



SOCIAL COMPETENCIES

COMPASSION

SHARINGGOALS

THE SYSTEMIC COACHING MANUAL
FOR FOOTBALL COACHES
AROUND THE WORLD

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1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Yaghoubi Jami et al. (2023) conclude that empathy is a multidimensional construct that is not only possessed but may also be achieved through interaction between individuals.

1.1. Scientific research

1.1.1. Definition

Empathy is a complex and multidimensional construct that has led to numerous scientific definitions. Kanch et al. (2023) refer to empathy as a multifaceted psychological phenomenon characterised by the capacity to understand and share the emotional and cognitive states of others. Empathy involves perceiving and resonating with people's feelings and thoughts. Based on this understanding, it often leads to a sense of emotional connection and a willingness to provide support or assistance. Yaghoubi Jami et al. (2023) conclude that empathy is a multidimensional construct that is not only possessed but may also be achieved through interaction between individuals. Zeyer and Dillon (2019) define empathy as cognitive and emotional responses to others on perceived meanings or emotions in situations as if they were one's own, emphasising cognitive and emotional characteristics in interpersonal relationships.

Various researchers have defined empathy as possessing emotional and cognitive components, as the construct is of a psychological and biological nature. Cuff et al. (2016) define affective empathy as the experience of similar, yet not identical, emotions of the observed person. On the contrary, cognitive empathy refers to the cognitive process of understanding the mind. In other words, affective empathy is "feeling," and cognitive empathy is "understanding" the emotional state of others. Vieten et al. (2024) identify in their scoping review different concepts of empathy that have at least four elements: (1) Perspective taking (i.e., understanding the point of view of others), (2) fantasy (i.e., imagining oneself into the feelings and actions of others), (3) empathic concern (i.e., accessing other-oriented feelings of sympathy or concern), and (4) personal distress (i.e., unease in intense interpersonal interactions). This is one of many approaches to conceptualise empathy and define the most important aspects and components.

Vieten et al. (2024) found 503 different measures of empathy and compassion, concluding that a variety of different concepts and models of empathy exist. In their studies of different measuring instruments of empathy, Innamorati et al. (2019) have confirmed that the Empathic Experience Scale (EES) is a valid instrument to measure empathy. Unlike many other tools, the EES differentiates between empathy behaviours and cognitive and affective empathy. An adaptation of existing tools has been made for the sports context as Erkuş and Yakupoğlu (2001) have developed the Empathy Scale in Sports Situations (ESSS). In their scoping review to identify and validate existing tools for evaluating empathy and compassion, Vieten et al. (2024) created the online tool CEM-IDV, which aids researchers in identifying the most relevant questions and measures for their specific contexts, inside and outside of the sports world.

Compassion and empathy are closely related constructs that have often been used together or used interchangeably in literature. Compassion, or the heartfelt desire to reduce the suffering of self and others, promotes social connection and significantly predicts overall quality of life and well-being. Self-compassion focuses on the individual mindset, caring about yourself; therefore, self-love must be seen as an emotional competency. Compassion and empathy are multidimensional and have been described as affective, cognitive, behavioural, intentional, motivational, spiritual, moral, and others.

As a result of their systematic review, Strauss et al. (2016) proposed five elements of compassion: (1) recognising suffering, (2) understanding the universality of human suffering, (3) feeling for the person suffering, (4) tolerating uncomfortable feelings, and (5) motivation to act/acting to alleviate suffering. In his research, Gilbert (2010) identified six characteristics of compassion: (1) sensitivity, (2) sympathy, (3) empathy, (4) motivation/caring, (5) distress tolerance, and (6) non-judgment. Those are just two models of various others that exist in scientific literature. When it comes to instruments to measure empathy and compassion, an even higher number of instruments exist. In her model of social empathy, Segal (2018) uses two different models to explain the complexity of empathy: interpersonal and social empathy.

1.1.2. Impact on performance

In their research about empathic behaviour in team sports, Certel (2013) further remarks that empathy is an important factor for better team spirit, healthy intra-team communication, and team success. A study by Milošević et al. (2024) showed the correlation between mental toughness, empathy, and match performance. Their study with high-level female basketball players has been able to link the results and suggest further investigation of the topic to explore links between empathy and creative, collaborative play. This was the only study that tried to link the empathy skills of athletes with a direct impact on performance.

