

Getting it Right for Every Child  
in Scottish Football:

# Young players have their say

A Children's Parliament report for  
The Scottish Football Association  
Summary Report  
June 2023

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Children's  
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# INTRODUCTION

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

The Scottish Football Association (Scottish FA) is the governing body for Scottish football. To help make sure every young player is happy (we can also think about this as wellbeing), safe and is able to participate (we can also think about this as having your say), the Scottish FA has a five-year strategy *Getting it Right for Every Child in Scottish Football (2019-2023)*. The Scottish FA state: This is a strategy for all of Scottish football. It is everyone's responsibility to protect the children and young people who play our national sport.

To find out how young players feel about the game the Scottish FA asked Children's Parliament to meet with young players aged 8 to 18, and then to create a national survey for them.

You can read the **full report** to find out about the detail of what young players said. This is a shorter summary report of the key things we learned.

We have shared some of the things young players have said by using quotes in this report; there are lots more in the full report that really help adults understand what young players want to say.

We end this summary report with a set of challenge questions that Scottish football needs to consider to make sure every young player is happy, safe and fully participating (having their say) when they play the game.

The Scottish FA and Children's Parliament would like to thank all the adults that helped make the consultation possible, and of course all the young players who shared their experiences and opinions.



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

# WHO TOOK PART

## Part 1: going out to clubs and having conversations with young players

**10** clubs involved

**102** young players in small group conversations, of which:

**38** children aged 8 to 11

**51** children and young people aged 12-to-15

**13** young people aged 16 to 18

**69** boys/young men

**33** girls/young women

## Part 2: a national survey

A total of **1,565** young players took the survey, of which:

**477** were girls/young women

**1,058** were boys/young men

**30** preferred not to say

**8-11-year olds**  
total respondents:

**763**

**12-15-year olds**  
total respondents:

**647**

**16-18-year olds**  
total respondents:

**155**

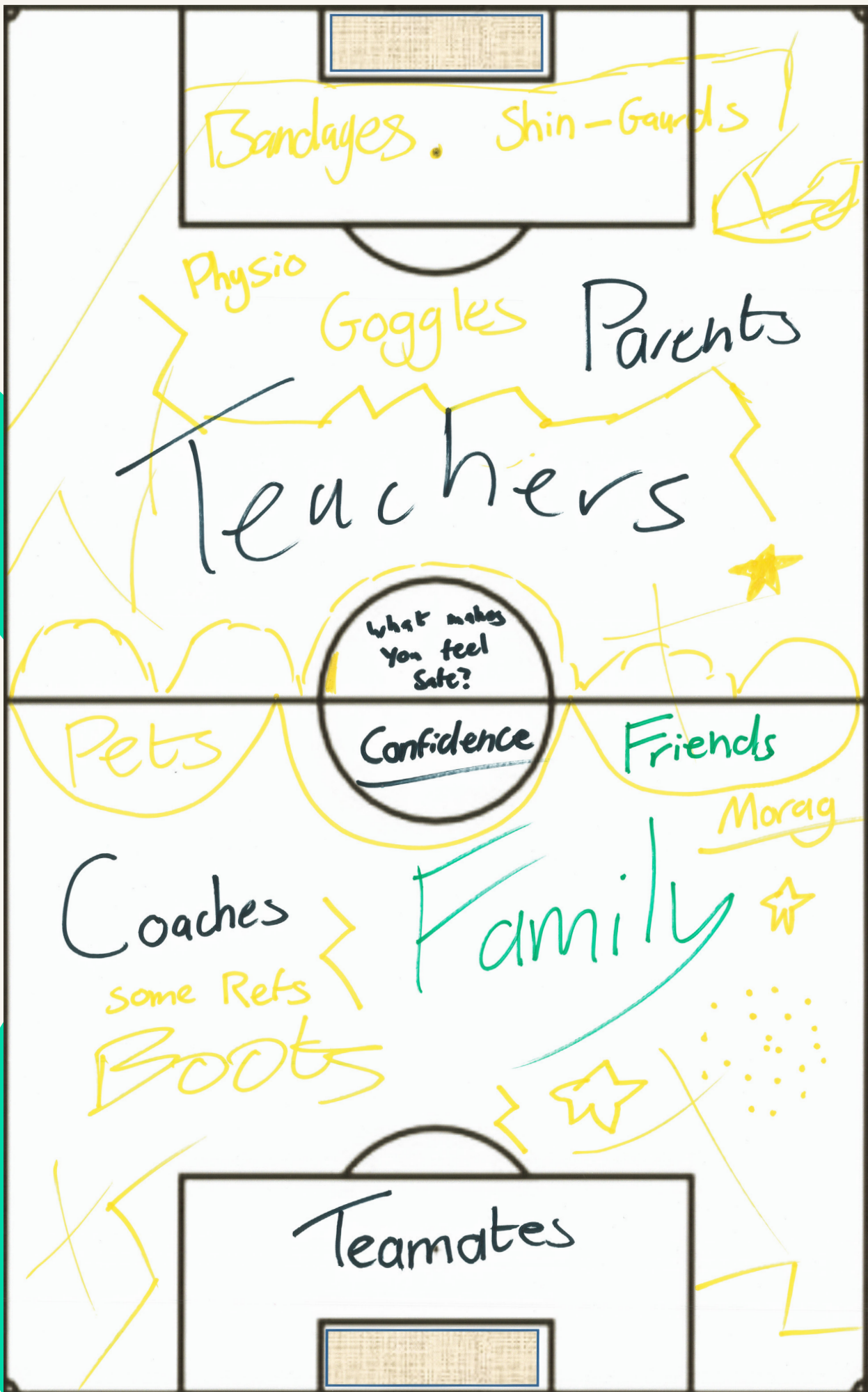


Image: What makes you feel safe while playing football? (2023)

# WHAT WE LEARNED

Young players play the game in lots of different places: local/grassroots football, in school PE and school teams, and professional clubs or academies. Of course children and young people also play socially with friends, but this consultation was about the experiences of young players who play in organised settings like clubs or teams.

## SAFETY

This is what we learned from our visits to clubs and from the national survey on the theme of safety.

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

(16-18/boy/group session)

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

(16-18/girl/survey)

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

(8-11/boy/group session)

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

(16-18/boy/group session)

Almost all young players feel safe when they play and train. For young players, feeling and being safe comes with well-maintained pitches and facilities, proper clothing and protective gear like gloves and shin guards.

Feeling and being safe is also about people. Young players say that trusted adults in the game include coaches, referees, volunteers, parents, medical and physio teams who look after them. Feelings of safety are also built, young players tell us, on being and feeling included.

There are times when young players feel vulnerable. Some adults, especially parents from an opposing team, can be abusive during the heat of a game. This can feel frightening.

One of the biggest fears young players have is being injured during training or a game, better support is needed to support a player with an injury.

Young players want and need the referee to be fair, consistent and confident in their role. They also recognise how difficult the job is, especially when having to deal with adults on the touchline who are shouting or being aggressive.

Young players need to know that there are adults they can talk to and that everyone will be respectful and calm.

Young players say that coaches and adults across the game have a role in keeping young players safe from bullying, sexism, racism and any discriminatory behaviour.

## HAPPINESS AND WELLBEING

This is what we learned from our visits to clubs and from the national survey on the theme of happiness and wellbeing.

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

(8-11/boy/survey)

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

(8-11/boy/survey)

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

(12-15/girl/survey)

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

(16-18/boy/group session)

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

(8-11/boy/group session)

Young players tell us that playing the game is good for their physical and mental health and wellbeing. Having fun with friends and feeling part of a team is important. They feel fitter and healthier. Training and playing lifts their spirits and makes them happy.

Young players say that kindness and fairness is important to them. There is a need for everyone in the game to know that they should not be mean or angry. Everyone should be encouraging, helpful and careful with other people. Fairness means no favouritism and kindness is shown with praise and encouragement.

Young players know that football depends on the support of adults. Parents and carers support their child's involvement and other adults, many in volunteer roles, make the game possible. Almost all young players feel that adults at their club look after them, and that adults at their club are encouraging.

Young players think the role of the coach is really important. A kind coach who is empathetic and who listens makes a difference. Young players tell us that positive feedback inspires them, that being a better player comes from being encouraged, not being criticised.

