



D3.1 Report Identifying and Assessing Coaches' Requirements



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1. Introduction

Youth sport plays a fundamental role in shaping the physical, psychological, and social development of children and adolescents. It provides opportunities for learning discipline, teamwork, resilience, and self-confidence, while also contributing to long-term health and well-being. However, in recent years, the landscape of youth sport has undergone profound transformations, driven by increased competitiveness, professionalisation at earlier ages, and rising expectations from parents, coaches, and institutions.

These changes have introduced new pressures on young athletes, who are now frequently exposed to high performance demands, fear of failure, and intense evaluation. As a result, participation in sport is no longer always associated with enjoyment and personal growth, but can also become a source of stress, anxiety, and emotional strain. The growing prevalence of burnout, dropout, and mental health concerns among young athletes reflects this shift.

Within this context, the role of the coach has evolved significantly. Coaches are no longer only responsible for developing technical skills and achieving performance outcomes. They are increasingly expected to support the holistic development of athletes, including their emotional well-being, social integration, and personal growth. This expanded role requires a broader set of competences, such as communication, empathy, conflict management, and the ability to create safe and inclusive environments.

Despite this evolution, many coaching systems and educational programmes have not fully adapted to these new demands. Training opportunities often remain focused on technical and tactical aspects of sport, leaving coaches insufficiently prepared to address the psychosocial dimensions of their work. This mismatch between expectations and competences creates a structural gap that directly affects the quality of the sport experience for young athletes.

The AWARD project has been designed to respond to this challenge by developing an integrated approach to coaching that combines physical, mental, and social dimensions. Central to this approach is the creation of a Digital Coaches Hub, which will provide practical tools, resources, and training modules tailored to the real needs of coaches.

Deliverable 3.1 constitutes the foundation of this process. It presents the results of a comprehensive needs assessment carried out across five European countries and the collection of good practices related to youth sport coaching at European and international level. By analysing the perspectives of coaches, youth athletes, and experts, and by mapping relevant European practices, this deliverable identifies the key challenges, needs, and gaps that must be addressed in order to improve coaching practices and support the holistic development of young athletes.

2. Methodological Framework of the Needs Assessment

The needs assessment was designed as a comprehensive and multi-layered research process aimed at capturing the complexity of youth sport environments. Recognising that coaching practices and athlete

experiences are shaped by a combination of individual, social, and systemic factors, the study adopted a mixed-method approach integrating both quantitative and qualitative data.

Quantitative data were collected through structured online surveys targeting coaches and youth athletes. These surveys allowed for the identification of patterns, frequencies, and trends across a relatively large number of participants. At the same time, qualitative data were gathered through open-ended questions and expert consultations, providing deeper insights into perceptions, experiences, and contextual nuances. Qualitative data were evaluated using the Taguette tool, a qualitative statistical data program.

The research involved three main groups of participants across Romania, Cyprus, Italy, Greece, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first group consisted of 194 coaches working with youth athletes. The second group included 121 youth athletes aged between 6 and 18 years, actively engaged in organised sport. The third group comprised experts with professional experience in youth sport, including psychologists, academics, and practitioners.

The sample of coaches was predominantly male (77.8%), reflecting broader trends in the coaching profession. Most participants were involved in team sports (84%), and a significant proportion worked with large groups of athletes, often exceeding 30 individuals per season. The majority held the role of head coach (68%), indicating that the data largely reflect decision-making positions within sport environments.

The athlete sample was composed mainly of adolescents, with 56.2% aged between 15 and 18 years and 39.7% between 11 and 14 years. Most participants had substantial experience in sport, with over 60% reporting more than seven years of practice. This suggests that the responses are informed by long-term engagement in sport systems.

To ensure ethical compliance, all participants were informed about the purpose of the research, and participation was voluntary and anonymous. For youth athletes, parental consent was obtained prior to participation, in line with GDPR requirements and ethical standards for research involving minors.

The data collection process was supported by partner organisations, which facilitated access to participants through their networks, including clubs, academies, and schools. Surveys were translated in all partners' languages, put on online forms, and distributed through digital channels such as email and social media, ensuring accessibility and reach.

To enhance the validity of the findings, several measures were implemented. These included the use of multiple data sources (triangulation), independent coding of qualitative responses by multiple researchers, and the inclusion of participants from different countries and contexts. While the sample cannot be considered fully representative of all European youth sport environments, it provides a robust and diverse basis for analysis.

3. Analysis of Coaches' Needs and Practices

The analysis of coaches' responses provides a detailed and multifaceted understanding of the current realities of youth sport coaching across the partner countries. The research included 194 coaches from Romania, Cyprus, Italy, Greece, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A questionnaire was developed that included 6 sections with different themes. The first section aimed to identify the profile of the respondents (nationality, gender, sport, level of performance, coaching role, years

of coaching experience, main age group coached). The second section aimed to identify current challenges and included a multiple-choice question. Section 3, *Importance*, brought together 11 questions on a Likert scale from 1 (low) to 5 (very high). Sections 4, *Current Practices*, and 5, *Needs & Gaps*, have 2 questions each, one with multiple answers and the other open-ended. The last section, *Digital Hub Requirements*, included 4 multiple-choice questions regarding formats and types of agreed tools, type of access, allocated time, and 1 open-ended question requesting suggestions.

The results confirm that the role of the coach has evolved significantly, extending far beyond the traditional boundaries of technical and tactical instruction and increasingly encompassing psychological, relational, and educational dimensions.

3.1 Socio-demographic Characteristics of the Subject Group

As mentioned, the sample analyzed consists of 194 respondents from Romania (28.4%), Cyprus (22.2%), Belgium (17.0%), Italy (16.5%) and Greece (16.0%). In terms of gender distribution, the majority of participants are male (77.8%), while 22.2% are female.

From the perspective of the type of sport practiced, team sports predominate (84.0%), followed by individual sports (12.9%) and mixed sports (2.6%). In terms of the level of practicing sports, most respondents are active in amateur sports (44.8%), followed by professional sports (22.7%), school sports (15.5%) and combinations of these (17.0%).

Regarding the role held, the majority of respondents are head coaches (68.0%), followed by assistant coaches (18.6%), instructors (8.2%) and mentors (3.6%), while other roles are poorly represented.

Regarding the age groups trained, the majority of respondents work with mixed groups (35.6%), and the rest are relatively evenly distributed between the categories 11–14 years (25.3%), 15–18 years (25.3%) and 6–10 years (13.9%).

Regarding the number of athletes trained in a season, the majority of respondents work with large groups, of over 30 athletes (33.5%), followed by those who train between 11–20 athletes (32.0%) and 21–30 athletes (29.4%), while only 5.2% work with small groups (1–10 athletes).

3.2 Main Challenges Faced by Coaches

The data collected from coaches clearly indicates that the most pressing challenges in youth sport are predominantly psychosocial rather than technical.

The most frequently reported challenge is related to athletes' motivation and engagement (15.28%), making it the single most critical issue identified. This highlights a systemic difficulty in maintaining consistent interest and commitment among young athletes, particularly in environments where competing priorities (education, social life, digital engagement) are strong.

Closely following are discipline and behavioural issues (12.79%) and confidence and self-esteem (12.26%), which together account for over 25% of all reported challenges. These findings confirm that coaches are increasingly required to act as educators and emotional facilitators, managing not only performance but also personal development and behaviour.

Another major area of difficulty is communication with parents (10.84%), which underscores the complex triadic relationship between coach, athlete and family. Parents can influence motivation, pressure levels and expectations, often creating additional challenges for coaches.

The issue of balancing sport and school commitments (9.77%) further reinforces the need for a holistic approach to youth development. Coaches are expected to support athletes in managing dual careers, which requires flexibility and awareness beyond the sport context.

Other significant challenges include:

- Performance pressure and anxiety (8.53%)
- Team dynamics and conflicts (7.46%)
- Preventing burnout and dropout (6.57%)
- Mental health support (5.86%)
- Inclusion (5.15%)

Less frequently reported but still relevant challenges are:

- Injuries and recovery (3.02%)
- Ethics and safeguarding (2.31%)

Overall, these figures demonstrate that over 70% of challenges relate directly to psychological, emotional and relational aspects, confirming a major shift in the coaching role toward human development.

3.3 Current Coaching Practices

Despite these challenges, coaches are already implementing a range of practices aligned with modern, athlete-centred approaches.

The most widely used practice is reflective conversations with athletes (18.06%), indicating a strong emphasis on dialogue, feedback and relationship-building.

This is followed by:

- Structured goal setting (14.22%)
- Monitoring workload and well-being (13.48%)
- Confidence-building routines and positive reinforcement (13.04%)

Together, these four practices account for nearly 59% of all responses, demonstrating a clear orientation toward supporting athlete development beyond performance.

Additional commonly used practices include:

- Team-building activities (12.44%), supporting cohesion and social development
- Meetings with parents (7.70%)
- Inclusion-focused actions (6.81%)
- Peer mentoring between athletes (6.07%)

Less frequently adopted practices are:

- Mindfulness and breathing techniques (5.77%)
- Safeguarding protocols (4.00%)

The qualitative analysis reinforces these findings:

- 30.63% of responses highlight communication and relationships as the most effective coaching element
- 19.05% emphasise team dynamics
- 18.49% focus on organisation and structured planning
- 16.76% highlight motivation and psychological support

These results suggest that while coaches are already applying relevant practices, these are often intuitive rather than systematically trained or standardised.

