



SOCIAL COMPETENCIES

COMMUNICATION

SHARINGGOALS

THE SYSTEMIC COACHING MANUAL
FOR FOOTBALL COACHES
AROUND THE WORLD

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1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

“Effective communication is critical to the success of any team or organization and its members” (Yukelson, 2015, p. 140 in Blaser & Seiler, 2019)

1.1. Scientific research

1.1.1. Definition

Interpersonal communication is defined as “a symbolic process by which two people, bound together in a relationship, provide each other with resources, or negotiate the exchange of resources” (Rolloff, 1981, p. 30). Although this definition includes two individuals, communication can also involve groups, such as a family or football teams. Thereby, what one person does, has an effect on the others, the communication does not occur in a vacuum (Nurrachmad et al., 2020). The relationship between all parties involved in the sporting environment, especially coaches and athletes but also parents or other actors, is crucial to success and significantly influenced by their communication (Nurrachmad et al., 2020).

Communication can be verbal or nonverbal. While verbal communication includes the words that are being said, nonverbal communication refers to any other forms of signaling, such as auditory cues (tone, speed and rhythm) and visual cues, such as body language including gestures or facial expressions. It also includes interpersonal distance or other physical features. Research has found that most communication is non-verbal (65%-95%). Nonverbal communication is often spontaneous or automatic and, therefore, assumed to be more genuine than verbal communication. Especially in sports, due to disruptors on the field such as loud noise, nonverbal communication holds high importance. It also allows for secret game adjustments, for instance the coach can show a hand sign for a specific tactical adjustment.

While many different types of communication exist and have been categorized by researchers, Overall and McNulty (2017) suggest the prevalence of two dimensions which create four types of communication. The first is defined as direct opposition which can include the blaming of the conversation partner. The second one is described as indirect opposition which can include the implication of guilt. Furthermore, direct cooperation through direct reasoning and indirect cooperation through affection aimed to decrease conflict are defined as two types of communication (Overall & McNulty, 2017).

1.1.2. Impact on performance

Effective communication has a direct influence on individual and team performance in football. The following section summarizes research findings linking communication processes with coordination, decision-making, and competitive success. Leadership, collective efficacy, goal setting, and team cohesion are all influenced by communication between team members. To be successful in sports, the team should be able to communicate in an effective manner while the coach should be a good communicator as well (Sullivan & Feltz, 2003).

According to Blaser and Seiler (2019), in team sports of complex and interactive nature, such as football, communication plays an important role in coordinating future team actions. Coordinating team actions is relevant because in complex, uncertain, and dynamic situations it is almost impossible to coordinate decisions due to the time pressure present. Furthermore, these environments are often noisy (Blaser & Seiler, 2019). Communication, therefore, helps to achieve efficient instruction, feedback, and coordination to achieve the team's objectives on the field (Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

Furthermore, improvements in communication are found to improve team performance, individual performance as well as cohesion and motivation within a team (Sullivan & Feltz, 2003; Akpetou & Furley, 2017). According to Akpetou and Furley (2017), team sports do not only require effective communication, but they also offer a setting to enhance communication skills of the players and the coaches.

In sports, coaches often use ways to communicate nonverbally by maintaining privacy of the message, such as signs or symbols. For example, the coach and the players may have discussed prior to a game that holding up three fingers means a specific tactical change. Furthermore, coaches and athletes similarly need effective communication to share knowledge, discuss tactical and technical ideas, and provide each other with mental and social support. Body language of dominance can, for instance, provide the team with confidence and the opponents with decreased confidence.

However, the opposite holds true as well. Additionally, specific nonverbal communication can be inappropriate in some contexts and appropriate in others. Actively attempting to display certain nonverbal cues, especially in high-pressure environments, can be taxing and take the focus off the game situation. Consequently, it is important to communicate and consider nonverbal cues beforehand to avoid

miscommunication (Akpetou & Furley, 2017). Additionally, efficient communication displayed by the coach includes the appropriate explanation of training contents. During a match, coaches and players need to communicate effectively with the opponents as well as referees to avoid conflict situations (Soccermind Academy, 2024).

Effective communication can consequently be useful to explain behavioral expectations, it influences players' motivation, and it can be used to show appreciation. Furthermore, communication is needed to exchange ideas, thoughts, and feelings, it helps to avoid or solve conflicts and provides autonomy. These points are of importance when considering coach-athlete communication but also athlete-athlete communication. Essentially, good communication leads to less miscommunication and conflicts which, in turn, is directly related to higher success on the field (Soccermind Academy, 2024).

Types of communication in football

Several different types of communication in sports, and more specifically in football, are defined in literature. In football, in-game and out-of-game communication can be important, however, Blaser and Seiler (2019) argue for in-game communication to be more relevant. In-game communication includes four types: orientation, stimulation, evaluation, and task-irrelevant communication.

- Orientation communication pertains to the coordination of interactions, such as who must do what, when, and where.
- Stimulation refers to communication with a teammate to increase or decrease activity levels, such as 'let's push'. Thereby, the communication is not about what to do or how to do it but solely to increase or decrease activity.
- Evaluation communication includes positive or negative feedback about other's or one's own actions.
- Finally, task-irrelevant communication refers to either positive or negative messages which are not related to the performance (Blaser & Seiler, 2019).

Williams and Widmeyer (1991) defined intra-team communication as an important type of communication referring to the regularity of teammates giving each other feedback during training sessions and tournaments.

However, as the definition of communication has shown, non-verbal communication may be of relevance. Nevertheless, the majority of studies on communication in sport have neglected non-verbal

communication in the form of proxemics, kinesics, and paralinguistics. Proxemics refers to the use of space, for instance how far sender and receiver are positioned from each other. Kinesics refers to gestures and body movements. Paralinguistics includes other sounds which are not language. This type is not uncommon on the football field, it can for instance include groaning when a team member lost the ball (Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

1.1.3. Impact on cohesion

Beyond performance, communication significantly influences interpersonal relationships and team cohesion. Research highlights that communication quality determines emotional climate, trust, and cooperation within teams.

According to Sullivan and Feltz (2003), interpersonal communication is the most important social behavior for any group. In a sport context, it can involve listening, questioning, understanding and responding (Mihai-Adrian, 2019). Interpersonal communication in sport is highly complex because the sporting environment is marked by many differing interpersonal relationships which include support, competition and conflict resolution.

Case Study

It is match day. The coach tells one of his players, *"You are not in the starting formation today because you have not been training enough!"*. The factual message is that the player won't be playing from the beginning today because he did not attend training the prior weeks. The coach looks and sounds upset and sad, potentially revealing to the player that the coach is upset about having to bring this message to the player.

The demand the player could understand could be that he must attend training more often over the following weeks to be able to play. If the coach and the player have a positive relationship and considering the sadness expressed in the coach's face and voice, these factors could tell the athlete that the coach values the player's skills and would generally want to have him on the field. While this could be one possibility of interpretation, communication is complex, and the interpretation of the message could also be different.

Communication has often been part of the skills discussed in so-called life skills literature. Life skills are a set of skills that enable individuals to navigate their daily life. Communication, in particular, is of great importance to establish connections with other people and form relationships (Khan et al., 2021). Furthermore, children with communication skills are more sensitive to others and can control their feelings. When children become older, communication skills allow them to work in cooperation, be successful in their lives, ask for help and reject demands that are inappropriate (Erbay & Dogru, 2010). Communication skills help children express themselves in a clear and confident manner. The more communication takes place with a child, the more the child will learn how to communicate. Furthermore, good communication skills are also found to improve school performance and later, performance at work (Kumon, 2021).

