

Children and young people's worries in sport

Participation Unit; June 2015

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The Football Association (FA) nominated the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) through its Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) to be the recipient of the UEFA Children's Foundation charity award of 1 million Euros over three years.

This award will enable the NSPCC to extend our reach through a range of universal national services, which focus on protecting children and young people and preventing abuse, further into the sport sector, within football in particular.

To enable these services to be fit for purpose, NSPCC will be hosting consultations with young people over the course of the project. This will ensure that the right and relevant information is out there to support young people involved in sport.

For this round of consultations, we involved 100 young people aged between 9 and 20 from England and Scotland. 80 respondents were male and 20 were female.

View from NSPCC Support in Sport advisory group

A young person's advisory group has been created to help shape the research. Some of the young people have read the report, and helped us to shape the recommendations.

This was a very insightful report, which was a good and easy read. I really like the lay out of the results, it was easy for a visual learner to read due to the tables and speech bubbles used. The results were also very interesting.
Shannon, aged 20

I did find it really interesting and 'scary' in places. The only thing I noticed is that its aim is to cover football in particular and children taking part in football but it only 'listens' to children who are actually laying football and not the children who are involved in refereeing (referees start at age 14). Lots of referees are children and their voices should be heard also
Giorgio, aged 16

Section One: Young people's worries in sport

ChildLine and NSPCC are aware of the wider issues in sport for young people through the Child Protection in Sport Unit and information gathered from our helplines.

The questions explored with young people were:

- What do you think worries children involved in sport have?
- What do you think are the most common worries children and young people have?
- What do you think are the most important worries children and young people have?
- What would be your top tips to someone with these kinds of worries?

"What do you think worries children involved in sport?"

The top 10 issues young people noted, without any prompts, were:

Top worries	Percentage
Injuries, tackles	54
Bullying	39
Pressure	33
Mistakes	28
Abuse	27
Racism	25
Sexism and gender issues	20
Verbal abuse, shouting	19
Losing	17
Not good enough	12

Young people were presented with a list of the issues relating to sport that the NSPCC and ChildLine receive contacts about:

- Achieving in sport without enjoying it
- Awareness of support through club
- Balancing sport and education
- Balancing sport and social life
- Body image
- Bullying
- Going away on trips or playing abroad
- Pressure from coaches
- Pressure from parents/carers
- Pressure to perform

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There are some parallels with what is already known about young people's worries – for example, bullying and pressures around performing.

However, for these young people, the physical nature of sport is clearly worrying for them. **More than 1 in 2 respondents saw injuries as an issue.** This is particularly true of the young people from professional teams, as this could spell the end of their career.



Abuse was another issue that appeared on many lists. Although many did not choose to tell us how they defined abuse in their responses, around **one fifth of young people said verbal abuse was something which might be troubling.** This has been a real area of interest for sporting bodies, with the English FA's [Respect](#) work, for example, focusing on the area of touchline verbal abuse in its resources.



Pressure and mistakes were often cited as common worries, sometimes in relation to verbal abuse. But it was clear that for all young people involved in the consultation, their performance was very important to them. **1 in 10 young people said being 'not good enough'** was a worry in its own right, in addition to the other pressures they face.

Missing a goal

Male aged 12

Not being good enough to play

Male aged 17

Being released, dropped from the squad, poor performances,

Male aged 13

“What do you think are the most common worries children and young people have?”

These young people told us that the most common of these worries were:

Overall Ranking	Most common worries
1	Bullying
2	Pressure to perform
3	Pressure from parents/carers
4	Pressure from coaches
5	Balancing sport and education
6	Body image
7	Balancing sport and social life
8	Achieving in sport without enjoying it
9	Going away on trips or playing abroad
10	Awareness of support through club

46% of responses ranked bullying as their second most common worry. It was by far the most consistent ranking from the groups, which is why it claimed top spot.

Many of their explanations as to why they ranked this so highly was related to the ability of a player. They thought people could be targeted by bullies when playing sport if they're a better performer, or if they are not good enough. They also thought that bullying was often disguised as team banter that went too far.

People are jealous of you

Female aged 10

It's a big problem if you don't do well

Male aged 10

Its not bullying
It's banter

Male aged 12

Pressure to perform was voted as the most common worry by 1 in 3 young people. Some of the themes that reoccurred again and again in responses were their desire to win, wanting to be their best and how other people's expectations impacted on them – those of the family, coaches, team mates and fans.