Empathy and compassion also have a direct impact on football performance, particularly in situations involving pressure, mistakes, or emotional intensity. Players who are emotionally attuned to one another are better equipped to maintain focus and cooperation during demanding moments.

Empathy supports performance by:

- helping players recover quickly after errors
- reducing emotional escalation and distraction
- improving cooperation and collective decision-making
- supporting sustained effort and engagement

When empathetic behaviour is present, teams are more likely to:

- stay organised after setbacks
- maintain confidence and motivation
- support effective communication under pressure
- perform consistently across changing game situations

Rather than weakening competitiveness, empathy enhances performance by stabilising emotional dynamics. Players who feel supported are more willing to take initiative, remain engaged, and contribute positively to the team's collective performance.

1.1.3. Impact on cohesion

Coaches in team sports can create an environment where they can encourage empathy and establish healthy connections with other team members, which later can be transferred into a society where understanding different values and compassion becomes increasingly important. Anderson-Butcher (2019) analyses Youth Sports as a vehicle for social development. Positive Youth Development (PYD) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) are two concepts that have similarities and differences, and both aim to contribute to a positive sports experience. Turan and Cirmi (2021) observed that athletes' empathic skills varied depending on their years of involvement in sports. Certel (2013) investigated empathy and self-esteem among team sports players and found a significant difference between male and female athletes. In their research, they conclude that training and social activities for the acquisition of self-awareness and interaction with teammates are needed, as they may play a key role in the improvement of emotional empathy levels of athletes, particularly male football players. Yang, Anderson & Kang (2023) defined a scientific empathy scale for the school environment, and four of the factors can be adapted to the sports environment: sensitivity, situational interest, empathetic concern, and empathetic understanding. Kanch et al. (2023) summarise in their research into neural mechanisms of empathy that its "extensive web of brain regions, cognitive processes, and emotional experiences demonstrates the staggering complexity of human social relationships." Recent neurological studies about prosocial behaviour have shown that various brain regions (medial prefrontal cortex, amygdala, insula, ventromedial prefrontal cortex) are highly active when trying to understand others' mental states (Decety & Steinbeis, 2020).

As empathy and compassion are strongly connected concepts, we will examine compassion, yet its research within team sports still needs to be improved. Jerome and Jordan (2007) found that participants in the study were experiencing a heightened presence with another in a mediated environment where there is total absorption and absolute engagement which may promote a better understanding of empathy, compassion, and the facilitation of healthier relationships. They indicate investigating more about the principles of empathy and processes of hyperpresence in a mediated setting and applying them to the physical world will make it possible to teach individuals how to focus their full attention on critical subtleties in relationships and inform new perspectives in decision-making and problem-solving.

Empathy and compassion play a central role in building and sustaining team cohesion. When players are able to recognise and respond to the emotions of teammates, they contribute to a climate of emotional safety and belonging, which is essential for group functioning in football.

Empathetic behaviour strengthens cohesion by:

- helping players feel accepted after mistakes or setbacks
- reducing social isolation during emotionally challenging moments
- supporting inclusion across different personalities and roles
- fostering mutual respect and care within the group

Teams in which empathy is present are more likely to:

- remain connected during difficult phases of a match
- support each other instead of assigning blame
- maintain trust and openness in communication
- recover collectively from errors or disappointment

Over time, consistent empathetic interactions build strong interpersonal bonds. Players learn that emotional responses are acknowledged and managed constructively, which reinforces cohesion both on and off the field.