However, communication skills do not lose their value when a child enters adolescence. Especially during adolescence, communication skills can be a predictor for social success. Communication skills surrounding empathy are of relevance when forming relationships with peers which is of particular importance for adolescents as positive relationships with others are crucial during this period (Henry et al., 1995). Furthermore, positive peer relationships influence emotions and motivations. Good communication skills can help adolescents learn how to cooperate with others, negotiate solutions to ethical dilemmas, gain self-discipline, and learn fairness, loyalty, perseverance and teamwork (Hadadi & Mallaei, 2024). All these factors are important in life in general, but also on the football field which the following section will highlight.

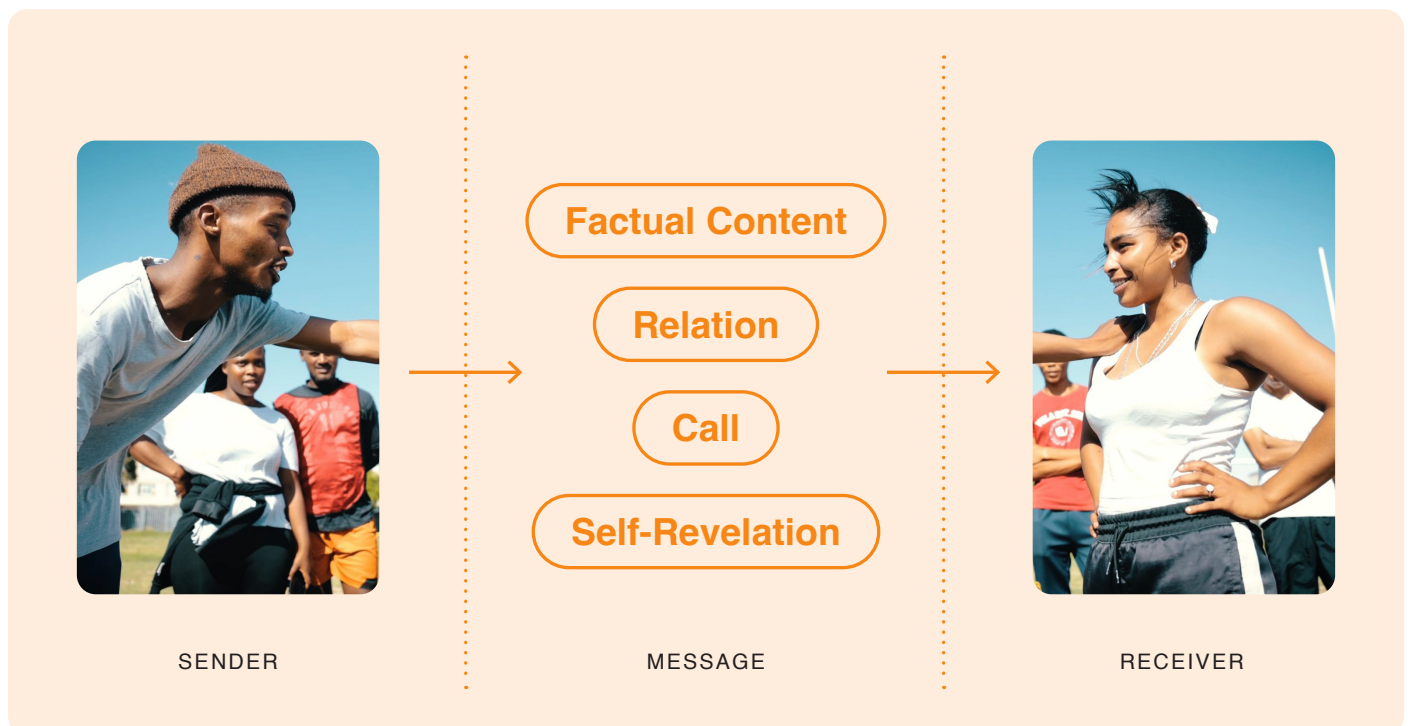


Figure 1: Message Square according to Schulz von Thun (Schaden, 2021)

1.1.4. Models of communication

Schulz von Thun Model

Communication is a complex process holding several challenges. Therefore, Friedemann Schulz von Thun (1981), a German psychologist, created a model illustrating these issues. Although the model has been criticized for simplifying the human communication process, it still holds valuable insights into communication (Akpetou & Furley, 2017). The model focuses on highlighting potential sources of misunderstandings to prevent miscommunication between individuals.

According to Schulz von Thun (1981 in Akpetou & Furley, 2017), the transmission of information through communication consists of two parts. First, a sender transmits information either verbally or non-verbally. The information is received by the receiver who decodes and interprets the message. Every message has four layers which determine how a message is received: the factual layer, the layer of self-disclosure, the appeal-layer, and the relationship-layer (Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

The factual layer includes the literal information of the message. It provides the receiver with data, facts, and statements. The receiver checks whether the message received fulfils the criteria of truth, meaning whether the message is true or untrue, the criteria of relevance, meaning whether the message is relevant or irrelevant, and the completeness, meaning whether information needs to be added or not (Schaden, 2021; Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

The layer of self-revelation includes information shared about the sender which can include emotions, motives, and values. This can be an intentional way of self-representation or involuntary self-disclosure through the verbal and non-verbal language used. This layer can also include the revelation of one's mood or stress levels (Schaden, 2021; Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

The appeal-layer includes a demand the sender has for the receiver. This demand can involve advice, desires, or instructions and can be openly communicated, for example as a piece of advice, or hidden, for example through manipulation (Schaden, 2021; Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

Finally, the relationship-layer reveals the relationship, including nature and quality, between the sender and the receiver. This relationship is expressed through formulation, intonation or expression. Consequently, through communication, the sender expresses how he or she feels about the receiver (Schaden, 2021; Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

Each of these layers informs how the receiver interprets a message, however, this interpretation is also dependent on situational and relational factors which are context specific. Consequently, the more the sender leaves room for the receiver to interpret the message sent, more misunderstanding or miscommunication is likely. (Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

This example shows that all messages are subject to personal interpretation. Consequently, knowing about the different parts that influence the interpretation of messages can help to avoid miscommunication. If conflicts due to miscommunication arise easily in a team, it may be useful to analyze the patterns to understand the roots of the miscommunication and prevent it from happening. This four-side-model has recently been combined with a model by Paul Watzlawick et al., who suggest the use of five principles for interpersonal communication.

Five axioms of communication

The five axioms of communication specifically focus on the nonverbal parts of communication and are useful in understanding interpersonal interactions (Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

- **Axiom 1: One cannot not communicate**

According to Watzlawick et al. (1967 in Akpetou & Furley, 2017), communication takes place between two or more people even if an actual action is absent. Consequently, an interpretation of social information by the observer still takes place even if nothing is said.

- **Axiom 2: Every communication act has a content and a relationship aspect**

Every message is interpreted depending on the relationship between the sender and the receiver. Consequently, feedback from the coach can be interpreted by the athlete as positive and well-intended to improve the athlete's performance or it can be perceived as negative criticism and can cause feelings of rejection depending on the coach-athlete relationship (Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

- **Axiom 3: Communication is punctuated**

Each communication can be considered as having a 'stimulus' and a 'response'. However, the starting point of a communication can differ between the parties involved. For example, the coach may decide to not include a player in the starting formation, which is the stimulus, and can lead to the player being upset and missing training for the subsequent week, which is the response. This communication may have started for the player when he was not considered for the starting formation. For the coach, however, this decision may have derived from lack of training motivation of the athlete in the weeks prior to the game. The more individuals are involved in a communication act, the more complex these points become, and it might be useful to understand and track starting points or roots of these communications (Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

- **Axiom 4: Communication involves digital and analogous modalities**

Communication can include verbal, paraverbal (for instance the tone of the voice), and nonverbal acts. To achieve clear communication, all these acts should be in tune. However, if verbal and nonverbal acts do not seem to portray the same message, humans tend to rely on the nonverbal part of the communication. For example, if a coach shouts at the players at training to keep up their motivation but smiles while doing so, the players will likely take the shouting less seriously (Akpetou & Furley, 2017).