The pressure from fans to perform and to be judged
Female aged 19

Team mates want you win
Male aged 12

Disappointing team mates
Male aged 10

It was then not surprising that pressure from family and coaches then followed as third and fourth in the ranking. For family members, many of the young people said that what parents maybe intended as encouragement became pressure and expectation in young people's eyes. Young people saw coaches expecting too much from you was what caused worry for some.

This is common as lots of parents want their children to do well so much they threatened them to do well
Female aged 10

Some parents put real pressure on their boys because they want them to be the best
Male aged 14

They [coaches] can make you try so hard you don't enjoy it
Female aged 10

“What do you think are the most important worries children and young people have?”

Young people were asked to reflect on what they thought the most important issues were – the ones that ChildLine and NSPCC should put more emphasis on, the ones they felt most strongly about.

Overall Ranking	Most important worries
1	Pressure to perform
2	Balancing sport and education
3	Bullying
4	Pressure from coaches
5	Balancing sport and social life
6	Pressure from parents/carers
7	Achieving in sport without enjoying it
8	Body image
9	Awareness of support through club
10	Going away on trips or playing abroad

One in three young people ranked pressure to perform as the most important worry, correlating with their previous responses to what they thought the most common pressures were.

Bullying was still ranked highly by many young people. There was an acknowledgement that bullying should not be happening in team sports, and that people should know where to go for help – meaning that it gained a lower ranking by some young people.

Checking that you're not getting bullied

Male aged 15

Your team mates shouldn't bully you

Male aged 15

It is important to have support if being bullied

Male aged 16

Balancing sport and education moved up the table, with **43% of young people scoring balancing sport and education as their first or second most important worry**. The consultation was held during the main exam period in May, so it is likely that this was a very real concern for young people at that time. Some of the most interesting responses came from the young people at the professional club – they recognised they would need a good education should playing football professionally not work out.

Lot of pressure on education (exams) - usually put before sport

Female aged 16

If football fails you need a good education to get a job

Male aged 10

In life you'll need a plan B if sports doesn't work for you

Male aged 13

At the other end of the table, the two worries young people ranked least important and least common remained the same.

Just under 1 in 3 young people ranked awareness of support at the club as ninth or tenth, so amongst the least important worries. Many of them said you should already know about support at the club, so not being aware of it should not be an issue.

If there is support, you should already know about it

Male aged 15

The club provides that

Male aged 13

Club is very open and I know where to go

Male aged 12

1 in 3 young people ranked awareness of support at the club as the least important of the options given. From the responses given, many enjoyed going away with their teams, and were quite dismissive that young people might see this as a worry.

It doesn't bother most people

Male aged 14

It's because I really enjoy trips

Male aged 13

It's because I really enjoy trips

Male aged 15

"What would be your top tips to someone with these kinds of worries?"

The young people came up with a number of really great tips. The key themes and examples of their tips are below.

Worry	Key themes of advice	Quotes from young people
Achieving in sport without enjoying it	<i>Stay happy and enjoy things</i>	Do what makes you happy Male aged 14
		Enjoyment is first Male aged 15
Awareness of support through club	<i>Find out more</i>	Speak to someone to find out Male aged 17
		Numbers and people to contact

		Male aged 16
Balancing sport and education	<i>Education is priority; balance is key</i>	Ensure education is done first Female aged 20 Parents and coaches should help you balance your time Male aged 16 Education is very important - enjoy it! Male aged 15
Balancing sport and social life	<i>Make sure to have a break</i>	Everything is not all about football Male aged 12 Seeing family and friends is the most important thing in life Male aged 15 Talk to someone about making time for both e.g. cutting down on how much you do Male aged 17
Body image	<i>Feel comfortable in your own skin</i>	Don't worry - you are who you are Female aged 20 Don't care, no one is perfect Female aged 19 You are your person Female aged 18
Bullying	<i>Tell a trusted adult</i>	If you are being bullied in sport speak to a coach, parent or welfare officer Male aged 17 Tell someone that can help you Male aged 12 Have approachable people at the club Male aged 13
Going away on trips or playing abroad	<i>Good to push yourself</i>	Try to get out of your comfort zone Male aged 17 Facetime, keep in contact Male aged 14 Enjoy! Male aged 15
Pressure from coaches	<i>Be honest with your coach</i>	The coaches are there to get the best out of you, but if they push you <u>too</u> hard tell them Male aged 17 Have a meeting to encourage you

