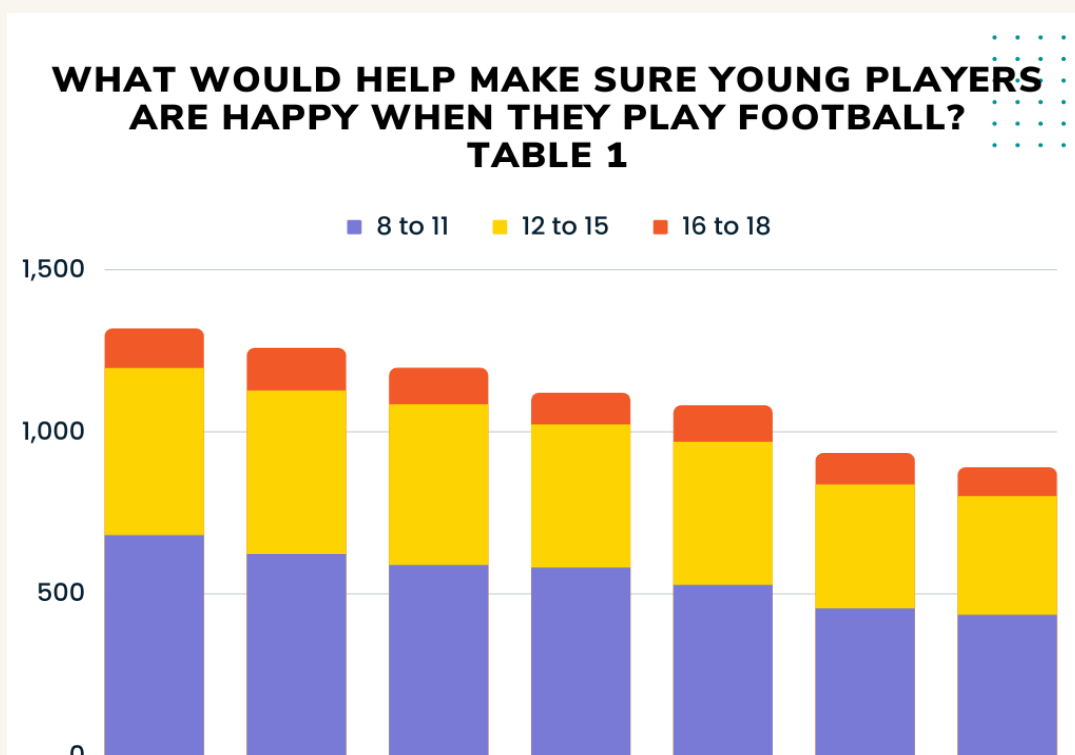


	Stop adults shouting at us during games	Coaches and adults stop sexism and racism	Everyone has good clothing and equipment	Coaches and adults help us make good choices about food and drinks
16 to 18	75	73	48	64
12 to 15	331	275	222	208
8 to 11	381	284	285	262
Total	787	632	555	534
Percentage %	50%	40%	35%	34%

In this second set of responses, considering **what young players need to be happy**, young players emphasise the importance of fairness and kindness in the game. Fairness means no favouritism and kindness is exemplified by praise, encouragement, and a real sense of being part of a team. Young players also acknowledge that some young people need help to get to training or a game, and that participation means having game time. Young players also connect their happiness with the active support of family members at games. There also needs to be less pressure on simply winning.



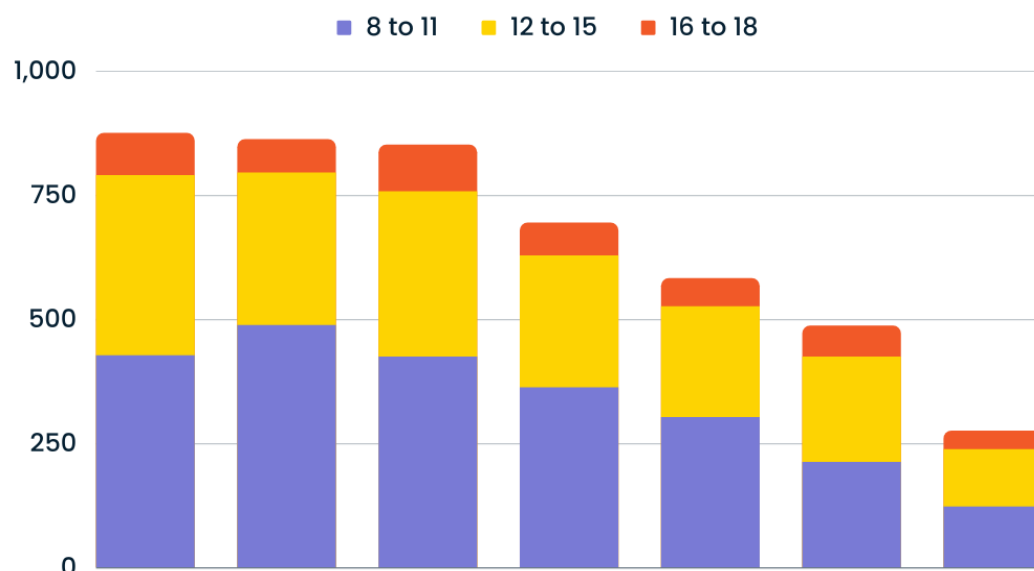
Young players were given this prompt: **What would help make sure young players are happy when they play football? You can pick up to 5 things from this list that you think would help most. You don't have to pick as many as 5 unless you want to.** The options provided in response were developed from the group sessions, findings are reported over the next two tables.