- **Axiom 5: Communication can be symmetrical or complementary**

Human interaction is based on the equality or disparity of the relationship between sender and receiver. A symmetrical communication would take place if both individuals were of a similar social status or have similar expertise, for example between two long-standing coaches. A complementary communication would take place when knowledge is not distributed equally, for instance between an established coach and a young assistant coach. While this relationship can lead to the younger coach being subordinated to the established coach, the partners can also complement each other. The young coach might bring new perspectives into the experienced training sessions led by the established coach (Akpétou & Furley, 2017).

1.1.5. Development of communication competence

Most of the literature in the field of communication in sport focuses on the importance of the coach being able to communicate effectively (i.e. Moen & Kvalsund, 2013; Rosca, 2010; David et al., 2019). However, several factors are present in literature from other fields which provide ideas on how communication can be taught and practiced in football.

Littlewood (1981 in Guclu, 2016) suggests that players need to be sufficiently motivated and have opportunities to connect with people and express their own identity. These prerequisites make learning communication skills in a football environment possible. Perron et al. (2015) believe that communication skills can be trained through the integration of exercises into everyday training. Furthermore, coaches should be able to model positive and effective communication which students can observe. Communication exercises should be combined with feedback sessions that are detailed, and well-intended. It is crucial to include peer-to-peer feedback during exercises, between different exercises, and at the end of each training through regular reflection circles. This not only helps players improve their football skills, but it forms an important way of learning how to communicate with each other, as well as how to give and receive feedback.

As communication skills form part of the so-called 'life skills' in literature, findings from life skills development through sport are applicable to the teaching of communication skills. To successfully teach communication skills, the teaching must take place explicitly because they "must be taught, not caught" (Theokas et al., 2007, p. 78). It is important

that the players learn from successful communication rather than being told what not to do. Furthermore, while speaking about communication and providing feedback is relevant, children and adolescents learn by doing rather than through mere listening (Theokas et al., 2007).



1.2. Window of opportunities

A window of opportunity describes a period during development when a competence, or the components underlying it, is especially receptive to training — not because learning is impossible outside that period, but because the same coaching input produces disproportionately larger gains during it than before or after.

The foundations of communication are laid very early. The core language system is acquired in the first years of life, and the social understanding that gives communication its purpose, the recognition that another person may hold a different view of the same situation, emerges reliably during the preschool years (Wellman, Cross, & Watson, 2001). This foundational period largely precedes entry into organised football.

What continues to develop through the school years is pragmatic skill: using language appropriately in context, adjusting a message to what a listener already knows, and repairing a misunderstanding once it arises. Pragmatic ability draws jointly on formal language, mentalising and executive function, which is why it improves gradually rather than appearing at once (Matthews, Biney, & Abbot-Smith, 2018). These gains extend across the school-age and adolescent years (Nippold, 2000), corresponding to Stages 1 to 3.

Adolescence brings a second period of heightened receptiveness. Regions of the social brain undergo structural change and functional reorganisation

during the second decade of life, proposed as a sensitive period for adapting to the social environment (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). The perspective-taking on which communication depends is still developing: on a task requiring a speaker's viewpoint to be taken into account, adolescents aged 14 to 17 did not yet perform at adult levels (Dumontheil, Apperly, & Blakemore, 2010). Stages 4 to 6 sit inside this curve rather than after it.

Taken together, the evidence does not support a single narrow window for Communication. It points instead to a layered trajectory: the foundations are largely in place before football begins, the pragmatic layer develops fastest across middle childhood, and the social-cognitive layer governing communication under pressure is still maturing into early adulthood. No stage is too early or too late; each has a different layer to work on.

Football suits this development because it supplies what instructional settings rarely can: real listeners, genuine time pressure, and immediate consequences for an unclear message. Shared knowledge and verbal communication within a team change measurably through collective training (Blaser & Seiler, 2019), and communication skills built in sport transfer beyond it (Khan et al., 2021). The condition is intent: these skills must be taught rather than left to emerge from play (Theokas et al., 2007).

Communication therefore warrants explicit attention at every stage, with the emphasis shifting from clarity and listening early on to perspective-taking and composure under pressure later.



1.3. Correlation with other skills and competencies

Communication links emotional, physical, technical, social, cognitive, and tactical development by enabling information exchange, coordination, and effective teamwork.



Correlation with Emotional Competencies

Communication is closely linked to emotional development. Self-reflection improves how players interact with others. Motivation and passion encourage positive engagement, while goal setting aligns individual and team objectives. Coping with emotions supports constructive communication under pressure.

Correlation with Physical Skills

While no direct connection is identified, communication can indirectly enhance physical performance through better coordination and anticipation.

Correlation with Technical Abilities

Communication improves technical performance by supporting the timing, direction, and intention of passing. It also enhances first touch by helping players prepare for their next action before receiving the ball.

Correlation with Social Competencies

Communication is fundamental to social interaction. Trust enables open exchange, empathy and compassion foster respectful behaviour, and conflict management depends on constructive dialogue. Leadership relies on communication to organise, guide, and inspire teammates.

Correlation with Cognitive Skills

Communication supports decision-making by providing relevant information. It enables collective problem solving through the exchange of ideas and helps players analyse situations.

Correlation with Tactical Principles

Communication is vital for applying tactical principles, including penetration, cover, width, mobility, balance, concentration, and team unity. It enables players to coordinate movements, exchange information, and adapt collectively to changing situations.

1.4. Key learnings

- Communication is a process between two people or more and includes the exchange of resources (stage 1-6)
- Communication can be verbal and nonverbal (stage 2-6)
- Schulz von Thun's model describes four layers which can lead to miscommunication: factual layer, layer of self-disclosure, appeal-layer, relationship-layer (stage 3-6)
- The five axioms of communication describe the process of nonverbal communication (stage 4-6)
- Communication skills are considered a life skill and help navigate interpersonal relationships in all areas of life (stage 2-6)
- Effective communication between coach and athletes, but also between the athletes, is an important factor for success on the field (stage 2-6)
- Effective communication, verbal and nonverbal, enhances collaboration, teamwork, cohesion,

motivation, and overall team and individual performance (stage 3-6)

- In-game communication can take on four types: orientation, stimulation, evaluation, and task-irrelevant communication (stage 4-6)
- The coach is an important determinator in developing effective communication skills in the players through modelling effective communication and explicitly integrating communication exercises into training sessions (stage 2-6).

1.5. From science to practice

Communication competence develops progressively across childhood and adolescence. Scientific research highlights that effective communication integrates cognitive clarity, emotional awareness, social responsibility, and situational regulation. In football, communication influences tactical coordination, emotional stability, and collective performance. The following stages translate these scientific insights into age-appropriate developmental priorities and practical orientation.

Stage 1 7-8 years



Clarity, safety, basic expression

At this stage, communication is concrete and immediate. Children rely on simple verbal instructions, visible cues, and emotional tone to understand interactions. Communication competence is primarily expressed through basic listening, clear speaking, and recognizing simple emotional signals in others. The need for safety and predictability is central, and misunderstandings are often unintentional rather than strategic.

Clear and supportive communication at this stage contributes to emotional safety within the group. When children experience understandable instructions and respectful tone, cohesion develops through trust in the environment. Performance benefits from clarity, as simple, direct communication improves coordination and reduces confusion during play.

Stage 2 9-10 years



Expression, listening, rule awareness)

With growing cognitive abilities, players begin to understand that communication includes not only speaking but also active listening. They become more aware of fairness, rules, and the impact of their words on others. Emotional expression becomes more differentiated, and children start to recognise that teammates may perceive situations differently.

Communication now supports cohesion by encouraging mutual respect and shared understanding of rules. Listening and fair expression reduce interpersonal tensions. From a performance perspective, improved communication enhances cooperation in small group situations and allows clearer tactical execution during games.