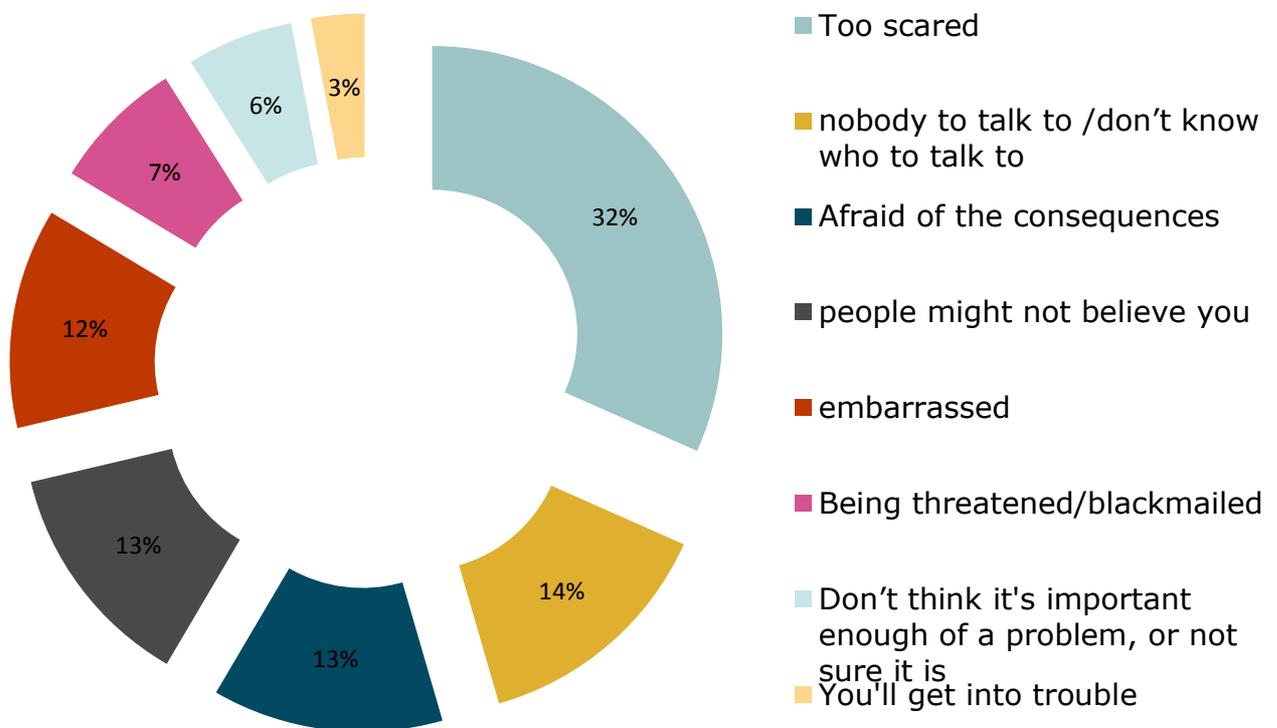
		more Male aged 14
		Talk to welfare officer Male aged 14
Pressure from parents/carers	<i>Parents/carers should encourage, not pressure</i>	Its our career, not yours Male aged 13
		Tell them if the pressure is too much and they may put less pressure on you Male aged 17
		Tell parents/carers how you feel about playing and if you don't enjoy playing you should tell them Male aged 17
Pressure to perform	<i>Do your best and relax</i>	Perform to your best ability and don't worry Female aged 19
		Sometimes you perform badly and sometimes you perform well. Take the bad experiences and they can motivate you. Male aged 17
		Try not to expect so much every game, and encourage Male aged 12

Section Two: Barriers to reporting problems

After exploring the worries that young people might have, young people were then asked to think what might stop young people from seeking help.

The main themes which appeared in their responses are shown in the chart below.

Why might young people not report worries they have?



Being scared was clearly the reason most young people thought was a barrier to telling. Most of the young people did not explore what being too scared meant - but for some, it was fear of reporting itself.

Being scared and afraid was a feeling that a lot of young people noted in their responses around other specific worries; most notably with **over one tenth attributing worries not being reported because of fear of consequences**, and seven young people specifically referring to **being threatened**.