	Everyone feels part of the team	Everyone being treated fairly	Coaches telling you what you are good at	Adults at the club being kind	There are no favourites	Encouraged by others	Don't blame individuals if we lose
16 to 18	122	131	113	98	112	97	89
12 to 15	515	504	495	441	441	392	365
8 to 11	680	622	588	580	527	454	435
Total	1317	1257	1196	1119	1080	943	889
Percentage %	84%	80%	76%	72%	69%	60%	57%

## WHAT WOULD HELP MAKE SURE YOUNG PLAYERS ARE HAPPY WHEN THEY PLAY FOOTBALL?

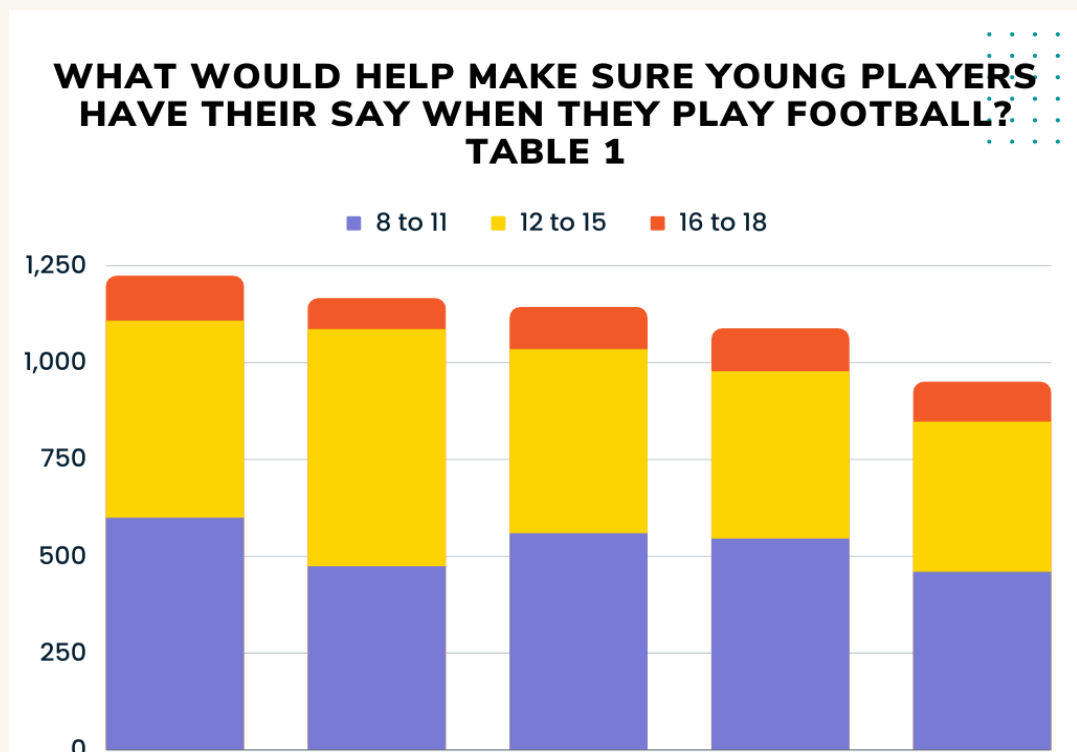
### TABLE 2



	You can have a chat if you are unhappy or worried	Everyone gets a game	Help if you need it to get to training or a game	More fun things in training and between games	Family members coming to see games more often	More time to chill and relax together	Less pressure about diet and weight
16 to 18	85	67	94	66	57	62	37
12 to 15	363	307	333	266	223	212	115
8 to 11	427	488	424	362	302	212	122
Total	875	862	851	694	582	486	274
Percentage %	56%	55%	54%	44%	37%	31%	18%

In this next set of responses, considering **what young players need so that they can have their say**, there is much agreement with many of the suggestions that came up in the initial group sessions. Excellent communication from the coach and lots of team talks help young players feel as though they can have their say; quiet children and young people need encouragement here too. Young players want to influence what they do in training, they want to talk about how they feel being part of the game and would value times where the players can get together to do social and fun activities.