Stage 3 11-12 years



Perspective-taking, feedback, repair

As perspective-taking develops, communication becomes more reflective. Players begin to understand how their words influence others and recognise the importance of constructive feedback. They are increasingly capable of repairing misunderstandings and addressing minor conflicts verbally rather than emotionally.

At this stage, communication strengthens cohesion through responsible dialogue and the ability to clarify intentions after mistakes. Performance improves as players exchange feedback more effectively, support each other tactically, and manage frustration through communication rather than withdrawal or aggression.

Stage 4 13-14 years



Regulation, timing, respectful interaction under pressure

With increasing emotional intensity and competitive demands, communication competence requires emotional regulation and appropriate timing. Players learn that not every thought must be expressed immediately and that respectful tone is essential, especially under pressure. Communication becomes situationally adaptive.

Cohesion at this stage depends on consistent and respectful communication, particularly during challenging moments. Teams that regulate emotional expression are less likely to escalate conflicts. Performance benefits from calm, structured communication that maintains focus and tactical clarity even in stressful situations.

At this stage, players learn to consciously regulate not only their tone of voice but also their body language and facial expressions, especially during emotionally intense moments. They begin to differentiate between emotional communication (expressing frustration or encouragement) and tactical communication (giving clear, game-related instructions), and understand when each form is appropriate.

Stage 5 15-16 years



Proactivity, influence, team culture

Communication becomes increasingly proactive. Players anticipate misunderstandings, clarify roles early, and contribute actively to a positive communication climate. Peer influence grows stronger, and communication begins to shape team culture. Feedback becomes more strategic and constructive.

Cohesion strengthens as players intentionally support open dialogue and mutual accountability. Communication now stabilizes group dynamics and prevents avoidable conflicts. From a performance perspective, proactive communication improves decision-making speed, synchronisation of movements, and collective tactical awareness.

Stage 6 17-18 years



Leadership, reflection, performance impact

At the highest developmental stage, communication is fully integrated into leadership behaviour and reflective practice. Players understand communication not only as a tool for interaction but as a determinant of team functioning. They recognise how clarity, emotional regulation, and respectful dialogue influence trust, cohesion, and performance outcomes.

Communication at this level contributes directly to collective efficiency. Leaders use communication strategically to organise play, manage pressure, resolve tensions constructively, and maintain group focus. Cohesion is reinforced through transparent dialogue and shared reflection, while performance is enhanced through precise tactical coordination and emotionally stable interactions. At this level, players intentionally reflect on how their communication influenced decision-making, team focus, emotional climate, and ultimately match performance.

2. COACHES' BEHAVIOUR

2.1. Coaching style

2.1.1. Scientific grounding

The coach plays a crucial role in the development of skills among his football players. Especially appropriate communication is fundamental in creating fruitful relationships between the players and the coach (Moen & Kvalsund, 2013).

Strategies can include a) giving athletes the opportunity to choose within boundaries, b) giving a rationale for tasks, c) acknowledging feelings, valuing perspectives and input, d) giving opportunities for athletes to take initiative, e) avoid controlling comments and behavior, and f) reducing perception of ego-involvement. Furthermore, roles and expectations need to be communicated clearly to the players (Akpétou & Furley, 2017). This can be done through a democratic or servant leadership style. Autocratic leadership may be the least useful as it has been found to negatively impact the affection athletes have for their sport (Izquierdo & Anguera, 2021).

Instead, coaches need to create a coaching climate that is favorable for the development of communication skills (Khan et al., 2021). Furthermore, coaches should listen to their players messages rather than just hearing them. This means that their messages should be given consideration. Additionally, displaying empathetic and sympathetic behavior should be displayed by asking questions, listening, encouraging communication (nonverbal and verbal) (Mihai-Adrian, 2019). Of high importance is mutual understanding between the players and the coach (Moen & Kvalsund, 2013). Thereby, it is also relevant for coaches to speak according to the players' ages (Soccermind Academy, 2024). Moen and Kvalsund (2013) emphasize the importance of the 3+1 Cs for coaches, especially considering communication between players and coaches. Thereby communication should be based on closeness, commitment, complementary, and co-orientation. Closeness describes a certain emotional attachment between the player and the coach. Commitment refers to both, the player's and coach's desire to maintain a positive and productive relationship over time. Furthermore, complementary refers to the interactions between player and coach to be effective and of cooperative nature. Finally, co-orientation describes that both parties bring forth emphatic understanding for the other.

2.1.2. Practical implications

Practically, this means that a coach consistently models clarity, structure, and intentional dialogue. Players learn effective communication not only through drills, but through observing how the coach gives instructions, provides feedback, and manages discussions.

A coach who strengthens communication:

- Gives clear, concise, and structured instructions
- Adjusts language to the developmental stage of the players
- Uses feedback that is specific and constructive
- Encourages active listening and respectful dialogue
- Reinforces communication that supports team focus and coordination

Especially during competitive or stressful moments, the coach's communication becomes a reference point. Tone, timing, and precision influence whether players remain organised or become confused. Structured and calm communication under pressure models stability and focus.

An essential modelling responsibility of the coach is differentiating between emotional and tactical communication. During active game play, communication should primarily be emotional and stimulating — short encouragement, reinforcement of effort, and activation cues that maintain energy and confidence without overloading attention. Tactical instruction, by contrast, should be delivered during natural pauses in the game (e.g., injuries, throw-ins, substitutions, or extended breaks), when players have the cognitive capacity to process more detailed information.

When coaches attempt to provide complex tactical instructions while the game is running, players' focus can be disrupted and decision-making slowed. Clear differentiation between emotional activation in play and tactical adjustment in pauses protects concentration, supports faster in-game reactions, and models the communication discipline expected from players. This distinction becomes especially important from Stage 4 onward, when players learn to differentiate between emotional and tactical communication themselves.

When a coach consistently models effective communication, misunderstandings decrease, expectations are clear and team cohesion strengthens. Performance benefits because tactical instructions are understood quickly, coordination improves, and decision-making becomes more efficient.

2.2. Choice of words

The way a coach formulates messages directly shapes how players understand expectations, interpret feedback, and regulate emotions. Language influences clarity, confidence, and team dynamics. The developmental level of the players determines how messages should be structured.

Stage 1 7-8 years



Language should be simple, concrete, and direct.

- Use short and clear instructions
- Avoid abstract explanations
- Focus on one key message at a time
- Reinforce effort and fairness

Example tone: "Let's try again.", "We take turns."

Stage 2 9-10 years



Players can process slightly more explanation.

- Explain why rules exist
- Encourage basic reflection
- Use calm correction
- Avoid blame-focused language

Example tone: "What could we do differently?", "Let's listen first."

Stage 3 11-12 years



Perspective-taking develops.

- Encourage explanation of viewpoints
- Use neutral language in disagreement
- Differentiate behaviour from identity
- Promote constructive feedback

Example tone: "I understand your view.", "What was your intention?"

Stage 4 13-14 years



Emotional intensity increases.

- Avoid public humiliation
- Use respectful debate language
- Address behaviour privately when needed
- Emphasize responsibility

Example tone: "Let's discuss this after training.", "Focus on the task, not the person."

Stage 5 15-16 years



Ownership and influence grow.

- Encourage peer dialogue
- Use performance-oriented language
- Clarify expectations clearly
- Reinforce accountability

Example tone: "How can we improve this together?", "What is your responsibility here?"