1.1.4. Segal's Model of Social Empathy

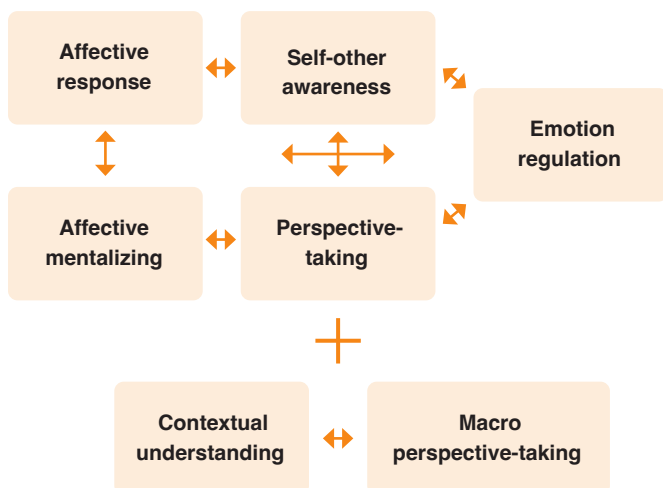


Figure 1: Social empathy, Segal (2018).

The arrows show the dynamic processes that happen in the brain and constantly change according to the situation. The five interpersonal components are affective response, affective mentalising, self-other awareness, perspective-taking, and emotion regulation. The intensity varies depending on the situation, the triggers, and their developmental

status. When they are all activated simultaneously, we experience empathy towards others at high intensity. The social empathy model includes two more components: contextual understanding and macro perspective-taking. Understanding the context refers to specific situations that people face in their lives and other events during their life spans. Taking the macro-perspective requires the ability to analyse the cultural circumstances and the history of the groups they belong to.

Segal's model highlights that empathy is not a single skill, but a dynamic interaction between affective response, cognitive understanding, self-awareness, emotion regulation, and contextual perspective-taking. In the context of football, these components operate simultaneously during play: players perceive teammates' emotions, interpret situations from different perspectives, regulate their own reactions, and decide how to respond constructively. Empathy therefore becomes a functional team competence rather than merely a personal trait. When players develop both interpersonal empathy (within the team) and contextual awareness (understanding pressure, roles, and social background), they contribute to emotional stability, cooperation, and collective performance. In this way, empathy supports not only relationships, but also decision-making and behaviour under competitive conditions.

For future research, Kanch et al. (2023) suggest diving deeper into the science of empathy and its neurological foundation to increase our scientific understanding of human behaviour and its effects on professions, including psychology. Many scientists aim to understand better how empathy is processed in the brain, which can lead to interventions that improve empathy, communication, and interpersonal interactions.

1.1.5. Development of Empathy

The development of empathy in team sports can be intentionally modelled and strengthened by coaches. Similar to trustworthiness, empathic capacity is shaped both by personal dispositions and by observable behaviours. Players learn empathy not only by understanding emotions cognitively, but by repeatedly engaging in emotionally aware interactions.

The following framework adapts scientific models of empathy (affective, cognitive, regulatory, and behavioural components) to the football context and provides reflection questions to strengthen empathic behaviour within the team.

Who you are (Intrapersonal foundation of empathy)

Component	Reflection Questions
Emotional Awareness (Affective empathy)	- Do I notice quickly when a teammate is frustrated, disappointed, or happy? - Can I name the emotion I observe?
Perspective-Taking Ability (Cognitive empathy)	- Can I understand why my teammate feels this way, even if I experience the situation differently? - Can I imagine how the game looks from their position?
Self–Other Differentiation	- Do I recognise that their emotions belong to them and not to me? - Can I avoid overreacting or taking their emotions personally?
Emotion Regulation	- Can I stay calm while understanding someone else's frustration? - Can I control my reactions when emotions are intense?

What you do (Behavioural expression of empathy)

Component	Reflection Questions
Supportive Response	- When I notice a teammate struggling, do I say or do something supportive? - What exactly do I say?
Timing & Sensitivity	- Do I choose the right moment to speak? - Do I know when to give space and when to step closer?
Constructive Communication	- Are my words respectful and calm, especially under pressure? - Do I use "I language" rather than blaming language?
Compassionate Action	- Do I act to reduce emotional tension in the group? - Do I help teammates feel included after mistakes?

Empathy, like trust, develops dynamically over time. While some players may show natural sensitivity toward others, empathic behaviour becomes stable only through repeated practice in emotionally meaningful situations. In football, empathy influences communication quality, emotional recovery after mistakes, cooperation under pressure, and long-term team cohesion. By strengthening both internal awareness and observable behaviour, players actively contribute to a supportive and high-performing team environment.

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.