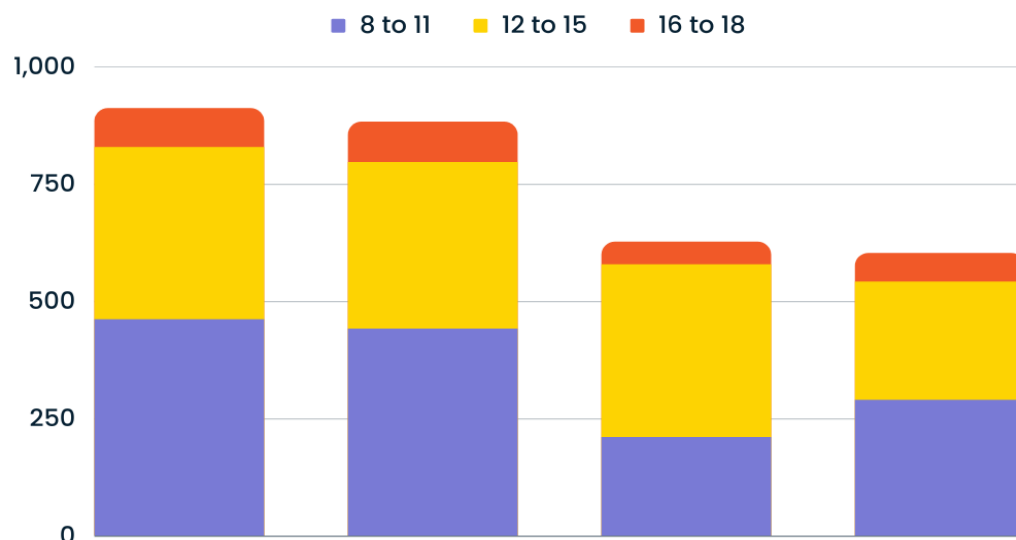
Young players were given this prompt: **What would help make sure young players have their say when they play football? Same as before, you can pick up to 5 things from this list that you think would help most.** The options provided in response were developed from the group sessions, and findings are reported over the next two tables.



	Coaches and adults speak to everyone, including quiet kids	Times where we get together and do social or fun stuff	Team talks before a training session or a game	Team talks after a training session or a game	Time to talk to coaches if you have had a bad game
16 to 18	116	80	109	111	103
12 to 15	509	612	475	432	388
8 to 11	598	473	558	544	458
Total	1223	1165	1142	1087	949
Percentage %	78%	74%	73%	69%	61%

## WHAT WOULD HELP MAKE SURE YOUNG PLAYERS HAVE THEIR SAY WHEN THEY PLAY FOOTBALL?

TABLE 2



	The chance to say what we want in training sessions	The chance to talk about how you feel	A players committee or forum that helps makes decisions	Surveys to find out what players think
16 to 18	83	86	48	61
12 to 15	367	355	368	252
8 to 11	461	441	210	289
Total	911	882	626	602
Percentage %	58%	56%	40%	38%

## KEY LEARNING AND CHALLENGE QUESTIONS

For the Scottish FA and all those who support children and young people play the game

The Scottish FA has a five-year strategy **Getting it Right for Every Child in Scottish Football** (2019-2023). The purpose of the strategy is captured in the mission statement:

**Children are the priority. We lead with confidence, taking responsibility to create a culture of safety and wellbeing. We empower children through active promotion of their rights.**

The Scottish FA state that:

**This is a strategy for all of Scottish football. It is everyone's responsibility to protect the children and young people who play our national sport.**

So, how are we doing across Scottish football with these promises to young players? In this concluding section of the report, we draw some conclusions from what young players have told us, we will call this **key learning**.

We also ask **challenge questions** to support the Scottish FA progress the commitments made in the national strategy. Importantly though, the strategy is about everyone in the game, so while the Scottish FA have responsibility to review and refresh their commitment to it, it is beholden upon us all to reflect on what the key learning and challenge questions mean to us if we want the best for children and young people in our national game.