Stage 6 17-18 years



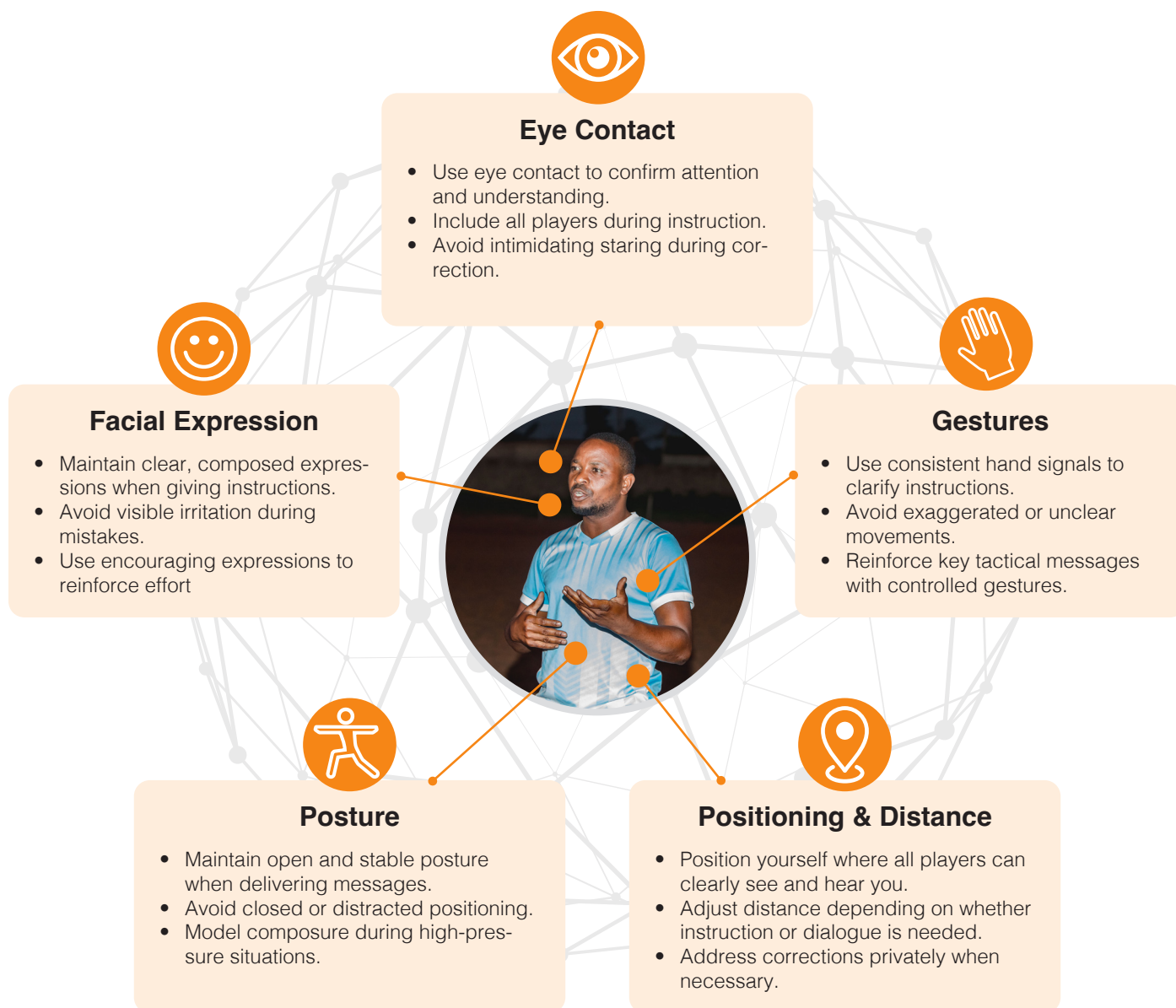
Leadership communication emerges.

- Use reflective questioning
- Connect communication to team goals
- Emphasize collective standards
- Encourage self-regulation in language

Example tone: "How did our communication affect performance?", "What message do we want to send as a team?"

2.3. Body language

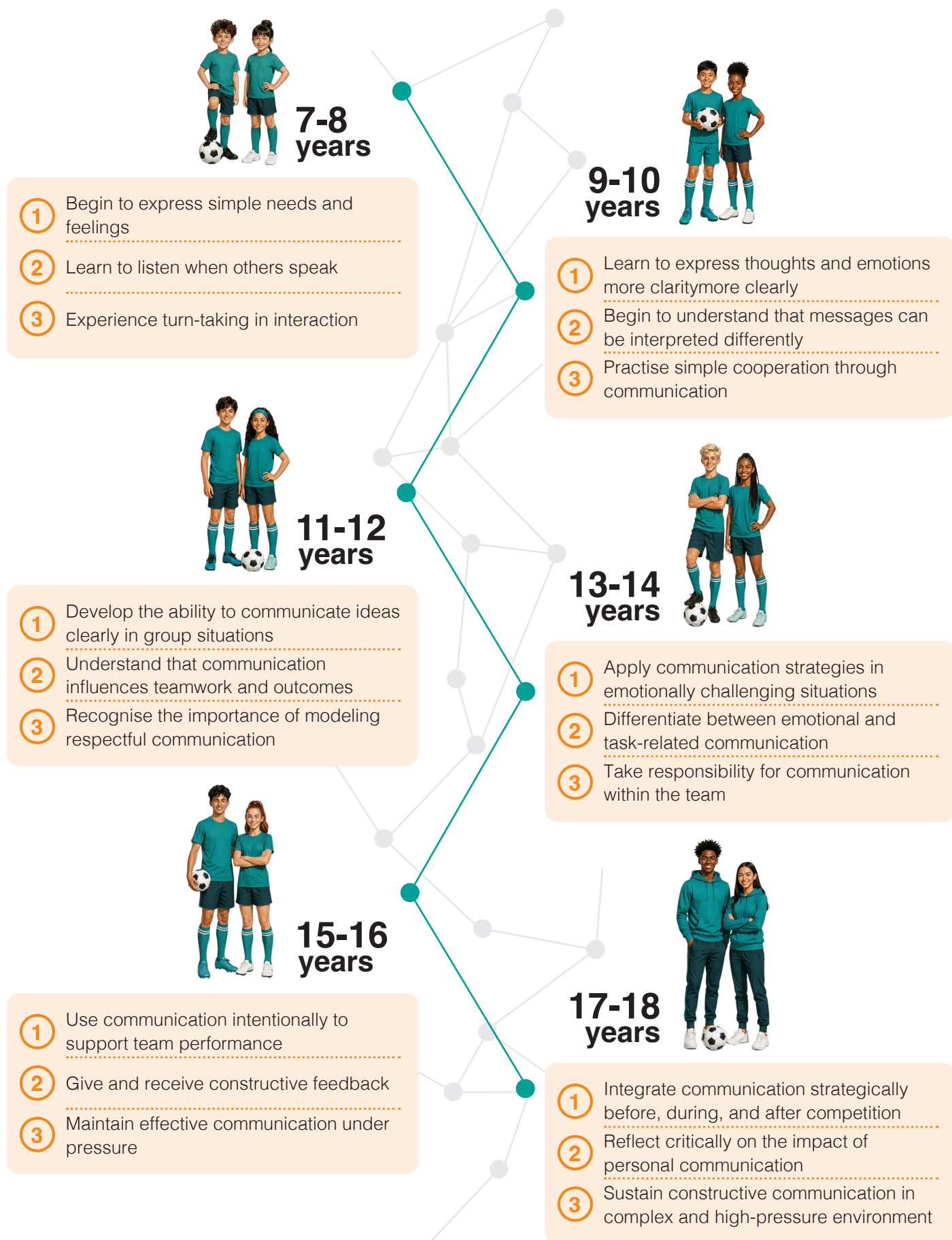
A coach's body language directly influences how clearly messages are understood. Non-verbal signals can either reinforce clarity or create confusion. Intentional and consistent body language strengthens understanding and team organisation.



When body language aligns with verbal communication, misunderstandings decrease and coordination improves. This strengthens cohesion and contributes to more efficient and stable performance.