Someone saying
'if you report me
I'll beat you up'

Male aged 10

Scared of
reporting it, not
knowing what
would happen
afterwards

Male aged 16

Worried that
bullies will treat
them worse for
reporting them

Female aged 10

Fear of the
outcome

Female aged 18

Scared or fear of
being hunted
down

Male aged 12

Afraid of giving
up football
altogether

Male aged 12

Not being believed was also a common reason young people gave. Taking into consideration the amount of fear that young people thought they'd overcome to tell in the first place, it was quite telling that even after plucking up the courage to tell, someone might still not be taken seriously

Think that
nothing will
happen about it

Male aged 12

People might not
believe you

Male aged 14

Worried that
people will think
you are stupid

Female aged 10

An interesting response drawn out was that **14% of young people think things would not be reported because young people would not know who to tell**. After many of them said that you should know who can support you in your club, this was quite a revelation.

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Maybe they don't know the person to go to

Male aged 15

Not having anyone to talk to

Male aged 12

Having someone to tell was something that would maybe make it easier for young person to report things. What is evident from this exercise was that those people also needed to be more prominent to young people as somewhere to seek help – something which the final activity of the consultation explored more.

Section Three: Welfare officers and turning to someone for help

There are structures that many clubs have to give young people help and advice, but more often than not, this support is not well known to the young people themselves. It was important to explore in the context of the consultation what support young people knew they had from the club, and what sort of person they would seek help from. The focus was on the position of the welfare officer.

What is a welfare officer?

Welfare Officers have two key roles in sporting organisations:

1. Be informed and aware of the league or club's responsibilities when running activities for children and young people.
2. Helping league and club personnel understand their 'duty of care' towards children and young people. Duty of Care is a moral or legal obligation to ensure the safety or well-being of others

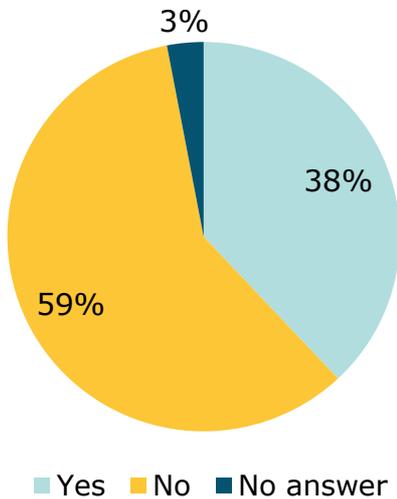
Previous consultations undertaken by the English FA have indicated that young people involved in football would choose to refer any concerns they have either to their coach or parent/carer rather than go directly to the welfare officer.

The welfare officer's role is often one that offers support and guidance either directly or via the clubs coaches/officials to children and young people. In some cases, welfare officers have the capacity to have a constant presence which allows them to build relationships with children and young people, but this is not true of all clubs.

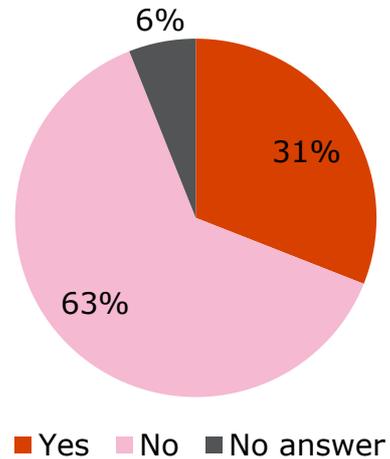
What is important to note is that young people should always have a choice about who they look for support from in their clubs. Whilst many will choose to seek advice from coaches, not everyone will feel comfortable doing that. It is also important that someone else in the organisation can offer support to young people, and their parents, in situations where allegations are made about a coach, or if the coach is ineffective at reporting concerns young people have raised.

Of the young people that took part in their consultation, **two thirds of young people did not know what a welfare officer was.** Of the young people that did know what a welfare officer was, **twenty percent did not know who their welfare officer was at their club.**

Do you know what a welfare officer is?



Do you know who your welfare officer is at your club?



Taking into account their previous answers relating to accessing support at the club, this suggests that the young people who were part of the groups knew there should be support at their clubs – they just did not know what that looked like.