Young players can be worried about things: from letting people down, to worries about being fit or getting injured, to concerns about not being good enough to be a professional. Some young players struggle to balance academic and football commitments.

When they have a worry, young players are most likely to speak to their coach, an adult at home or a friend. But sometimes sharing a worry is difficult. Young players can feel embarrassed, they worry that game time might be affected, or that they might be judged. They worry about getting someone else into trouble. These pressures and worries can be really strong for young players who want to play professionally.

Young players say that their wellbeing and happiness is about having game time and feeling supported by family. There also needs to be less pressure on simply winning.

## PARTICIPATION/HAVING OUR SAY

This is what we learned from our visits to clubs and from the national survey on the theme of participation and having our say.

Doesn't matter how bad or good the player is!! Everyone in the team should get a game. #Letthemplay .  
(12-15/boy/survey)

Grown-ups and some kids are too serious. I just want to play and get a bit better. Coaches always pay attention to the players they think will play for the senior club. I just want to play and have fun.  
(8-11/boy/survey)

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

As a girl playing in what is seen as a boys sport it can be really hard and lots of sexism still exists especially from parents. I play at academy level for my club and I am good but never get treated the same when playing with the boys. I have to fight so much harder for it.  
(12-15/girl/survey)

A majority of young players feel that adults at their club ask their opinion, or allow them to have their say when training or playing. But some also say that sometimes adults just expect young players to turn up and follow instructions; that the adults/coach knows best.

Young players say good communication from the coach and lots of team talks are important. Young players want to influence what they do in training, they want to talk about how they feel being part of the game, and value times where the players can get together to do social and fun activities. Quieter players need encouragement to have their say.

Football is a competitive sport. Some young players say their club is a place that puts winning ahead of taking part. Others say their club wants everyone to have a game, and everyone is valued equally, win or lose. Where there is too much pressure to win, young players have less fun.

Girls and young women in the game say they often experience sexism, bullying and exclusion. Boys and young men sometimes behave in unacceptable ways. Adults let this happen.

Young players with disabilities say they feel welcome and can participate in some settings. But this is not true across the game. Young players say they need to see greater awareness and efforts to support them taking part.

Efforts are made across the game to tackle racism, but young players continue to experience and worry about racism, this impacts on their participation and enjoyment of the game.

Most young players in the game will live in or near towns or cities, but many do not. Rural communities can be poorly served by sports facilities and there can be fewer opportunities to play team sports.

In some communities a lack of facilities, limited access to facilities, and increasing costs are a barrier to participation.

Young players talked about strict application of age categories and said they can be a barrier to participation, they say there needs to be some changes here.



## Celebrating as a Family

Seeing something you worked on in training work on the pitch

Making a big impacting play

Shouting or motivating even as a job

Playing well as a team



# CHALLENGES

**These are the things the Scottish FA and everyone involved in football need to think about.** This is a summary, there is more detail in the full report.

How can we help children to learn, experience and claim their rights as young football players?

What more can be done to support parents, coaches, referees and other adults involved in football to understand, promote and uphold children's rights for young players?

## SAFETY

- How do we ensure that every young player can access the clothing and gear they need to play safely?
- Are we adequately focused on injury prevention and treatment across all levels of the game?
- What is the balance between taking part, being included, having fun and winning across a competitive team sport?
- What support, resource or new approaches do we need to manage and change problematic adult behaviour on the touchline?
- If we want young players to share worries or concerns, are there systems and approaches in place that clubs can see and learn from?
- How do we strengthen our relationship with parents and carers so that when a child shares a concern with them, they know who to come to and can be assured of our attention?



## HAPPINESS AND WELLBEING

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

## PARTICIPATION AND HAVING OUR SAY

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

# ABOUT THE SCOTTISH FA WELLBEING AND PROTECTION TEAM

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

You can find out more about the Department and work on the website [scottishfa.co.uk/scottish-fa/wellbeing-protection/wellbeing-and-protection-resources/](https://scottishfa.co.uk/scottish-fa/wellbeing-protection/wellbeing-and-protection-resources/)

## ABOUT CHILDREN'S PARLIAMENT

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

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

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