3. TRAINING

The development Journey of Communication from foundation to maturity:



Training

7-8
years



3.1. Stage 1 (7-8 years)

3.1.1. Stage characteristics

At this age, communication is concrete, simple, and immediate. Players are still developing basic expressive and receptive language skills. They benefit from repetition, modelling, and short, clear interaction sequences. Emotional safety and turn-taking experiences are central for early communication development. Communication in football should therefore focus on simple needs, listening, and structured interaction patterns.

3.1.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, communication development in football focuses on establishing first expressive and receptive habits that support safe and structured interaction. The emphasis is on encouraging children to verbalise simple needs, practise listening before reacting, and experience basic interaction rules such as turn-taking. Simple listening games and short verbal cues during play provide practical opportunities to build these foundational communication behaviours.

In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

- 1 Begin to express simple needs and feelings
- 2 Learn to listen when others speak
- 3 Experience turn-taking in interaction

3.1.3. Coach insight

At this stage, communication learning is primarily experiential and requires modelling rather than explanation. Coaches should demonstrate short, clear verbal cues and visible listening behaviour. Creating structured interaction patterns during exercises helps children connect communication with cooperation and game flow. Reinforcing positive attempts to speak or listen builds confidence and establishes early communication habits.

EXERCISE

PASSING THROUGH COLORED GOALS



	Players	6+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	25×25 m
	Equipment	1 ball for 2 players, 16 cones in 4 different colors
	Duration	total: 10 min play: 5× 1 min breaks: 1 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Eight goals are set up with as many different color cones as available
- Pairs of two are instructed to pass the ball through each of these goals
- The pair who manage to do it first and get back into the starting position, wins
- After having passed the ball, the player without the ball needs to find a new goal and give the teammate a sign or command so he knows which goal needs to be played next
- Variations:
 - Once the players easily master the basic exercise, the coach uses commands to tell the players which color goals to pass through
 - The pass must be completed with the left/right foot only

Coaching Tips

1. Make sure to encourage the players to speak to each other
 - **Before the pass** is played to make sure the other player is ready to receive the ball
 - **When finding a new goal** to pass through



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players use **simple words or gestures** (e.g. “pass”, “here”, pointing) to express needs.

- What words or signs did you use to show what you need?
- Did your teammate understand you? How did you notice?
- When was it difficult to say what you needed?

2

Players **pause briefly** and react appropriately **before acting** when a teammate speaks or signals.

- Did you listen before moving or passing?
- What happened when you did not listen carefully?
- How did listening help your team?

3

Players **wait for your turn** to speak, receive the ball, or act (in small-sided games or partner exercises).

- Did you wait for your turn before acting?
- How did it feel when everyone took turns?
- What happened when someone did not wait?

Training

9-10
years



3.2. Stage 2 (9-10 years)

3.2.1. Stage characteristics

At this stage, players become more socially aware and increasingly enjoy cooperative activities. They are able to express themselves more clearly and begin to recognise that others may interpret messages differently. Communication becomes more purposeful, particularly in partner and small-group situations, and first non-verbal signals gain importance in game contexts.

3.2.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, communication development focuses on improving clarity of expression and recognising that communication involves both sending and receiving messages. Players begin to understand that misunderstandings can occur and that communication supports cooperation in football situations. Structured partner and small-sided activities provide opportunities to practise clearer verbal and non-verbal interaction.

In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

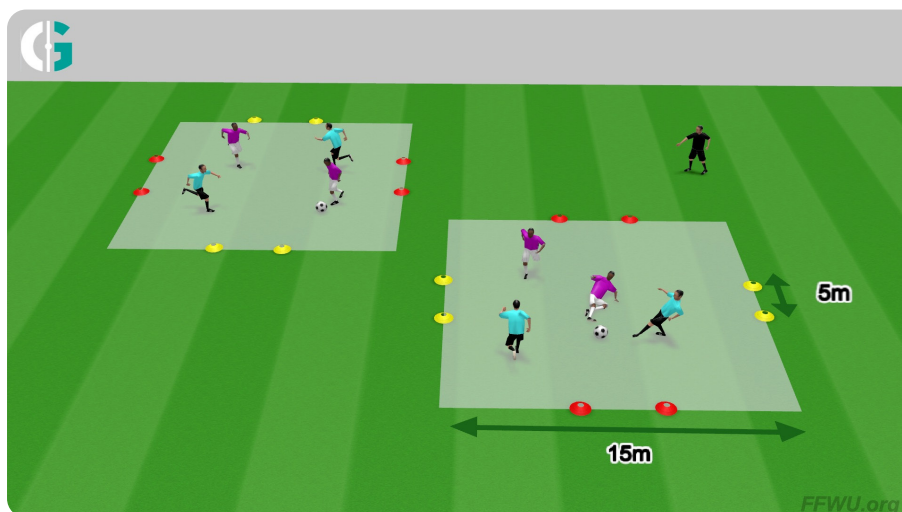
- 1 Learn to express thoughts and emotions more clearly
- 2 Begin to understand that messages can be interpreted differently
- 3 Practise simple cooperation through communication

3.2.3. Coach insight

At this stage, communication should be reinforced as a cooperative tool rather than only an individual skill. Coaches should intentionally create partner and small-group situations that require players to clarify, adjust, and repeat messages. Highlighting moments of misunderstanding and guiding players to rephrase their communication strengthens awareness that messages can be interpreted differently. Positive reinforcement of cooperative language builds confidence and supports early tactical coordination.

EXERCISE

2V2 ON TWO OPPOSITE GOALS



	Players	8+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	2 x 15 x 5 m
	Equipment	2 balls, 4 bibs, 16 cones (8 cones per field)
	Duration	total: 12 min play: 3 x 3 min breaks: 1 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- A 2 v 2 is played on a small field, played for three halves each three minutes with a minute break in between
- Several fields can be set up according to the available players
- Each team scores into two goals on opposite sites
- Goals are scored by dribbling over the goal line
- Variations:
 - If the players are more advanced, more players can be added, i.e. 3v3 or 4v4
 - A tournament can be introduced where each team is playing against each other team

Coaching Tips

1. Encourage the players to **use commands or signs** to point to open spaces or when they want to receive a pass
2. Since the players are only two but have to defend and attack onto two goals, **it is necessary they communicate**



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players use **simple words or gestures** (*here, switch, thumbs up*) to express intentions and emotions.

- What words or signs did you use to make your message clear? Did your teammate react the way you expected?
- When was it difficult to say exactly what you meant?

2

Players **notice misunderstandings** and **repeat or change the message** to make it clearer during the game.

- Did someone misunderstand what you said or showed?
- What did you change to make your message clearer?
- How did it help when you explained your message?

3

Players **use words or signals to coordinate movement and decisions** with teammates during the game.

- When did you speak or signal to work together?
- What happened when you did not communicate with your teammate?

Training

11-12
years



3.3. Stage 3 (11-12 years)

3.3.1. Stage characteristics

At this stage, players become more peer-oriented and increasingly value group belonging. They are capable of expressing more complex ideas and begin to understand that communication influences teamwork and outcomes. Tactical awareness starts to develop, and communication becomes more purposeful in supporting coordination and collective play.