3.4 Training Needs and Gaps

The analysis reveals a strong alignment between the challenges faced and the training needs expressed by coaches.

The most requested training areas are:

- Motivation and goal setting (14.55%)
- Communication and feedback (13.43%)
- Confidence and self-esteem development (13.06%)
- Mental health and well-being (12.87%)
- Stress and performance pressure management (12.31%)

Together, these top five areas represent over 66% of total training needs, clearly confirming the centrality of psychosocial competencies.

Additional training interests include:

- Resilience and performance mindset (9.70%)
- Talent identification and transitions (9.51%)
- Emotional intelligence (8.40%)
- Conflict resolution and team dynamics (8.02%)
- Inclusion and positive team culture (7.27%)

Notably, safeguarding and ethics (2.80%) are mentioned less frequently, suggesting either lower awareness or lower prioritisation, which may itself represent a gap.

The qualitative data provides deeper insight into systemic shortcomings:

- 38.81% of coaches highlight the lack of practical, applied coaching skills (e.g., real-life interaction, motivation strategies, adaptability)

- 24.12% emphasise insufficient education and professional development, including:
 - lack of training opportunities
 - limited psychological and pedagogical preparation
- 12.23% report gaps in organisation and performance management, such as:
 - goal setting
 - planning
 - workload monitoring
- 10.83% identify systemic issues, including:
 - lack of resources
 - absence of professional standards
 - limited exchange of good practices
- 10.48% highlight missing values-based and athlete-centred approaches, pointing to:
 - excessive focus on results
 - insufficient attention to holistic development

These figures clearly demonstrate that coach education systems are not yet aligned with the real demands of youth sport, particularly in the psychosocial domain.

3.5 Digital Learning Needs and Preferences

The data shows very strong and consistent preferences for flexible, practical and time-efficient digital learning.

3.5.1 Preferred Learning Formats

The most valued formats are:

- Short videos (3–7 minutes): 23.85%
- Practical exercises and templates: 22.69%

Together, these account for nearly 46.5%, confirming a clear preference for micro-learning and applied content.

Other formats include:

- PowerPoint with voiceover: 12.31%
- Interactive quizzes: 10.00%
- Live webinars: 9.42%
- Downloadable guides/checklists: 6.92%
- Case studies: 6.54%
- Communities/forums: 5.77%

3.5.2 Access and Time Availability

- 64.67% prefer combined mobile + desktop access
- 23.95% prefer mobile-only
- 11.38% prefer desktop-only

This means almost 88.6% require mobile compatibility, making responsive design essential.

In terms of time:

- 43.11% can dedicate 30–60 minutes/week
- 30.54% can dedicate 1–2 hours/week
- 17.37% can dedicate more than 2 hours
- 8.98% less than 30 minutes

This confirms that over 73% of coaches have a maximum of 1–2 hours weekly, reinforcing the need for short, modular learning units.

3.5.3 Preferred Hub Functionalities

The most useful features identified are:

- Quick tips for real situations: 17.41%
- Toolbox resources (plans, checklists): 16.72%
- Personalised learning paths: 15.53%
- Self-assessment tests: 14.84%
- Progress tracking and badges: 13.99%

Secondary needs include:

- Parent communication tools: 11.61%
- Referral guides to specialists: 9.22%
- Case study libraries: 8.36%
- Accessibility features: 5.46%
- Multilingual content: 4.61%

3.5.4 Additional Qualitative Insights

- 30.95% of suggestions focus on learning formats and resources, including:
 - videos, webinars, blended learning
 - AI-based tools
 - expert-led sessions
- 9.52% request practical tools and ready-to-use materials
- 7.14% emphasise communication and parent education

- 7.14% highlight system-level improvements

Notably, 38.09% provided no additional suggestions, suggesting either satisfaction or difficulty in articulating further needs.

3.6 Overall Interpretation

The analysis of the data provides a clear and compelling picture of the evolving reality of youth coaching across Europe. What emerges most strongly is that the challenges faced by coaches are no longer primarily technical, but overwhelmingly psychosocial in nature. When aggregating the main reported difficulties – motivation and engagement (15.28%), discipline and behaviour (12.79%), confidence and self-esteem (12.26%), communication with parents (10.84%), sport–school balance (9.77%), performance pressure and anxiety (8.53%), team dynamics (7.46%) and burnout prevention (6.57%) – it becomes evident that well over 70% of the challenges relate directly to emotional, relational and developmental aspects. This confirms a fundamental shift in the role of the coach: from technical instructor to facilitator of holistic youth development.

At the same time, current coaching practices suggest that this transition is already underway, albeit in a fragmented and non-systematic manner. Coaches are actively using reflective conversations (18.06%), goal setting (14.22%), well-being monitoring (13.48%) and confidence-building strategies (13.04%), alongside team-building activities (12.44%). These approaches clearly align with modern, athlete-centred methodologies. However, the fact that coaches continue to request training in exactly these same areas reveals an important gap: these practices are often applied intuitively, without structured frameworks, shared methodologies or evidence-based guidance. In other words, there is alignment in intention, but inconsistency in execution.

This gap becomes even more visible when examining training needs. A strong concentration – over 66% – is found in areas such as motivation and goal setting (14.55%), communication and feedback (13.43%), confidence development (13.06%), mental health and well-being (12.87%) and stress management (12.31%). These figures not only reinforce the centrality of psychosocial competencies, but also indicate that coaches are highly aware of their own limitations in these domains. The demand is not generic; it is specific, urgent and clearly articulated.

Perhaps the most critical insight concerns the structural shortcomings of existing coach education systems. A significant proportion of respondents (38.81%) explicitly highlight the lack of practical, applied training. Coaches are not asking for more theory – they are asking for concrete tools, real-life strategies, and immediately usable methods to handle everyday situations with young athletes. This is reinforced by additional gaps related to continuous professional development (24.12%), organisational and methodological clarity (12.23%), and systemic limitations such as lack of resources and standards (10.83%). Together, these findings point to a disconnect between formal education and real-world coaching demands.

Within this context, digital learning emerges not simply as an opportunity, but as a necessity. Coaches clearly express a preference for short, focused and practical learning formats, with 23.85% favouring micro-videos and 22.69% prioritising exercises and templates. Combined with the fact that nearly 65% prefer hybrid (mobile and desktop) access and over 73% can dedicate no more than 1–2 hours per week, it becomes evident that learning solutions must be flexible, accessible and time-efficient. Traditional, long-form training models are no longer compatible with coaches' realities.

Taken together, these findings strongly support the development of a Digital Coaches Hub conceived not as a static repository of knowledge, but as a dynamic, practice-oriented support system. Such a hub should function as an extension of the coach's daily work, offering immediate guidance, practical tools and context-based solutions. It should prioritise real-life applicability, enabling coaches to respond effectively to concrete situations such as managing an unmotivated athlete, addressing parental pressure, or supporting a player experiencing anxiety.

At the same time, the system should incorporate personalised learning pathways, allowing coaches to progress according to their individual needs, experience levels and contexts. Structured yet flexible learning journeys, combined with self-assessment tools and progress tracking, can support continuous development while respecting time constraints.

Ultimately, this transformation is not only about improving coaching practices – it is about redefining the support system around youth sport. By equipping coaches with the right tools, skills and knowledge, it becomes possible to foster environments that prioritise well-being, personal growth and long-term engagement. In this sense, the Digital Coaches Hub represents a strategic response to the evolving role of the coach, ensuring that youth sport can truly contribute to the holistic development of the next generation.

4. Analysis of Youth Athletes' Needs

The analysis of youth athletes' responses provides critical insight into the lived experiences of young people in sport and highlights the central importance of emotional and relational dimensions in shaping these experiences.

The sample of 121 athletes is predominantly composed of adolescents aged 15–18 (56.2%), with significant experience in sport (over 7 years for 60.3%). This indicates that responses reflect long-term exposure to structured sport environments.

4.1 Core Needs of Youth Athletes

The analysis of responses reveals a clear prioritisation of psychosocial and relational needs, confirming that young athletes seek more than technical instruction in sport.

The most prominent need identified is support after mistakes or defeats (20.62%). This highlights that athletes experience mistakes not as neutral learning opportunities, but often as emotionally charged events. They require reassurance, constructive feedback and a safe environment in which failure is normalised as part of development.

Closely linked to this is the need for motivation during difficult or low-emotional moments (17.52%). Athletes expect coaches to actively help them regain focus, energy and engagement when they feel discouraged, tired or overwhelmed.

Another key need is encouragement and confidence-building (14.95%), indicating that self-esteem is fragile and strongly influenced by the coaching environment. Positive reinforcement, recognition of effort and emotional support play a critical role in sustaining participation and performance.

Communication also emerges as a fundamental dimension. Effective communication and active listening (11.85%) are essential for athletes to feel understood, respected and supported. This reflects the importance of trust and openness in the coach–athlete relationship.

Additional needs include:

- Stress and pressure management (9.79%), reflecting the emotional demands of competitive sport.
- Fair treatment and inclusion (9.27%), highlighting the importance of equity and respect.
- Management of team conflicts (8.76%), especially relevant in team sports.
- Support in balancing school and sport (7.21%), indicating the importance of dual-career support.