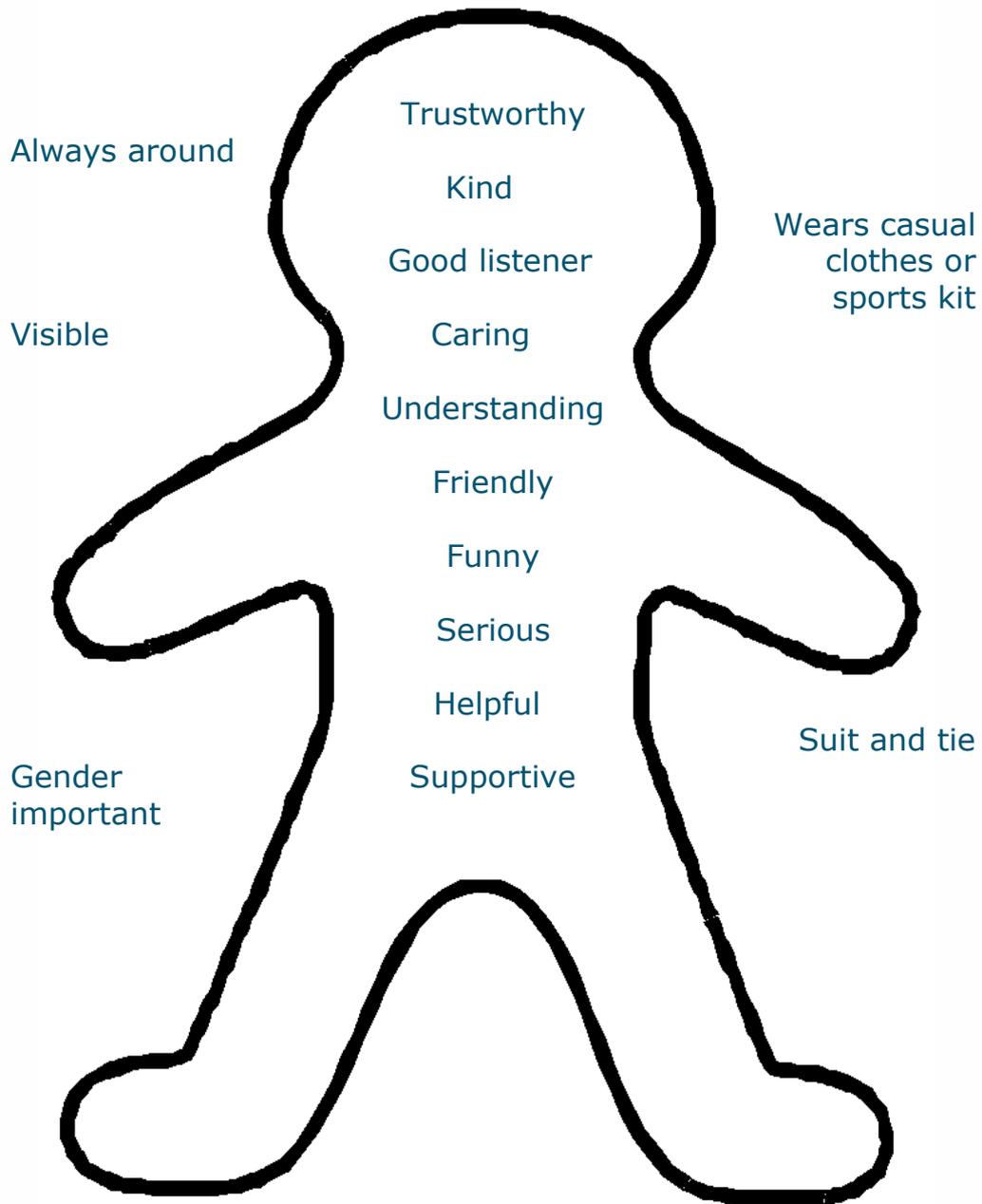
What makes a perfect welfare officer?

It was important to see what kind of person the young people would turn to for support if they had a worry.

The next page shows common answers they gave, with the characteristics of the person shown inside the body, and what they might look like and where they might be on the outside of the body.

These characteristics may be true of what young people wanted from a welfare officer, but also adults involved in their sports clubs in general.

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Characteristics of perfect welfare officer	Percentage
Approachable	71
Kind	56
Trustworthy	38
Caring	38
Friendly	37
Understanding	31
Good listener	24
Helpful	18
Funny	16
Serious	13
Supportive	9
Happy	8

What a perfect welfare officer looks like	Percentage
Casual	19
Suit	18
Visible	18
Gender	16
Sports/team kit	14
Around	6

All of the attributes they wanted in a welfare officer were very positive, and very empathetic. Being approachable was the top characteristic, and was very evident in the way that young people phrased their responses

Someone you feel at ease talking to

Male aged 12

Listens to what is being told by the players

Male aged 10

Someone you can speak to, if you have any issues you can speak to them

Male aged 17

There was a slight difference of opinion around what they'd want their officer to look like. **Around one fifth said they'd want a welfare officer to be casual, or wearing sports kit** – something very informal. However, the same number respondents said they should wear a suit. This was heavily influenced by one of the sessions where, to the young people, wearing a suit meant they were professional.