3.3.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, communication development focuses on clarity in group situations and on recognising the influence of communication on team performance. Players begin to understand that communication shapes cooperation, problem-solving, and outcomes during play. The coach's communication behaviour also becomes more consciously observed and modelled.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

1

Develop the ability to communicate ideas clearly in group situations

2

Understand that communication influences teamwork and outcomes

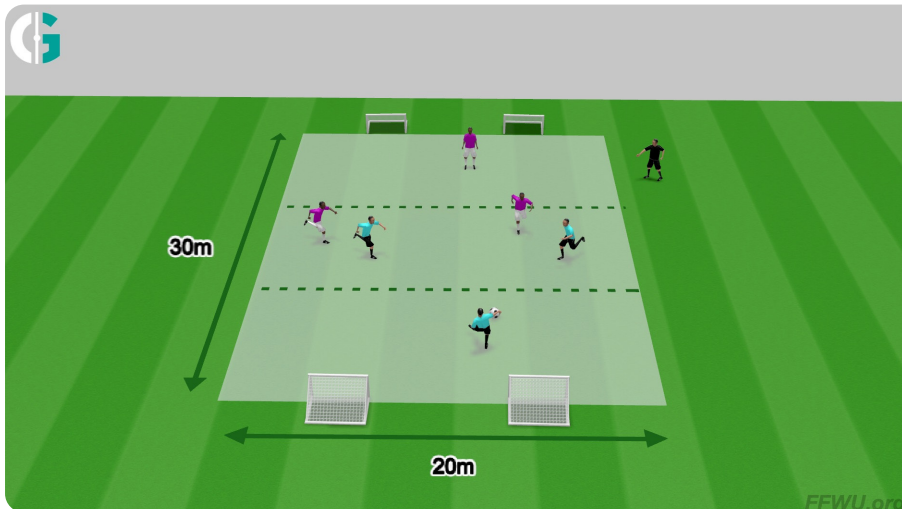
3

Recognise the importance of modelling respectful communication

3.3.3. Coach insight

At this stage, communication becomes socially influential. Coaches should emphasise clarity, respect, and constructive language during group discussions and tactical moments. Since players increasingly observe and imitate adult behaviour, the coach's communication style directly shapes team norms. Encouraging players to reflect on how communication affects performance strengthens awareness and responsibility.

POSSESSION AND SCORING



	Players	6+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	30×20 m
	Equipment	1 ball, 3 bibs, 8 cones, 4 mini goals
	Duration	total: 16 min play: 4 × 3 min breaks: 1 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- A 3 v 3 is played onto four goals
- However, one player remains in the attacking zone (attacking third of the pitch and the two remaining players must keep possession of the ball for 6 seconds until they are allowed to make use of the third player and attack the goals
- Should the two players lose the ball, the other team follows the same idea; two players keep possession for 6 seconds until they attack onto their goals
- During the possession play, the player in the attacking third can continuously change with a random player of his team
- Variations: Passes to be completed before attacking game is started, for instance:
 - With the left foot only
 - Direct play only

Coaching Tips

1. The **Conflicts** arising during the game should (similar like in street football) **be solved through the players** communicating with each other
2. You should **count out loud the 6 seconds** or show fingers counting the 6 seconds; use variations to encourage the players to get used to both verbal and nonverbal language
3. Encourage the players to **communicate about passing and movement directions**
 - Verbal and non-verbal
 - The players can also discuss before the game



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players use **clear verbal cues or agreed signals** to organise passing and movement during possession.

- Did you clearly communicate your idea or intention?
- How did your team react to your communication?
- Was your message easy for others to understand?

2

Players see how **communication affects** ball retention, attacking opportunities, and defensive organisation.

- Did communication help to create chances?
- What happened without communication?
- How did communication influence the result?

3

Players **communicate respectfully** and observe how it affects the group during moments of disagreement.

- How did you react when someone made a mistake?
- Did respectful communication solve problems?
- What did you notice about coach's communicate?

Training

13-14
years



3.4. Stage 4 (13-14 Years)

3.4.1. Stage characteristics

At this stage, players experience increased emotional intensity and stronger peer influence. They are capable of abstract thinking and can consciously differentiate between types and purposes of communication. Social comparison and emerging leadership dynamics influence how communication is used within the team. Players begin to take greater responsibility for how their communication affects others.

3.4.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, communication development focuses on differentiating between emotional and task-related communication and applying appropriate strategies in challenging situations. Players begin to take responsibility for how their communication influences team dynamics and conflict resolution. Communication increasingly becomes a tool for leadership and collective regulation.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

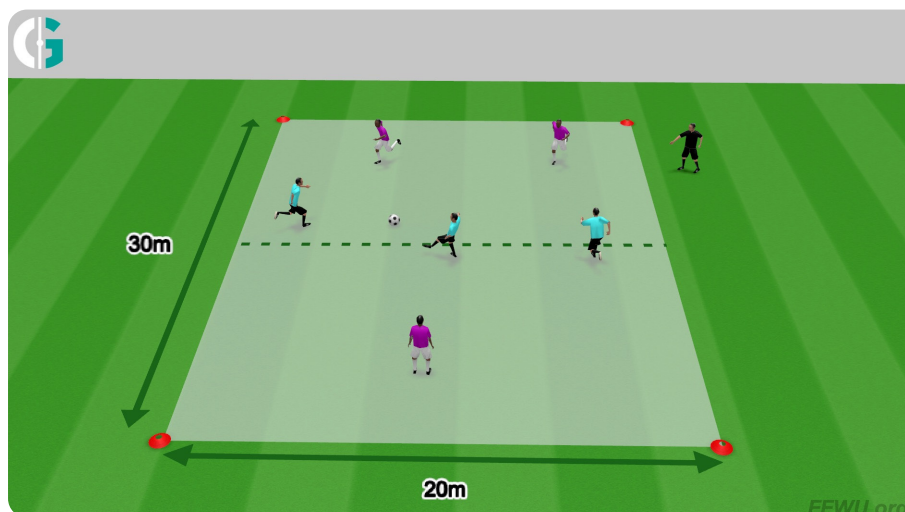
- ① Apply communication strategies in emotionally challenging situations
- ② Differentiate between emotional and task-related communication
- ③ Take responsibility for communication within the team

3.4.3. Coach insight

At this stage, coaches should explicitly address the difference between emotional communication and tactical communication. Players must learn when encouragement and emotional support are helpful during play and when concise, task-focused information is required. Coaches should model composed communication in emotionally charged situations and guide players to reflect on the impact of their words on team climate and performance.

EXERCISE

3V2 WITH COUNTERATTACK



	Players	6+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	30×20 m
	Equipment	1 ball, 3 bibs, 4 cones
	Duration	total: 16 min play: 4× 3 min breaks: 1 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Two goals are set up (20m width). One team of 3 players attacks alternately both goals aiming to dribble over the goal lines
- One goal is always defended by 2 players while the third stands in front of the other goal waiting for a counter pass from the defenders once they have won the ball
- After the attacking players have lost the ball, they can win it back in their half of the pitch
- After each attack, one of the two defending players must immediately run to help the third player to again create a 3v2 situation
- Swap attacking and defending players every 3min
- Variations:
 - This game can also be played 2v1, however, the field should be made smaller accordingly
 - A tournament can be played if enough players are present to form multiple teams (ideally 6)

Coaching Tips

1. Encourage **communication** between the players
2. Make sure, a 3 v 2 situation is always created. **If needed, pause the game** to explain it again
3. Assign **one player** of each team as the leader with the **communication responsibility** (however, all players should focus on communicating)
4. Let the players **solve conflicts by themselves**, don't act as a referee



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players maintain **composed and constructive during competitive phases** even after mistakes.

- How did you communicate after losing the ball or conceding?
- What changed when emotions increased?

2

Players **use encouragement** while the game is running and **short tactical instructions** during breaks.

- When did you use encouragement?
- When did you give tactical information?
- Did the right type of communication improve your team?

3

Players actively **support positive team communication** and address negative language constructively.

- Did you take responsibility for the way your team communicated?
- How did your behaviour influence others?

Training

15-16
years



3.5. Stage 5 (15-16 years)

3.5.1. Stage characteristics

At this stage, players are capable of more advanced reflection and social responsibility. They understand the broader impact of communication on team culture and performance. Pressure situations become more frequent and meaningful, and players are increasingly able to regulate their behaviour and give constructive feedback. Communication begins to take on a performance-oriented and leadership-related function.