Overall, these figures show that over 75% of identified needs are directly related to emotional support, communication and psychological well-being, reinforcing the idea that youth sport must be approached as a developmental and educational process.

4.2 Sources of Stress and Pressure

The data provides a nuanced understanding of the main stressors affecting young athletes, revealing that stress is largely internalised and performance-related.

The primary source of stress is linked to mistakes and execution (23.3%). Athletes frequently report fear of making errors, indicating a strong sensitivity to personal performance and its perceived consequences. Mistakes are often associated with negative evaluation rather than learning, suggesting the presence of a performance-oriented climate.

The second major source is performance and results (21.7%), including concerns about losing matches, failing to meet expectations or not progressing. This reflects a strong external and internal pressure to achieve outcomes, often tied to evaluation by coaches, parents or peers.

A third important category is internal psychological factors (18.5%), such as:

- anticipatory anxiety before competitions
- fear of failure
- fear of disappointing others
- lack of self-confidence

These findings indicate that stress is not only situational but also deeply internalised, affecting athletes' emotional states before, during and after performance.

Contextual and external factors account for 16.2% of stress sources, including:

- competitions
- injuries
- physical condition
- difficulty balancing sport and school

Less frequently mentioned, but still relevant, are:

- social and interpersonal factors (6.4%), such as peer pressure or team conflicts
- coach-related factors (4.03%), particularly negative reactions to mistakes

Interestingly, 9.6% of athletes report no stress, suggesting variability in coping mechanisms, resilience levels or sport environments.

Overall, the data indicates that over 60% of stress originates from performance-related and internal psychological factors, pointing to a need for stronger emotional support systems and healthier performance climates.

4.3 Expectations Towards Coaches

Athletes' expectations towards coaches provide one of the clearest and most significant insights of the analysis. The data shows that the primary expectation is emotional support, far exceeding all other categories.

A striking 43.5% of responses emphasise the need for encouragement, empathy and understanding. Athletes expect coaches to:

- support them after mistakes
- build their confidence
- show patience and understanding
- create a positive and safe emotional environment

This dominant percentage clearly indicates that, from the athlete perspective, the emotional role of the coach is more important than the technical one.

The second most important expectation is related to instruction and feedback (19.3%). Athletes want:

- clear and constructive feedback
- personalised guidance
- support adapted to their individual needs

This highlights the importance of individualisation in coaching, rather than one-size-fits-all approaches.

Other expectations, though less frequently mentioned, remain important:

- Communication and relationships (6.9%) – active listening, respect and dialogue.
- Autonomy and development (6.9%) – opportunities to grow, make decisions and recover.
- Training structure (7%) – engaging and balanced sessions.
- Fairness and equal treatment (5.2%).

These results confirm that athletes value a balanced coaching approach combining emotional support, technical guidance and respectful relationships.

4.4 Additional Key Insights

4.4.1 The Central Role of Mistakes

One of the most important cross-cutting findings is the role of mistakes. Athletes identify mistakes as:

- their main source of stress (23.3%)
- their main area of needed support (20.62%)

This overlap suggests that current sport environments may frame mistakes negatively, contributing to fear, anxiety and reduced confidence. Athletes clearly need a shift toward a learning-oriented culture, where errors are treated as opportunities for growth.

4.4.2 Performance Culture vs Development Culture

The strong presence of stress related to results (21.7%) and fear of failure (part of 18.5%) indicates that many athletes operate in highly evaluative environments. This can lead to:

- fear of disappointing coaches or parents
- anxiety before competitions
- reduced intrinsic motivation

This contrasts with athletes' expressed needs for encouragement, empathy and support, highlighting a misalignment between the environment and athletes' developmental needs.

4.4.3 Emotional Imbalance and Limited Coping Resources

The combination of high pressure and strong emotional needs suggests an imbalance between demands and available coping resources. Athletes face:

- high expectations
- frequent evaluation
- emotional challenges

but often lack:

- structured psychological support
- tools for emotional regulation
- safe spaces for expression

4.4.4 Importance of the Coach–Athlete Relationship

The data consistently shows that the quality of the coach–athlete relationship is a determining factor in both performance and well-being. When this relationship includes:

- trust
- communication
- empathy
- personalised support

it can reduce stress and enhance motivation. Conversely, its absence can amplify anxiety and disengagement.

4.5 Overall Interpretation

The findings clearly demonstrate that youth athletes experience sport as a deeply emotional and psychological journey, not only a physical or competitive activity. Their needs, stressors and expectations converge around a central idea: the importance of feeling supported, understood and valued.

Athletes are not simply asking for better training – they are asking for better relationships, better communication and better emotional support systems. The prominence of emotional support (43.5%), combined with the high levels of stress related to mistakes and performance, indicates that current sport environments often lack a sufficiently safe and developmental climate.

This reinforces the need to redefine youth sport as a psycho-educational process, where performance and personal development coexist. In this context, the coach plays a pivotal role not only as a trainer, but as a mentor, educator and emotional guide.

Addressing these needs through more athlete-centred approaches can significantly:

- reduce stress and anxiety
- improve motivation and engagement
- support long-term participation
- enhance both performance and well-being

Ultimately, creating environments where athletes feel safe to make mistakes, express emotions and develop at their own pace is essential for building sustainable, healthy and meaningful sport experiences.

5. Expert Consultation Results

The expert consultation provides a systemic and forward-looking perspective on youth sport, highlighting structural challenges and identifying key areas for reform.

Experts identify psychological challenges as the most significant (29.6%), followed by contextual pressures (18.5%), social influences (12.9%), and physical demands (11.1%).

5.1 Understanding the Athlete Profile

The expert analysis provides a clear and multidimensional picture of today's youth athlete, characterised by simultaneous exposure to psychological, social, contextual and physical pressures.

The most dominant dimension is psychological challenges (29.6%), including anxiety, performance pressure, burnout and emotional overload. Experts consistently highlight that young athletes operate in environments where expectations are high and emotional resilience is constantly tested. This suggests that modern youth sport is no longer just physically demanding, but also mentally intensive.

A second major dimension relates to contextual and lifestyle pressures (18.5%), particularly the difficulty of balancing sport, school and personal life. Young athletes often face overloaded schedules, early specialization and limited free time. This indicates that their experience of sport is embedded within a broader context of competing demands, requiring strong time management and coping skills.

Social and interpersonal pressures (12.9%) also play a significant role. These include expectations from parents, social comparison and communication challenges within the sport environment. The presence of these factors highlights the complexity of the athlete ecosystem, where multiple actors influence the athlete's experience.

In addition, physical challenges (11.1%), such as injuries, overtraining and fatigue, remain relevant. However, compared to psychological pressures, they are less dominant, reinforcing the idea that the primary risks in youth sport are increasingly mental rather than physical.

Other, less frequent but still important influences include:

- Media and societal pressures (7.4%), such as exposure to unrealistic standards.
- Cognitive and self-management difficulties (5.5%), including decision-making and organisation.
- Lack of resources (3.7%), affecting access to support systems.

Overall, the data suggests that the contemporary youth athlete can be described as a “multi-pressured individual”, navigating a complex environment where mental, social and contextual demands often outweigh purely physical ones. This reinforces the need to approach youth sport as a holistic developmental process rather than a performance-only pathway.

5.2 Gaps in Coaching Competences

From the expert perspective, there is a clear and significant mismatch between the demands placed on coaches and their current level of preparation, particularly in relation to youth development.

The most critical gap identified is insufficient education in child development and psychology (34.1%). Coaches often lack knowledge about:

- developmental stages of children and adolescents
- emotional and cognitive growth
- psychosocial needs of young athletes

This gap limits their ability to adapt training, communication and expectations to the age and maturity of athletes.

The second major area of deficiency concerns communication and relational skills (26.8%). Experts highlight that many coaches struggle with:

- effective communication with young athletes
- providing constructive and positive feedback
- managing relationships with parents

This is particularly problematic given that communication is central to motivation, confidence and well-being.

Additional gaps include:

- Methodological and pedagogical limitations (7.3%), such as applying adult-oriented training approaches to children.
- Excessive focus on performance (7.3%), often prioritising short-term results over long-term development.
- Limited capacity to support athlete well-being (7.3%), including emotional and behavioural management.
- Organisational and workload challenges (4.8%), reflecting the increasing complexity of the coaching role.

Less frequently mentioned, but still relevant, are gaps related to empathy, motivation and understanding of the social context of athletes.

Overall, these findings suggest that coaches are still predominantly trained as technical specialists, rather than as educators and facilitators of holistic development. This creates a structural misalignment with the real needs of young athletes, which are largely psychosocial.

5.3 Required Areas for Training

In response to these gaps, experts clearly identify the priority areas that should be included in modern coach education programmes.

The most important domain is psychological skills and emotional support (26.3%). This includes:

- mental health awareness
- emotion regulation
- motivation strategies
- confidence building
- stress and anxiety management

This emphasis reflects the centrality of psychological demands in youth sport and the need for coaches to actively support athletes' well-being.

The second key area is communication and relationship-building (19.3%), including:

- effective communication with athletes
- managing relationships with parents
- developing empathy and trust

This reinforces the idea that coaching is fundamentally relational and that communication skills are essential for both performance and development.