### GENERAL

Challenge questions

- How can we help children to learn, experience and claim their rights as young football players?
- What more can be done to support parents, coaches, referees and other adults involved in football to understand, promote and uphold children's rights for young players?

## SAFETY

### Key learning

- Almost all young players feel safe when they play and train.
- For young players, feeling and being safe comes with well-maintained pitches and facilities, proper clothing and protective gear like gloves and shin guards.
- Feeling and being safe is also about people. Young players identify trusted adults in the game include coaches, referees, volunteers, parents, medical and physio teams who look after them.
- Feelings of safety are also built, young players tell us, on being and feeling included.
- There are occasions when young players feel vulnerable. While adults are supportive and encouraging most of the time, some adults, especially parents from an opposing team, can be abusive during the heat of a game. As the match goes on this behaviour can escalate and feel frightening.
- One of their biggest fears young players have is being injured during training or a game, better support is needed to support a player with an injury.
- Young players want and need the referee to be fair, consistent and confident in their role. They also recognise how difficult the job is, especially when having to deal with adults on the touchline who are shouting or being aggressive. They do however need match officials to play their role in making football a safe, positive experience.
- When considering safety, young players place an emphasis on having adults that they can talk to and having opportunities to talk respectfully and calmly.
- Young players say that coaches and adults across the game have a role in keeping young players safe from bullying, sexism, racism and other manifestations of discriminatory behaviour or poor peer relationships.

### Challenge questions

- How do we ensure that every young player can access the clothing and gear they need to play safely? Is any young player at risk of exclusion or injury because of costs?
- Are we adequately focused on injury prevention and treatment across all levels of the game?
- How do we support coaches, and other adults that support the game, to understand the importance of the relationships they have with young players?
- When young players tell us they want to be and feel included, how do we adults make that real day-to-day?

- Do we reflect enough on the tone or ethos that might be evidenced in our relationships and the experiences young players have? What is the balance of taking part, being included, success or winning across a competitive team sport?
- What support, resource or new approaches do we need to manage and change problematic adult behaviour on the touchline?
- If we want young players to share worries or concerns, are there systems and approaches in place across the game that clubs can see and learn from?
- How do we strengthen our relationship with parents and carers so that when a child shares a concern with them, they know who to come to and can be assured of our attention?

## WELLBEING

### Key learning

- Young players tell us their participation in the game brings benefits in terms of both physical and mental health and wellbeing. Participation connects them to others, helps them have a sense of belonging, feeling part of a team is crucial to young players. They feel fitter and healthier. Training and playing lifts their spirits and makes them happy.
- Young players identify the importance of kindness, and the need to tackle a lack of kindness in interactions, whether between players or between children and adults. There is a need for everyone in the game to know that they should not be mean or angry; rather they should be encouraging, helpful and careful with other people.
- Football depends on the support of adults: parents and carers support their child's involvement and other adults, many in volunteer roles, make the game possible. Almost all young players feel that adults at their club look after them and that adults at their club are encouraging.
- Amongst all adults at the club, young players mentioned that it is the role of the coach that is most significant. They said a kind coach who is empathetic and willing to listen makes a difference.
- Young players tell us that positive feedback inspires them, that being a better player comes from being encouraged, not being criticised.
- Young players can be worried about aspects of participating in football: from letting people down, to worries about being fit or injuries, to concerns about not being good enough to be a professional.
- Some young players struggle to balance academic and football commitments.
- When they have a worry, young players are most likely to speak to their coach, an adult at home or a friend.

- There are several barriers to seeking help or talking about a worry; with the most common responses being a concern for feeling embarrassed, that game time might be affected, a concern about being judged, and the possibility of getting someone else into trouble.
- Pressures and worries can come with the aspiration to play the game professionally. Young players on a possible route to professional football require us to put a clear focus on their safety, wellbeing and participation.
- Considering what young players need to be happy, young players emphasise the importance of fairness and kindness in the game.
- Fairness means no favouritism and kindness is exemplified by praise, encouragement and a real sense of being part of a team. Young players also acknowledge that some need help to get to training or a game, and that participation means having game time. Young players also connect their happiness with the active support of family members at games. There also needs to be less pressure on simply winning.