Being visible matched with young people wanting a welfare officer to be approachable. Them being a part of the team, and showing an interest in them was obviously important.

Be around all of the time asking if everyone's OK

Male aged 15

Out on the park with us, be with teams a lot

Male aged 15

Easy to access - on site, always around school

Male aged 14

Gender was one particular area of interest. In most of the groups of young people that took part in the consultation the majority competed in sports in gendered teams. 12 percent said their coach should be male, and 4 percent said they should be female. All of those who suggested the coach should be female were male, so perhaps young people were biased depending on the gender of their preferred coach. Either way, this was maybe something for clubs to consider.

Summary

- **100** young people took part in the consultation from **England and Scotland**
- **More than 1 in every 2** young people were most worried about **injuries and tackles**
- **One fifth** of the group had experienced **verbal abuse**
- **Nearly half** of the group thought **bullying** would be the **most common problem experienced by others in sport**.
- **1 in 3** young people said **pressure to perform** was a common problem, and the **most important worry** for those involved in sport would worry about
- **Balancing sport and education** was important to young people, to ensure they had a positive future
- **Going away on trips** and **knowing what** support is available from your club were ranked the **least important worries**
- **Being scared** was the top reason that someone would not report a problem, with **over one tenth** attributing worries not being reported because of **fear of consequences**
- **two thirds of young people did not know what a welfare officer was**. Of the young people that did know what a welfare officer was, **twenty percent did not know who their welfare officer was at their club**.
- **Nearly three quarters** of young people said a perfect welfare officer would be **approachable**
- **Around one fifth** said they'd want a welfare officer to be **casual, or wearing sports kit**

Recommendations

- Include more voices of female participants in future consultations
- Information on the new ChildLine website to have a focus on the key worries raised by young people – particularly looking at information around pressure
- Look into the role of the welfare officer, and what young people at the club want from this source of support?

Is a visible welfare office practical? Most clubs have one, but with so many teams and different age groups, it would be highly unlikely you'll see them more than once or twice a season. One welfare officer per team should be what clubs aim for. The welfare officer workshops are only a couple of hours long and not rocket science

Giorgio, aged 16

Appendix: Further session with younger children

The focus of the consultations was on young people aged 11 and above.

There was an opportunity to consult younger children on some of the topics the report has discussed, to see if there were any apparent differences.

24 young people aged between 9 and 11 took part in answering these questions.

What might make a child happy when they play football?

Below is a table of what the children said might make a child happy playing football when unprompted and thinking in groups

What young people said	Number	Percentage
Respect	13	54
Having fun/enjoying yourself	8	33
Scoring	7	29
Winning	7	29
Feel supported	5	21
Good manager	3	13
Cheering	3	13

Of those children involved, **over half said respect would make children happy** when they played football. When compared to their responses to what they worry about football might be, this makes a lot of sense. They wanted to make sure playing football was fair.

Having fun was also a key theme. **Nearly 1 in 3 children said enjoying yourself was what would make someone happy.** Some of the children were affiliated with non-league clubs, but for most, football was likely something they played in an informal manner in parks and playground – it was fun for them.

Performance was clearly a key focus too, with scoring and winning featuring high on the list.

What worries might a child who plays football have?

Again, the children responded to this question unprompted; the key themes found in their answers are below.

What young people said	Number	Percentage
Injuries/getting hurt	11	46
Swearing and shouting	11	46
Getting left out	7	29
Bullying	5	21
Disappoint people	5	21
Make a mistake	5	21
Moaning	3	13

Like the young people involved in the main consultation, getting hurt and being verbally abused were the top issues, with **nearly half the group noting injuries and being sworn at** on their mind maps. Although this group was younger than those previously consulted, their answers were very similar in tone.

An answer that was slightly different, and not really included in the main consultation, was that of being left out. Many young people in the main consultation did refer to being on the bench, but for **nearly 1 in 3 young people, they saw that being left out would be a main concern**. This might link into their experience of football being linked to play, and not club football, where football is only played by a select few.