Another critical domain is understanding athlete development (14%), including:

- stages of growth and maturation
- child and adolescent psychology
- Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) models

This area is particularly important for aligning training practices with the developmental needs of young athletes.

Additional training priorities include:

- Sport-specific professional knowledge (10.5%), including new training methods and data use.
- Performance development and injury prevention (10.5%), ensuring safe training.
- Cognitive and self-management skills (8.7%), such as time management and problem-solving.
- Values and character development (7%), including leadership and responsibility.
- Conflict management and interpersonal skills (3.5%).

5.4 Early Warning Signs and Intervention

A critical aspect highlighted by experts is the ability of coaches to identify early warning signs (red flags) and intervene appropriately.

The most significant indicators are psychological signals (44.7%), including burnout, demotivation, anxiety, irritability and decreased self-confidence. These signs often reflect a deeper emotional imbalance and can precede more serious issues such as withdrawal or dropout.

Behavioural changes (16.4%) also represent important warning signals. These include isolation from teammates, reduced participation, sudden attitude changes or absenteeism, which may indicate underlying stress or dissatisfaction.

Cognitive and performance-related signs are also relevant, such as:

- decreased concentration
- decline in performance
- difficulties in school

Additionally, physical signals (5.9%), including recurring injuries, fatigue or pain, may reflect overtraining or insufficient recovery.

In response to these warning signs, experts emphasise the importance of:

- open and empathetic communication (13.4%), based on trust and non-judgment
- individualised support, tailored to the athlete's needs
- adaptation of training, including adjustments in intensity and workload
- clear boundaries and guidance, to provide structure and safety

In more complex situations, referral to specialists (5.9%), such as psychologists or medical professionals, is considered essential. This highlights the importance of recognising the limits of the coaching role and working within a broader support system.

Overall, this section reinforces the idea that coaches must act as early observers and facilitators of intervention, playing a key role in preventing more serious psychological or physical issues.

5.5 Additional Key Insights

5.5.1 Need for Interdisciplinary and Systemic Support

Experts emphasise that coaching should be embedded within a multidisciplinary support system, involving psychologists, physiotherapists, nutritionists and educators. This reflects a shift from the coach as an isolated figure to the coach as part of a support ecosystem.

5.5.2 Importance of Practical Tools and Digital Solutions

The most valuable tools for coaches are:

- education and professional development resources (38.2%)
- digital monitoring tools (26.4%)
- training materials (11.7%)
- multidisciplinary support (14.7%)
- assessment tools (8.8%)

For digital learning, experts strongly favour:

- short, practical content formats (54.2%)
- ready-to-use tools and templates (20%)
- interactive learning (14.2%)

These preferences confirm the need for accessible, applied and technology-supported learning environments.

5.6 Overall Interpretation

The expert analysis provides a systemic perspective that complements and reinforces the findings from coaches and athletes.

Youth sport today is characterised by high psychological pressure and complex developmental demands, requiring a redefinition of both the athlete support system and the coaching role. At the same time, there is a clear gap between what coaches are expected to manage and the training they currently receive.

This highlights the urgent need to transform coach education into a multidisciplinary and practice-oriented process, integrating psychology, communication, pedagogy and health. Coaches must evolve from technical instructors into facilitators of holistic development, capable of supporting both performance and well-being.

Ultimately, the findings point toward a necessary shift from a performance-centred model to a development-centred model, where the success of youth sport is measured not only by results, but by the long-term growth, health and engagement of young athletes.

6. Integrated Analysis of Findings

The integrated analysis of data collected from athletes, coaches and experts reveals a highly coherent and interconnected system, in which challenges, needs and gaps are strongly aligned across all three groups.

A first key finding is the existence of a systemic transmission mechanism of challenges. Experts identify structural issues such as performance pressure, lack of coach preparation and imbalance between sport and personal life. Coaches, in turn, report concrete difficulties in managing motivation, communication, emotional support and relationships with athletes and parents. These limitations are directly reflected in the experiences of athletes, who report high levels of stress, anxiety, fear of mistakes and pressure to perform.

This demonstrates that system-level deficiencies are translated into the daily experiences of young athletes through coaching practices, positioning the coach as a central mediator between structural constraints and athlete well-being.

A second critical insight concerns the misalignment between athletes' needs and coaches' competences. Athletes clearly express the need for emotional support (43.5%), encouragement, communication and confidence-building, particularly after mistakes or failures (20.62%). At the same time, coaches themselves report difficulties and training needs in exactly these areas, including motivation (14.55%), communication (13.43%), confidence development (13.06%) and mental health support (12.87%). Experts confirm these gaps, identifying deficiencies in child development knowledge (34.1%) and communication skills (26.8%).

This convergence of evidence highlights a structural gap: coaches are expected to deliver psychosocial support but are not sufficiently trained to do so effectively. This gap directly impacts the quality of the athlete experience and limits the developmental potential of sport.

Another strong point of convergence across all groups is the dominance of a performance-oriented culture, often focused on short-term results. Athletes report stress related to mistakes (23.3%) and performance outcomes (21.7%), while experts warn about burnout, early specialization and excessive demands (29.6% psychological challenges). Coaches themselves face pressure to achieve results while trying to maintain athlete motivation and engagement.

Within this context, mistakes emerge as a central and shared issue. For athletes, mistakes are the primary source of stress; for coaches, they represent a management challenge; for experts, they are linked to burnout and disengagement. Rather than being perceived as a natural part of learning, mistakes are often experienced as failure and risk. This indicates a clear need for a paradigm shift toward a learning-oriented and development-centred culture, where errors are reframed as opportunities for growth.

The analysis also highlights a shared awareness of the need for professionalisation and interdisciplinarity. Experts advocate for integrated support systems involving psychologists, educators and other specialists. Coaches express a strong demand for practical training, tools and digital resources, while athletes implicitly confirm this need through their expectations for emotional support, communication and guidance.

Across all groups, there is a clear call for:

- stronger psychosocial competences
- improved communication and relational skills
- access to practical, applicable tools
- continuous and flexible learning opportunities

In this context, digitalisation emerges as a key enabler. Coaches and experts emphasise the importance of short, practical and accessible learning formats, such as microlearning videos (over 50% preference among experts) and ready-to-use tools. This aligns with coaches' limited available time (over 73% can dedicate only 1–2 hours per week) and their preference for mobile-accessible content (nearly 88%).

Overall, the findings portray a youth sport system in transition, where traditional, performance-driven models are increasingly inadequate to respond to contemporary demands. Psychological, social and developmental dimensions are now central, requiring a redefinition of the coaching role.

The evidence strongly supports a shift toward a holistic, athlete-centred model, in which:

- the coach acts as educator, mentor and emotional facilitator
- athlete well-being is prioritised alongside performance
- learning environments are safe, supportive and development-oriented
- interdisciplinary collaboration becomes standard practice

Such a transformation is essential not only to improve performance, but also to ensure long-term engagement, mental health and sustainable participation in sport.

7. Study Limitations

While the research provides a robust and multi-perspective understanding of youth sport, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, the study relies on self-reported data, particularly through questionnaires, which may introduce response bias. Participants may provide socially desirable answers, especially when addressing sensitive topics such as mental health, relationships or personal challenges.

Second, although the sample includes participants from multiple European countries, it cannot be considered fully representative of the broader population of athletes, coaches and experts. As such, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of general trends rather than universally generalisable conclusions.

Another limitation concerns the cross-sectional nature of the study, which captures perceptions at a specific point in time. This prevents the analysis of changes over time and limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables.

In addition, while qualitative analysis was conducted systematically and involved multiple researchers, it inherently includes a degree of interpretative subjectivity, particularly in the processes of coding and thematic categorisation.

Cultural and contextual differences between countries may also influence how participants interpret questions and formulate responses. These variations can introduce cultural bias, affecting the comparability of results across contexts.

Finally, the study does not include the perspectives of other key stakeholders, such as parents, sport managers or policy-makers, whose input could further enrich the understanding of the youth sport ecosystem and its dynamics.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a consistent and triangulated evidence base, combining insights from athletes, coaches and experts. This strengthens the reliability of the findings and provides a solid foundation for informing future interventions, policy development and the design of innovative tools such as the Digital Coaches Hub.

8. Mapping of European Good Practices

8.1 Methodological Approach

The identification of good practices was conducted through a structured desk research process at European level, focusing on initiatives addressing youth sport for children and adolescents aged 6–18, and involving a clear and relevant coaching dimension. The research aimed to capture practices that go beyond technical sport delivery and contribute to the holistic development of young athletes.

A wide range of sources was consulted, including Erasmus+ Sport projects, European Commission initiatives, policy documents, sport federations, non-governmental organisations, and recognised programmes such as the BeInclusive EU Sport Awards. Particular attention was given to initiatives that explicitly integrate educational, social, and well-being components within coaching practice.

Practices were selected based on the following criteria:

- relevance to educational, social, and well-being dimensions of youth sport
- explicit involvement of coaches or structured coaching processes
- transferability and adaptability across different European contexts
- availability of documented methodologies, tools, or evidence of implementation

In addition, priority was given to practices demonstrating innovative approaches, practical applicability, and potential to inform the development of coaching resources within the AWARD project.