3.5.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, communication development focuses on intentional use of communication to support team performance and constructive feedback processes. Players learn to regulate their communication in pressure situations and to contribute to a performance-oriented team climate. Communication becomes increasingly strategic and responsibility-based.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

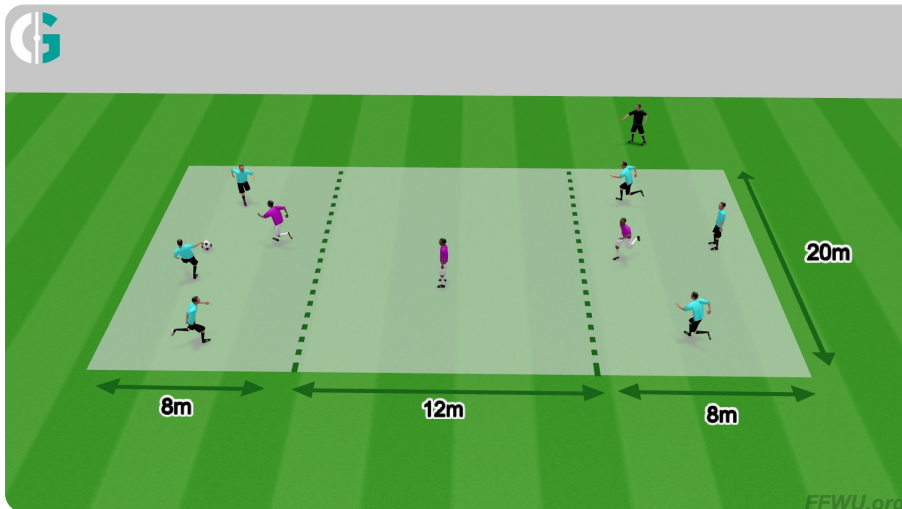
- 1 Use communication intentionally to support team performance
- 2 Give and receive constructive feedback
- 3 Maintain effective communication under pressure

3.5.3. Coach insight

At this stage, coaches should emphasise communication as a performance tool. Players must understand that clarity, timing, and tone directly influence execution and team cohesion. Coaches should model constructive feedback and create structured moments for peer feedback. High-pressure scenarios should be used intentionally to practise maintaining composure and clarity in communication.

EXERCISE

FORWARD PASSING



	Players	9+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	28×20 m
	Equipment	1 ball, 3 bibs, 8 cones
	Duration	total: 15 min play: 3× 4 min breaks: 1 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- The field is split up into three zones
 - In the two zones on the side, three attacking player and one defending player each are positioned
 - In the middle zone, one defending player is positioned
- The goal is for the three attacking players on one side to pass the ball to the other three attacking players on the other side
- One defending player in each zone tries to interrupt these passes
- Goal is to complete as many forward passes as possible (change tasks every 3 min)
- The players are not allowed to leave their zones
- Variations:
 - A specific number of passes needs to be completed before the forward pass is allowed
 - For younger or less experienced players, the field should be a quarter field. A tournament can be played if enough players are present to form multiple teams (ideally 6)

Coaching Tips

- It is important that the players **communicate** verbally or non-verbally with a player on the other side **before a forward pass** is executed
- They should also communicate with each other **when a forward pass is best played**; sometimes a player on their own side is better positioned
- The **defending players** should similarly communicate **about their positioning**



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players **use clear, agreed words or signals** to improve timing, positioning, and forward passing decisions.

- How did communication influence your team's success in completing forward passes?
- What happened when communication was missing?

2

Players **provide respectful feedback** and **respond openly to feedback** from teammates during breaks.

- Did you give feedback in a clear and respectful way?
- How did you react when receiving feedback?
- Did feedback improve your next action?

3

Players **maintain short, clear, and composed communication** when defenders apply pressure.

- Was it harder to communicate under pressure?
- What helped you stay clear and calm?
- Did communication help you manage the situation?

Training

17-18
years



3.6. Stage 6 (17-18 years)

3.6.1. Stage characteristics

At this stage, players operate with increased autonomy and responsibility, both within the team and in their broader life transitions. Communication becomes strategic, reflective, and leadership-oriented. Players are capable of analysing their own communication patterns and understanding how communication influences cohesion, performance, and team culture, especially in complex and high-pressure environments.

3.6.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, communication development focuses on strategic integration across all phases of competition and on reflective awareness of communication impact. Players learn to sustain constructive communication in complex, emotionally demanding situations and to consciously shape team culture through their communication behaviour.

During the reflection phase, the players should be able to:

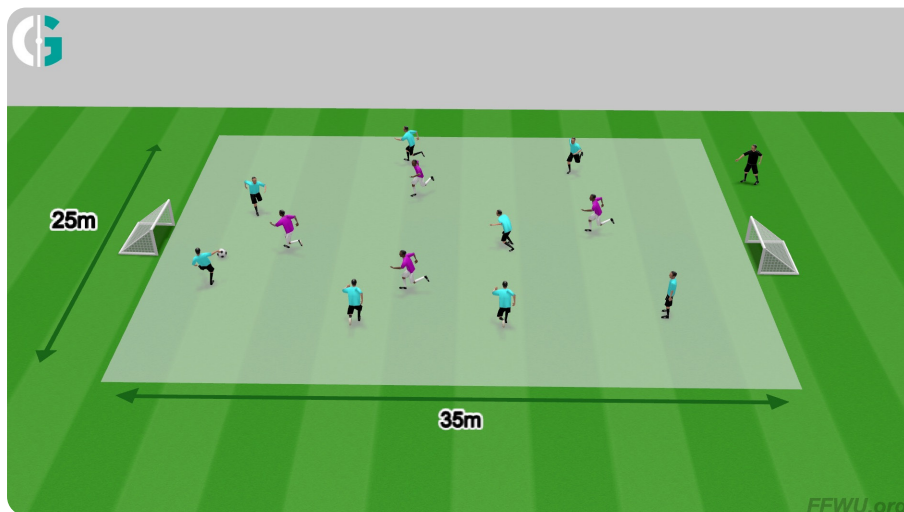
- 1 Integrate communication strategically before, during and after competition
- 2 Reflect critically on the impact of personal communication
- 3 Sustain constructive communication in complex and high-pressure environment

3.6.3. Coach insight

At this stage, coaches should treat communication as a leadership and cultural tool. Players must understand that their words influence not only immediate actions but also long-term cohesion and performance stability. Coaches should facilitate reflective discussions about communication impact and encourage senior players to model composed, strategic, and constructive communication in all phases of competition.

EXERCISE

HIGH PRESSURE COMMUNICATION



	Players	9+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	35 × 25 m
	Equipment	1 ball, 6 bibs in 2 different colors, 2 mini-goals
	Duration	total: 18 min play: 3 × 5 min breaks: 1 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- The players are split up into three teams (teams of 3, 4, 5 or 6 depending on number of available players); the field size should be adjusted accordingly
- Two teams are the possession teams, and one is the attacking team
- The attacking team should try and win the ball from the possession teams and then score a goal on either side
- After 5 minutes, the teams should be changed so that all teams attack at least once
- Variations:
 - Smaller teams will require the players to exert more communication and movement
 - A tournament can be played if enough players are present to form multiple teams (ideally 6)

Coaching Tips

1. Let the players **play** for a few minutes **without having had a discussion**
2. Encourage them then, during the break, to **discuss tactics and strategies** to win the ball from the other teams and score a goal
3. Give them some time afterwards to **give each other feedback**



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players participate actively in discussion, **communicate clearly** during play and **contribute to reflection**.

- How did communication influence decision-making?
- Did post-play reflection improve understanding for the next round?

2

Players **evaluate** how their tone, clarity, and timing **influence teammates** during and after exercises.

- How did your communication affect your teammates' confidence or focus? What would you change about your communication next time?

3

Players maintain **composed, respectful**, and solution-oriented communication during chaotic phases.

- Was it difficult to stay constructive under pressure?
- What helped you regulate your tone and clarity?
- Did your communication stabilise the team?

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