### Challenge questions

- Do we acknowledge and celebrate enough the significant benefits of playing the game when it comes to children and young people's physical and mental health and wellbeing?
- Could we do more to recognise and embed the central importance of positive relationships between young players and between adults and children/young people? How do we continue to build adult understanding, knowledge and skills as leaders in terms of ethos and positive communication?
- Could coaches/adults do more to acknowledge and support the young player when they are under pressure from other demands in addition to their football?
- What can coaches/adults better understand or do, to assure young players that sharing worries, asking questions or asking for help is the right thing to do? How could coaches/adults be proactive in creating opportunities for checking in with players?
- How does the game help young players to build confidence, communication skills and help seeking behaviours?
- Do adults understand the pressures that young players feel when it comes to their ambitions to play the game professionally? Are there structures, systems or adult behaviours that need to change to alleviate pressure and negative experiences?



## PARTICIPATION

### Key learning

- Many children and young people play their football in multiple settings: local/grassroots football clubs, in school PE and school teams, professional clubs or academies and of course with friends in the park and street. They play the game because they love it.
- A majority of young players feel that adults at their club ask their opinion, or allow them to have their say when training or playing. However, there is room for improvement in this regard. We heard that sometimes adults just expect young players to turn up and follow instructions; that the adults/coach knows best.
- Football is of course a competitive sport. Some young players talked about their football club as being a place that prioritises participation over winning; while they might play a competitive game, the focus remains on everyone having a game, and everyone being valued equally, win or lose. However, this is not always the case and young players talked about the pressure to win, and that some peers and adults prioritise winning over fun and participation.
- Across discussion of safety, wellbeing and participation girls and young women have shared both the joys and the evident sexism that can be part of the game, day-to-day. They articulate experiences of bullying and exclusion, of boys and young men behaving in unacceptable ways and of adults either condoning or not challenging such behaviours. There are also needs identified in terms of support for women's football.
- While some settings are inclusive of young players with disabilities this is not true across the game. Young players with disabilities need to see greater awareness and commitment to action to enable their participation.
- Efforts are made across the game to tackle racism, but young players continue to experience and worry about racism, this impacts on their participation and enjoyment of the game.
- While most young players in the game will live in or near urban areas, many young people do not. These rural communities can be poorly served by sports facilities and opportunities to play team sports.
- In some communities a lack of facilities, limited access to facilities, and increasing costs are a barrier to participation.
- From the perspective of young players, strict application of age categories can be a barrier to participation, with young players suggesting some need for flex in this current approach.
- When it comes to having their say, young players emphasise the importance of great communication from the coach and lots of team talks. Quieter players need encouragement here too. Young players want to influence what

they do in training, they want to talk about how they feel being part of the game, and value times where the players can get together to do social and fun activities.

### Challenge questions

- How do we support adults in the game to reflect on what participation means? How do we support coaches/adults to reflect on the power that often sits with their role regarding decisions about the team, the individual player or the game? With improved understanding, how do we support adults to build confidence and skills to operationalise commitments to young players participation?
- How does football as a game provide opportunities for the participation of all whilst acknowledging the excitement of competition and winning the game?
- What more can football do to address sexism in the sport? What changes are needed to structures, systems or adult/player behaviours?
- What more do we need to do when it comes to preventing and responding to exclusion and prejudice-based bullying with regard to the protected characteristics of children and young people?
- What do we need to do to support access to, and participation in, football in rural and island communities?
- Are increasing costs proving to be a barrier to local/grassroots football, if so, what can be done?
- How do we better consider the rights and wellbeing of the individual child who is negatively impacted by current age categories/rules?

## **ABOUT THE SCOTTISH FA WELLBEING AND PROTECTION TEAM**

The Scottish FA is the governing body for football in Scotland. The role of the Wellbeing and Protection Department at the Scottish FA is to ensure that Scottish Football is a safe and inclusive environment. We provide advice, guidance, education, and support to embed safeguarding standards throughout Scottish Football, empower children and young people and respond to concerns where a child or young person's wellbeing or safety has been affected.

You can find out more about the Department and work on the website <https://www.scottishfa.co.uk/scottish-fa/wellbeing-protection/wellbeing-and-protection-resources/>.

## **ABOUT CHILDREN'S PARLIAMENT**

Established in 1996, Children's Parliament is dedicated to the realisation of children's human rights in Scotland. Our dream is that children grow up in a world of love, happiness and understanding. Our mission is to inspire greater awareness and understanding of the power of children's human rights and to support implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Through our rights-based practice we provide children up to 14 years of age with opportunities to share their views, experiences, and ideas so that they can influence positive change in their lives at home, in school and in the community.

We use creative, participatory, and play-based methods to support children to meaningfully engage in decisions that affect them. We support children to influence policy, practice, and legislation, and we build the capacity and win the hearts and minds of adults to realise children's rights.