Following an initial mapping and screening phase, a shortlist of 20 practices was identified and further analysed. The final selection ensures a balanced representation of thematic areas, including child-centred coaching, mental health and well-being, inclusion and equality, safeguarding, and values-based education in sport.

8.2 Selected Good Practices

8.2.1 iCoachKids

Country: Europe-wide / international

Organisation: Leeds Beckett University + international partners

Target group: Coaches, children in grassroots sport

Age range: 5–12 (primary), extendable to 6–18

Main theme: Child-centred coaching

Description: iCoachKids is a European and international movement promoting child-centred coaching in youth sport. It provides evidence-based guidelines, training programmes, and educational resources for coaches working with children. The initiative emphasises fun, safety, inclusion, and developmentally appropriate practices.

Coaching relevance: Very high – focuses directly on improving coaching behaviours, communication, and session design.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Promotes holistic development (physical, emotional, social)
- Enhances motivation and enjoyment
- Prevents early dropout and burnout

Evidence/results: Widely adopted internationally; supported by research and multiple EU-funded initiatives.

Transferability: Excellent – already implemented across many European contexts.

Relevance for AWARD: Core reference model for positive, child-centred coaching philosophy.

Website: <https://icoachkids.org>

8.2.2 SAFE – Safeguarding in Grassroots Sport

Country: Europe-wide

Organisation: ENGSO + partners

Target group: Coaches, sport staff

Age range: 6–18

Main theme: Safeguarding and protection

Description: SAFE aims to equip coaches and sport organisations with knowledge and tools to prevent abuse, harassment, and unsafe environments in sport.

Coaching relevance: Very high – focuses on coach responsibility and behaviour.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Child protection
- Safe sport environments
- Trust and well-being

Evidence/results: Ongoing Erasmus+ project with training materials and guidelines.

Transferability: High.

Relevance for AWARD: Critical for safe and ethical coaching frameworks.

Website: <https://www.engso-education.eu/safe>

8.2.3 UEFA Child and Youth Protection Programme

Country: Europe-wide

Organisation: UEFA

Target group: Clubs, coaches, sport staff

Age range: 6–18

Main theme: Safeguarding

Description: UEFA provides a comprehensive safeguarding framework including policies, training, and tools to protect children and young people in football.

Coaching relevance: Very high – includes guidelines for coach conduct.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Protection from abuse
- Safe environments
- Awareness and prevention

Evidence/results: Widely implemented across European football structures.

Transferability: Very high.

Relevance for AWARD: Benchmark for safe sport governance and coaching responsibility.

Website: <https://www.uefa.com/sustainability/child-and-youth-protection>

8.2.4 SportMEup – Social Sports School

Country: Romania

Organisation: Asociata FDP-Protagonisti in educatie

Target group: Vulnerable children

Age range: 6–16

Main theme: Social inclusion through sport

Description: Provides structured sport activities to disadvantaged children, combining sport with education, life skills, and school retention strategies.

Coaching relevance: High – coaches act as educators and mentors.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Inclusion
- Life skills development
- School engagement

Evidence/results: Long-term programme with measurable social impact.

Transferability: Good – adaptable for NGOs and clubs.

Relevance for AWARD: Strong example of coaches as social educators.

Website: <https://fdpsr.ro/en/>

8.2.5 Karate in Europe – Bushido

Country: Poland

Organisation: Bushido Club

Target group: Coaches and youth athletes

Age range: 10–18

Main theme: Inclusion and diversity

Description: Programme training karate coaches in inclusive methods and intercultural competence, combined with youth exchanges and practical coaching guidelines.

Coaching relevance: High – includes direct coach training.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Diversity and inclusion
- Respect and discipline
- Cultural exchange

Evidence/results: EU recognition (BeInclusive Awards).

Transferability: High.

Relevance for AWARD: Example of inclusive coaching methodology in practice.

Website: www.bushido-centrum.pl

8.2.6 Chance to Shine Street

Country: United Kingdom (transferable model used and adapted in Europe)

Organisation: Chance to Shine

Target group: Young people in disadvantaged communities

Age range: 8–18

Main theme: Inclusion, engagement, and personal development through sport

Description: Chance to Shine Street is a sport-based programme (cricket-focused but conceptually transferable) designed to engage young people from underserved communities. It uses flexible, informal sport sessions combined with youth work principles to create safe, supportive, and engaging environments.

Coaching relevance: Very high – coaches are trained to build relationships with disengaged youth.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Improves engagement and participation
- Develops life skills (communication, teamwork, responsibility)
- Supports emotional well-being and confidence

Evidence/results: Widely implemented across the UK with strong monitoring data showing increased participation, improved well-being, and positive behavioural outcomes.

Transferability: High – methodology is adaptable across different sports, grassroots clubs, community organisations, European urban contexts.

Relevance for AWARD: Excellent model for engaging hard-to-reach youth, relationship-based coaching, coaches as social mentors.

Website: <https://www.chancetoshine.org/street>

8.2.7 A Fairer Coaching

Country: Europe-wide

Organisation: ENGSO + partners

Target group: Grassroots coaches

Age range: 6–18

Main theme: Inclusion, equality, anti-discrimination

Description: An e-learning platform supporting coaches to create inclusive sport environments by addressing discrimination, stereotypes, and inequality.

Coaching relevance: Very high – focuses on coach attitudes and behaviours.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Promotes inclusion and respect
- Reduces exclusion and discrimination
- Supports safe environments

Evidence/results: Structured training modules and case-based learning.

Transferability: High – digital and scalable.

Relevance for AWARD: Strong model for inclusive coaching practices.

Website: <https://www.engso-education.eu/a-fairer-coaching>

8.2.8 PaddlePWR – GirlPWR

Country: Slovenia

Organisation: Kajak Klub Zlatorog

Target group: Girls in sport

Age range: 10–16

Main theme: Gender empowerment

Description: Programme designed to increase girls' participation and retention in sport through female coaching role models, tailored training, and supportive environments.

Coaching relevance: High – focuses on coach-athlete relationship.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Confidence building
- Retention in sport
- Positive identity development

Evidence/results: Reported 100% retention over 12 months.

Transferability: High.

Relevance for AWARD: Excellent model for girls' engagement and coach influence.

Website: <https://kajakklubzlatorog.com/ppgp/>

8.2.9 District Spot – Fútbol Más France

Country: France

Organisation: Fútbol Más

Target group: Girls in vulnerable contexts

Age range: 10–17

Main theme: Empowerment through sport

Description: District Spot is a community-based programme creating safe and inclusive sport spaces for girls, particularly in disadvantaged urban areas. It combines football activities with structured psychosocial support sessions, mentoring, and emotional development exercises aimed at building confidence and resilience.

Coaching relevance: High – coaches trained to act as facilitators of sport and psychosocial development.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Strengthens self-confidence and leadership
- Supports emotional well-being
- Promotes gender equality and inclusion

Evidence/results: Part of the international Fútbol Más methodology, implemented in multiple countries with strong monitoring frameworks.

Transferability: High – structured methodology adaptable to different contexts.

Relevance for AWARD: Excellent example of coaching for empowerment, emotional development, and safe participation.

Website: <https://futbolmas.org>

8.2.10 DRAGONAS

Country: Spain

Organisation: Dragones de Lavapiés

Target group: Youth, women, and marginalized communities

Age range: 12–18

Main theme: Inclusion, diversity, anti-racism

Description: DRAGONAS is a grassroots football initiative promoting inclusion and diversity through sport. It focuses on creating safe and participatory environments for young people, especially girls and individuals from migrant and minority backgrounds.

Coaching relevance: High – coaches are key actors in creating inclusive environments.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Promotes intercultural dialogue
- Encourages participation and belonging
- Supports social cohesion

Evidence/results: Recognised at EU level (BeInclusive Awards finalist).

Transferability: Good – adaptable to urban grassroots sport settings.

Relevance for AWARD: Strong model of inclusive coaching and social integration through sport.

Website: <https://dragonedelavapies.com>

8.2.11 SPIRIT – Sport Coaching for Mental Wellbeing

Country: Europe-wide

Organisation: ENGSO + partners

Target group: Coaches, grassroots sport clubs

Age range: 10–18

Main theme: Mental health and well-being

Description: SPIRIT developed training modules and tools to help coaches support athletes' mental well-being, focusing on stress, anxiety, motivation, and emotional support in sport environments.

Coaching relevance: Very high – provides practical tools and training for coaches.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Mental health awareness
- Emotional regulation
- Positive coach-athlete relationships

Evidence/results: Includes e-learning modules and tested materials in grassroots sport settings.

Transferability: High – modular toolkit adaptable to different contexts.

Relevance for AWARD: Directly aligned with mental health & well-being dimension of coaching.

Website: <https://www.engso-education.eu/projects-2/spirit>

8.2.12 EuroHockey Gender Balance Charter

Country: Belgium (European federation level)

Organisation: EuroHockey

Target group: Clubs, federations, coaches

Age range: 10–18

Main theme: Gender equality in sport

Description: A structured framework supporting organisations in achieving gender balance in participation, coaching, and leadership. Includes self-assessment tools, training materials, and policy guidance.

Coaching relevance: High – directly addresses coach recruitment, representation, and behaviour.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Promotes equal opportunities
- Reduces gender bias
- Improves inclusivity in sport environments

Evidence/results: Adopted across multiple European hockey federations.

Transferability: Very high – scalable across sports and countries.

Relevance for AWARD: Supports systemic change in coaching culture and gender inclusion.

Website: <https://eurohockey.org>

8.2.13 PLAYS – Practical Learning to Advance Youngsters in Sport

Country: Europe-wide

Organisation: Ovidius University of Constanta + partners

Target group: Coaches, youth athletes

Age range: 12–18

Main theme: Life skills development through sport

Description: PLAYS is an Erasmus+ Sport project aimed at promoting the development of life skills among young athletes through structured coaching approaches. The project provides educational resources, training modules, and practical tools to help coaches intentionally integrate life skills development into sport activities.

Coaching relevance: Very high – directly supports coaches in integrating life skills into training sessions; using reflection and feedback as learning tools; structuring activities with dual objectives (sport + personal development).

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Enhances personal and social development
- Promotes active citizenship and responsibility
- Strengthens confidence and interpersonal skills
- Supports holistic development beyond sport performance

Evidence/results: Erasmus+ funded project with developed toolkits, training materials, and tested methodologies implemented across partner countries.

Transferability: High – tools and methodology are designed for adaptation across different contexts.

Relevance for AWARD: This practice is particularly valuable because it provides a structured and intentional model for integrating life skills into coaching, directly supporting AWARD's objective of linking sport with education and personal development.

Website: <https://www.playsproject.eu/>

8.2.14 SCORE – Gender Equality in Coaching

Country: Europe-wide

Organisation: ENGSO + partners

Target group: Coaches, sport organisations

Age range: 12–18

Main theme: Gender equality in coaching

Description: SCORE aims to increase gender equality in coaching by providing tools, training, and policy recommendations to organisations and coaches.

Coaching relevance: High – addresses structural and behavioural aspects of coaching.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Promotes equal participation
- Challenges gender stereotypes
- Encourages safe environments for girls

Evidence/results: EU-funded with documented outputs and policy recommendations.

Transferability: High – adaptable at club and federation level.

Relevance for AWARD: Supports inclusive and gender-sensitive coaching approaches.

Website: <https://www.engso-education.eu/projects-2/score>

8.2.15 RESTART – Refugee Inclusion Through Sport

Country: France

Organisation: UCPA Sport Loisirs

Target group: Refugees and young migrants

Age range: 12–18

Main theme: Integration and psychosocial support

Description: RESTART provides structured sport programmes for refugees, focusing on rebuilding confidence, social connections, and well-being through physical activity and group participation.

Coaching relevance: Medium – coaches support social and emotional integration.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Enhances well-being and resilience

- Promotes social inclusion
- Reduces isolation

Evidence/results: EU-level recognition and implementation across multiple centres.

Transferability: Good.

Relevance for AWARD: Useful example of coaching supporting mental health and integration.

Website: <https://www.ucpa.com>

8.2.16 PAPA – Promoting Adolescent Physical Activity

Country: Europe-wide

Organisation: University of Birmingham

Target group: Youth athletes and coaches

Age range: 12–18

Main theme: Motivation, well-being, and positive coaching climate

Description: The PAPA project is an EU-funded initiative that focuses on improving young people's motivation and well-being in sport by promoting positive coaching behaviours. The project is based on Self-Determination Theory and aims to help coaches create motivational climates.

Coaching relevance: Very high – directly targets coaching style, communication motivational strategies, coach-athlete interaction

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Increases intrinsic motivation
- Reduces dropout rates
- Supports emotional well-being
- Builds confidence and resilience

Evidence/results: Strong scientific basis with peer-reviewed research and validated results showing improved motivation and engagement among young athletes.

Transferability: Moderate – context-specific but adaptable conceptually.

Relevance for AWARD: This is one of the strongest evidence-based projects in Europe on motivation, well-being, coaching behaviour.

Website: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-les/sportex/research/papa-project-brochure.pdf>

8.2.17 New Fivə – Balon Mundial

Country: Italy

Organisation: Balon Mundial

Target group: Youth, women, non-binary participants

Age range: 14–18

Main theme: Safe and inclusive sport spaces

Description: New Five creates inclusive football environments where participants engage in sport alongside workshops on well-being, rights, and personal development.

Coaching relevance: High – coaches integrate sport with educational and social discussions.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Promotes inclusion and diversity
- Supports psychological well-being
- Encourages active participation

Evidence/results: Recognised at EU level.

Transferability: High.

Relevance for AWARD: Strong example of holistic coaching approach.

Website: <https://balonmundial.it>

8.2.18 Urban Youth Games

Country: Belgium

Organisation: Urban Youth Games

Target group: Urban youth

Age range: 10–18

Main theme: Social inclusion and participation

Description: A multi-sport event engaging young people from diverse backgrounds in urban environments, promoting access to sport and community cohesion.

Coaching relevance: Medium – less structured coaching component.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Promotes participation
- Encourages social interaction
- Builds community engagement

Evidence/results: EU award winner.

Transferability: Moderate.

Relevance for AWARD: Useful for engagement and outreach models.

Website: <https://urbanyouthgames.org/en/>

8.2.19 DIF Programme for Minority Girls

Country: Denmark

Organisation: Danmarks Idrætsforbund

Target group: Girls from ethnic minority backgrounds

Age range: 10–18

Main theme: Inclusion and gender equality

Description: Programme designed to increase participation of minority girls in sport by adapting club environments, training coaches, and addressing cultural barriers.

Coaching relevance: High – includes coach education and adaptation of practices.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Promotes equality and access
- Builds confidence
- Encourages long-term participation

Evidence/results: EU award winner.

Transferability: High.

Relevance for AWARD: Excellent model for inclusive coaching across cultural barriers.

Website: <https://www.dif.dk>

8.2.20 Positive Coaching Alliance Europe

Country: originally US-based but adapted in several European contexts

Organisation: Positive Coaching Alliance (with European adaptations via clubs and federations)

Target group: Coaches, youth athletes

Age range: 10–18

Main theme: Positive coaching and character development

Description: The Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) promotes a “Double-Goal Coaching” approach, where coaches are trained to pursue both sport performance and personal development. The methodology has been increasingly adopted or adapted in European grassroots sport contexts, particularly through coach education programmes and club-level initiatives.

Coaching relevance: Very high – directly targets coaching behaviour, communication, and motivational climate.

Educational / social / well-being value:

- Builds self-confidence and resilience
- Promotes growth mindset
- Reduces anxiety and fear of failure
- Encourages positive team dynamics

Evidence/results: Widely used internationally with growing adoption in Europe; supported by research on positive youth development and sport psychology.

Transferability: Very high – easily adaptable across sports and grassroots contexts.

Relevance for AWARD: Model for motivational coaching, confidence-building, and positive learning environments, directly supporting AWARD's focus on well-being and athlete development.

Website: <https://positivecoach.org>

8.3. Cross-analysis of the 20 European Good Practices

8.3.1 Overall pattern

Taken together, the 20 practices show a clear European trend: youth sport is increasingly seen not only as a space for performance, but as a setting for holistic development, where coaches influence:

- emotional well-being
- motivation and retention
- inclusion and belonging
- values and life skills
- safeguarding and safe relationships

The strongest practices are those where coaching is not limited to technical instruction, but includes an educational, relational, and protective role.

8.3.2 Main thematic clusters

The 20 practices can be grouped into 4 main clusters.

A. Child-centred and developmental coaching

These practices focus on age-appropriate, positive, and engaging sport experiences.

Examples: iCoachKids, Fair Play Movement, PaddlePWR-GirlPWR

Common feature: The coach is seen as a facilitator of development, not only performance.

B. Mental health, emotional well-being, and safe environments

These practices focus on psychological support, protection, and emotionally safe participation.

Examples: SPIRIT, SAFE, UEFA Child Protection, District Spot

Common feature: The coach is expected to recognise emotional needs, prevent harm, create trust.

C. Inclusion, equality, and participation

These practices address barriers linked to gender, ethnicity, social exclusion, or discrimination.

Examples: A Fairer Coaching, SCORE, DRAGONAS, DIF Girls Programme, RESTART.

Common feature: The coach becomes an active agent of inclusion.

D. Sport for values, identity, and social education

These practices use sport to promote belonging, cultural identity, leadership, and social skills.

Examples: SportMEup, Karate in Europe, New Fivə, Positive Coaching Alliance

Common feature: The coach acts as an educator and role model.

8.3.3 Key coaching principles emerging from the 20 practices

These are the most important principles AWARD can extract.

1. Coaching must be child- and adolescent-centred

The most relevant practices adapt methods, language, expectations, and session structure to the developmental needs of young people.

Implication for AWARD: Coaches should be trained to use age-appropriate communication, goals, and feedback.

2. Coaching is relational, not only technical

Across the strongest practices, the quality of the coach-athlete relationship is central.

This includes:

- empathy
- listening
- trust
- encouragement
- constructive feedback

Implication for AWARD: The project should emphasise interpersonal and relational competences as core coaching skills.

3. Safe environments are a coaching responsibility

Safeguarding is not only an organisational issue. It depends strongly on everyday coach behaviour.

This includes:

- respectful communication
- non-violent discipline
- prevention of humiliation, exclusion, and abuse

Implication for AWARD: Safe sport should be integrated into coach training, not treated as a separate administrative topic.

4. Coaches are key actors for mental well-being

Several practices show that coaches influence anxiety, confidence, self-esteem, motivation, and emotional regulation.

They do this through:

- climate creation
- response to mistakes
- support under pressure
- realistic expectations
- emotional availability

Implication for AWARD: The Digital Coaches Hub should include practical tools on mental health literacy and emotionally supportive coaching.

5. Inclusion requires intentional coaching strategies

Inclusion does not happen automatically. The most promising practices deliberately adapt coaching to support:

- girls
- migrant and refugee youth
- socially vulnerable young people

Implication for AWARD: The project should include specific inclusive coaching practices, not only general statements about equality.

6. Coaches are educators of values and life skills

Many practices go beyond sport skills and intentionally develop:

- respect
- responsibility
- teamwork
- resilience
- self-confidence

Implication for AWARD: Coaching resources should frame these as explicit learning outcomes.

7. Positive motivation and retention depend on coaching climate

Practices like iCoachKids and PaddlePWR show that athlete retention is strongly influenced by whether coaching is:

- enjoyable
- supportive
- autonomy-enhancing
- non-judgmental
- encouraging

Implication for AWARD: The project should include tools on motivation, retention, dropout prevention, and positive feedback.

8. Gender-sensitive coaching matters

A recurring pattern is that girls' participation improves when coaches:

- create safe spaces
- use inclusive communication
- challenge stereotypes
- provide role models
- respond to confidence gaps and social barriers

Implication for AWARD: Gender-sensitive coaching should be a dedicated component.

9. Community and belonging strengthen youth participation

The most socially effective practices create a sense of belonging around sport. This often involves:

- peer support
- team identity
- family/community links
- culturally sensitive spaces

Implication for AWARD: Coaching should be connected to wider social context.

10. Practical tools work better than abstract principles

The strongest practices provide:

- toolkits
- e-learning
- session guidelines
- scenarios
- case studies
- reflection exercises

Implication for AWARD: The AWARD outputs should be practical, short, usable, and scenario-based.

8.3.4 Common success factors across the practices

Several factors appear repeatedly in the best examples.

Strong success factors

- clear educational philosophy
- structured coach guidance
- focus on lived experience of youth athletes
- inclusion of psychosocial dimensions
- safe and respectful environments
- adaptability to grassroots settings
- easy-to-use tools and resources
- balance between theory and practical application

These are likely the features that make a practice transferable and sustainable.

8.3.5 Common weaknesses or limits found in the sample

Not all practices are equally strong in the same way. Some common weaknesses also emerge.

A. Weak explicit description of coaching methods: Some inclusion projects are valuable socially, but do not clearly explain what coaches actually do differently.

B. Limited evidence of impact: Some initiatives are recognised publicly, but do not provide strong measurable outcome data.

C. Too much focus on participation, too little on pedagogy: A few programmes promote access to sport, but give less attention to the quality of the coaching process.

D. Uneven age specificity: Some practices are youth-oriented, but not always clearly tailored to different developmental stages within 6–18.

8.3.6 Main gaps in the European landscape

Gap 1. Few integrated models combine coaching, well-being, inclusion, and education

Many practices are strong in one dimension, but fewer combine all three in a coherent framework.

Gap 2. Limited practical tools for everyday coaching behaviour

There are policies and principles, but fewer very practical resources for session-level use.

Gap 3. Mental health support is still underdeveloped in coach training

There is growing attention, but this area remains less developed than safeguarding or inclusion.

Gap 4. Few tools are designed directly from youth athletes' perspectives

Many programmes target coaches, but fewer are built explicitly from athlete voice and lived experience.

Gap 5. More evidence is needed on long-term outcomes

Retention, well-being, confidence, and social development are often mentioned, but not always systematically measured.

8.3.7 What this means for AWARD

Based on the 20 practices, AWARD can position itself strongly by developing a model that combines:

- child- and youth-centred coaching
- mental well-being support
- inclusive and gender-sensitive practice
- values and life skills education
- safe and ethical coach-athlete relationships
- practical digital tools for coaches

AWARD can be innovative by integrating them into one applied coaching framework.

8.3.8 Suggested 8 core pillars for AWARD

1. Positive and child-centred coaching
2. Safe sport and safeguarding
3. Mental health and emotional well-being
4. Inclusion and diversity in coaching
5. Gender-sensitive coaching
6. Communication and coach-athlete relationships
7. Values, life skills, and holistic development
8. Motivation, confidence, and retention in youth sport

9. Conclusions

The combined analysis of the needs assessment data and the mapping of 20 European good practices provides a comprehensive and coherent picture of the current state and evolution of youth sport coaching

across Europe. The findings from both strands of research strongly converge, highlighting a clear and ongoing transition from traditional performance-oriented coaching models towards more holistic, athlete-centred approaches.

Across all data sources – coaches, youth athletes, experts, and European practices – there is a consistent recognition that coaching is no longer limited to technical instruction. Instead, it is increasingly understood as a multidimensional role that encompasses educational, social, and psychological responsibilities. Coaches are expected to act not only as trainers, but also as educators, mentors, and facilitators of young people's overall development.

The survey data clearly confirm this shift. Coaches report that their main challenges are predominantly psychosocial rather than technical, with motivation and engagement (15.28%), discipline and behaviour (12.79%), and confidence and self-esteem (12.26%) representing the most significant areas of difficulty. Similarly, youth athletes identify their primary needs in terms of emotional and relational support, particularly after mistakes or defeats (20.62%), in moments of low motivation (17.52%), and in the development of self-confidence (14.95%). Experts further reinforce this perspective by highlighting psychological challenges such as anxiety, burnout, and performance pressure as the most pressing issues in youth sport (29.6%).

These converging findings underline a fundamental transformation: youth sport is increasingly shaped by psychological and relational dynamics, which require new competences and approaches from coaches. However, the research also reveals a persistent and critical gap between the needs of athletes and the skills currently available at the level of coaches. While athletes expect empathy, encouragement, individualized feedback, and effective communication, coaches report insufficient training in precisely these areas, alongside a strong demand for practical, applicable tools.

The analysis of European good practices further supports these conclusions. The most effective initiatives consistently adopt child- and youth-centred methodologies, prioritising the developmental needs, interests, and well-being of young people. They promote safe, inclusive, and supportive environments, where trust, respect, and positive relationships are central. In addition, they integrate psychosocial dimensions such as emotional regulation, motivation, and mental health, and intentionally foster values-based learning, including teamwork, responsibility, and resilience.

At the same time, both the survey data and the mapping of practices highlight several important structural gaps. One of the most significant is the lack of integrated frameworks that combine well-being, inclusion, education, and performance within a coherent coaching model. While many initiatives successfully address individual aspects – such as safeguarding, inclusion, or mental health – fewer provide comprehensive approaches that can be easily implemented in everyday coaching practice.

Another critical gap concerns the availability of practical tools. Coaches consistently express a preference for short, applied learning formats, such as videos (23.85%) and practical templates (22.69%), and emphasise the need for “quick tips” and ready-to-use resources. This aligns with the findings from good practices, which indicate that the most effective initiatives are those that provide concrete, user-friendly tools rather than abstract principles. The lack of such tools currently limits the ability of coaches to translate knowledge into action.

Mental health support emerges as a further area requiring attention. Although increasingly recognised as essential, it remains unevenly developed both in coaching education and in existing practices. This is

particularly relevant given that athletes identify fear of mistakes (23.3%) and performance pressure (21.7%) as their main sources of stress, while experts highlight burnout and anxiety as key risks.

The issue of mistakes represents a particularly important insight emerging from the integrated analysis. For athletes, mistakes are a primary source of stress and are often associated with fear and negative evaluation. For coaches, they represent a challenge in management and communication. For experts, they are linked to broader risks such as burnout and dropout. This indicates the need for a cultural shift towards reframing mistakes as a natural and constructive part of the learning process.

Another key challenge identified concerns the limited availability of systematic evidence on long-term impact. While many practices report positive outcomes, there is often insufficient data on sustained effects related to athlete retention, well-being, and personal development. This highlights the importance of strengthening monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in future initiatives.

Taken together, these findings strongly confirm the relevance and strategic positioning of the AWARD project. By building on existing good practices while directly addressing identified gaps, AWARD is well positioned to contribute to the development of an innovative and integrated coaching framework. In particular, the project responds to the need for:

- a holistic approach to coaching that combines physical, psychological, and social dimensions;
- practical, accessible, and evidence-based tools that support coaches in real-life situations;
- flexible and engaging learning formats aligned with coaches' preferences and time constraints;
- a stronger focus on mental health, emotional support, and positive coach-athlete relationships.

The development of the Digital Coaches Hub represents a key innovation in this context. By providing personalised learning pathways, practical resources, and real-time support, the Hub has the potential to bridge the gap between theory and practice, enabling coaches to apply new approaches effectively in their daily work.

Ultimately, the integrated results of this analysis reinforce a central conclusion: the quality of youth sport experiences depends largely on the competences, awareness, and support available to coaches. Investing in their development is therefore essential not only for improving performance, but also for ensuring that sport becomes a positive, inclusive, and empowering environment for all young people.

In this perspective, the AWARD project contributes to a broader transformation of youth sport systems, placing coaches at the centre of development policies and equipping them with the tools and knowledge needed to support the next generation of athletes in a holistic and sustainable way.

10. Annexes

10.1 Annex 1 – AWARD Survey for Coaches

This research is conducted by the AWARD project consortium, involving partner organisations from Romania, Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Bosnia and Herzegovina, working together to improve coaching practices and support the holistic development of youth athletes.

The AWARD project is a European initiative funded by the Erasmus+ Sport programme of the European Union. The project aims to support coaches working with youth athletes by developing innovative learning resources and a Digital Coaches Hub that will provide practical tools, training modules and guidance for fostering young athletes' physical, mental and personal development.

As part of the project, we are carrying out a needs assessment study to better understand the challenges faced by coaches and to identify the knowledge, skills and tools that would help them support young athletes more effectively. The results of this research will contribute to the development of training programmes and digital resources tailored to the real needs of coaches.

This survey is addressed to coaches working with young athletes in organised sport. Your experience and perspective are extremely valuable for ensuring that the AWARD project develops relevant and practical support materials.

Participation in this survey is voluntary and all responses will be anonymous. The information collected will be used only for research purposes within the AWARD project and will be analysed in aggregated form.

The survey takes approximately 10 minutes to complete. Thank you very much for contributing to this research and helping us improve support for coaches and young athletes.

Consent statement

By proceeding with this questionnaire, you confirm that:

- you have read and understood the information above;
- you voluntarily agree to participate in this research;
- you understand that your responses will be used only for research purposes within the AWARD project and analysed anonymously.

☐ I agree to participate in this survey.

Section 1 — Profile

1. Country
2. Gender
3. Sport type: (team / individual / mixed) + optional sport name
4. Coaching role: (head coach / assistant / trainer / mentor / other)
5. Years of coaching experience: (0–2 / 3–5 / 6–10 / 10+)
6. Main age group coached: (6–10 / 11–14 / 15–18 / mixed)
7. Typical number of athletes you coach per season: (1–10 / 11–20 / 21–30 / 30+)

Section 2 — Current challenges (select up to 5)

What are your biggest challenges when coaching youth athletes? (choose up to 5)

- motivation & engagement
- performance pressure/anxiety
- discipline & behaviour
- confidence/self-esteem
- team dynamics/conflicts
- communication with parents
- injuries and recovery mindset
- inclusion (gender, disability, background)
- burnout/dropout prevention
- mental health support and referral
- balancing sport and school
- ethical/safeguarding issues
- other (open)

Section 3 — Importance (Likert 1–5)

- **How important is training on this topic?** (1 low – 5 very high)

Topics:

8. Effective communication & feedback
9. Motivation and goal-setting
10. Mental toughness/resilience
11. Stress & performance pressure
12. Emotional intelligence
13. Confidence/self-esteem
14. Conflict resolution & team dynamics
15. Inclusion and positive team culture
16. Safeguarding & ethical conduct
17. Identifying talent and supporting transitions
18. Supporting athletes' wellbeing and mental health (boundaries + referral)

Section 4 — Current practices (multiple choice + open)

19. Which practices do you already use regularly? (tick all)

- reflective conversations with athletes
- structured goal-setting
- team-building activities
- mindfulness/breathing exercises
- confidence routines (positive reinforcement)
- parent meetings/briefings
- peer mentoring among athletes
- monitoring workload & wellbeing
- inclusion actions (adapted activities)
- safeguarding protocols
- other (open, few words)

20. What works best in your context? (open, 2–4 lines)

Section 5 — Needs & gaps

21. What is most missing today in coach education for youth development in your country? (open)

22. If you could receive training on 3 topics only, which would they be? (pick 3)

- Effective communication & feedback
- Motivation and goal-setting
- Mental toughness/resilience
- Stress & performance pressure
- Emotional intelligence
- Confidence/self-esteem
- Conflict resolution & team dynamics
- Inclusion and positive team culture
- Safeguarding & ethical conduct
- Identifying talent and supporting transitions
- Supporting athletes' wellbeing and mental health

Section 6 — Digital Hub requirements

23. Which learning formats do you prefer? (pick up to 3)
- short videos (3–7 min)
 - PowerPoint + voiceover
 - interactive quizzes
 - practical exercises/templates
 - case studies
 - downloadable guides/checklists
 - live webinars
 - peer forum/community
 - other
24. Preferred access:
- mobile first / desktop / both
25. Time you can dedicate weekly:
- <30 min / 30–60 min / 1–2h / 2h+
26. Features that would help you most (pick up to 5):
- personalised learning pathway
 - self-assessment tests (pre/post)
 - “toolbox” (session plans, checklists)
 - case study library
 - progress tracking and badges
 - quick tips for real situations
 - resources for parent communication
 - referral guidance (when/where to send athlete for help)
 - multilingual content
 - accessibility features
27. Any other requirement or suggestion for the Hub? (open)

10.2 Annex 2 – AWARD Survey for Youth Athletes

1. Age group: (6–10 / 11–14 / 15–18)
2. Sport type: team / individual / both
3. How many years have you practiced this sport? (0–1 / 2–3 / 4–6 / 7+)

Wellbeing & experience (Likert 1–5)

4. I feel supported by my coach.
5. I can talk to my coach when I feel stressed.
6. I feel pressure about performance/results.
7. I enjoy training most of the time.
8. I worry about making mistakes.
9. My team/training environment feels inclusive and respectful.

What you need (pick up to 3)

10. What kind of help would you like from coaches? (pick up to 3)

- more encouragement and confidence building
- better communication and listening
- help managing stress/pressure
- support after mistakes or losses
- fair treatment and inclusion
- help balancing school and sport
- team conflict support
- motivation when I feel low
- other (open)

11. What makes you feel most stressed in sport? (open)

12. One thing coaches should do more often is... (open)

10.3 Annex 2.1 – Parental consent form

This research is conducted by the AWARD project consortium, involving partner organisations from Romania, Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Bosnia and Herzegovina, working together to improve coaching practices and support the holistic development of youth athletes.

The AWARD project is a European initiative funded by the Erasmus+ Sport programme of the European Union. The project aims to improve the support that coaches provide to young athletes by developing training resources and a Digital Coaches Hub with practical tools for coaches. To design these resources, we want to better understand the experiences, challenges and needs of young athletes in sport. Your opinions will help us identify how coaches can better support athletes' wellbeing, motivation and positive sporting experiences.

This questionnaire is intended for young athletes who participate in organised sport.

Your participation is voluntary, and the survey is anonymous. This means that your answers cannot be linked to you personally. The information collected will be used only for research purposes within the AWARD project and will be analysed together with answers from other participants.

The questionnaire takes about 5 minutes to complete.

There are no right or wrong answers – we are simply interested in your experiences and opinions.

Thank you for helping us improve the sport environment for young athletes.

Please read through the following statements and acknowledge your understanding of each, by placing a tick in the brackets.

I have read and understand the information provided regarding the nature of the study ()

I am aware of the what my child's participation will involve if he or she agrees ()

I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and I can withdraw my child from the study at any time (up to two weeks following data collection) without providing a reason ()

My child's anonymity will be respected at all times ()

I am responsible for the child and consent for them to take part in this research ()

All of my questions about my child's participation in the study have been answered satisfactorily ()

I understand that the information provided may be used for research papers, conferences and teaching, but my child will not be identifiable individually ()

I have read and understood the above, and give my child's consent to participate:

Parent signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher signature: _____ Date: _____

10.3 Annex 3 – AWARD Survey for Youth Sport Experts

This research is conducted by the AWARD project consortium, involving partner organisations from Romania, Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Bosnia and Herzegovina, working together to improve coaching practices and support the holistic development of youth athletes.

The AWARD project is a European initiative funded by the Erasmus+ Sport programme of the European Union. The project focuses on strengthening the capacity of coaches who work with youth athletes by developing innovative training resources and a Digital Coaches Hub that will support coaches in fostering young athletes' physical, psychological and personal development.

As part of the project, we are conducting a needs assessment study aimed at identifying the main challenges faced by youth athletes and the skills, knowledge and tools that coaches need in order to better support young people in sport.

This consultation seeks input from professionals and experts with experience in fields such as youth sport, sports psychology, coaching education, safeguarding, youth development or related areas. Your expertise will help ensure that the project's training programmes and digital resources are evidence-based, relevant and effective.

Your responses will contribute to the development of the AWARD Digital Coaches Hub and training modules that will be made available to coaches across Europe.

Participation is voluntary and all responses will be anonymous. The information collected will be analysed in aggregated form for research purposes within the project.

Completing the questionnaire will take approximately 15 minutes. You can also write very short answers.

We sincerely appreciate your time and valuable contribution to this research.

Consent statement

By proceeding with this questionnaire, you confirm that:

- you have read and understood the information above;
- you voluntarily agree to participate in this research;
- you understand that your responses will be used only for research purposes within the AWARD project and analysed anonymously.

☐ I agree to participate in this survey.

Role/field of expertise: (open)

1. In your view, what are the top 3 challenges youth athletes face today (mental, social, physical)
2. What gaps do you see in coaches' skills or training related to youth wellbeing and character development?

3. Which topics should be *mandatory* in a coach training programme for youth development?
4. What are “red flags” coaches should recognise and how should they respond?
5. What practical tools would help coaches most?
6. For a digital hub, what formats/features increase engagement and learning transfer?



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