Empathy is not a single capacity that matures on one timetable. Its affective component, the tendency to resonate with what another person feels, appears earliest, while the cognitive component of understanding another person's mental state rests on separate mechanisms that develop later and partly independently (Decety & Steinbeis, 2020). The affective foundations are largely established in early childhood, before a child reaches organised football.

Across middle childhood the cognitive side continues to build, as children become steadily better at reading situations from a viewpoint other than their own. Development here is gradual rather than sudden, and it is supported by the same growth in perspective-taking that underpins Communication and Conflict Management.

Adolescence is where the evidence complicates the familiar assumption that empathy simply keeps growing. A six-year longitudinal study following 283 boys and 214 girls from age 13 to 18 found that perspective-taking did increase, though more steeply

in girls. Empathic concern, however, remained stable in girls while boys showed a decline from early to middle adolescence, rebounding to their earlier level only afterwards. Boys who were physically more mature reported lower empathic concern than their less developed peers (Van der Graaff et al., 2014).

For this competence the honest conclusion is therefore not two clean windows of accelerated growth. Early childhood is genuinely foundational, but the adolescent phase covered by Stages 4 and 5 is better understood as a period of risk than of easy gain, at least for boys. That reading has direct consequences in football, where early-maturing boys are systematically over-represented in selected squads, which means the players most likely to be in the room are also those the evidence flags as most likely to be dipping.

What should be trained during that dip is compassion rather than empathy alone. Sharing another's distress can produce either empathic distress, an aversive self-oriented reaction associated with withdrawal, or compassion, a concern for the other person carried by the motivation to help; the two rest on different neural systems, and compassion responds to training (Singer & Klimecki, 2014). Football supplies the occasions constantly: an injured opponent, a teammate who missed the decisive penalty, a substitute who has not played in weeks.

Empathy and compassion therefore warrant deliberate attention at every stage, and most deliberately in the middle stages, where the developmental trend is least likely to do the work unaided.



1.3. Correlation with other skills and competencies

Compassion is a complex psychological phenomenon that includes understanding and sharing both the emotional and cognitive states of others.



Correlation with Emotional Competencies

Compassion is closely linked to emotional development. Self-reflection helps individuals recognise the needs of others, while motivation encourages supportive actions. Coping with emotions enables people to respond with understanding and care in difficult situations.

Correlation with Physical Skills

While no direct connection is identified, compassion can indirectly support physical performance by creating an inclusive and encouraging environment where individuals feel supported.

Correlation with Technical Abilities

While no direct connection is identified, compassion can indirectly support technical development by encouraging players to help others learn, share feedback, and improve together.

Correlation with Social Competencies

Compassion is strongly connected to all social competencies. It strengthens empathy, supports effective communication, builds trust, and helps resolve conflicts constructively. Compassion also promotes positive relationships, teamwork, and leadership within the group.

Correlation with Cognitive Skills

Compassion supports decision making, problem solving, and critical thinking. Understanding another person's situation requires considering different perspectives and choosing actions that support both individual and group wellbeing.

Correlation with Tactical Principles

Compassion supports tactical principles by helping players understand the strengths, needs, and preferences of their teammates. This improves cooperation, communication, and collective decision making in both attacking and defensive situations.

1.4. Key learnings

- Empathy is a complex psychological phenomenon that includes understanding and sharing both the emotional and cognitive states of others.
- Empathy is often broken into affective (feeling) and cognitive (understanding) components. These elements allow individuals to resonate emotionally with others and cognitively comprehend their mental states.
- Vieten et al. (2024) outline four fundamental aspects of empathy: perspective-taking, fantasy, empathic concern, and personal distress, providing a broad understanding of empathy's psychological dimensions.
- Though related, compassion emphasises the motivation to alleviate suffering, whereas empathy focuses on emotional and cognitive resonance with others' experiences. Both constructs predict well-being and social connectedness.
- Segal's Social Empathy Model incorporates both interpersonal (affective response, self-awareness) and social (contextual understanding, macro perspective-taking) components of empathy, reflecting empathy's dynamic, situationally adaptive processes.
- In team sports, empathy fosters team cohesion, better communication, and a stronger team spirit. Research has linked empathic skills to increased cooperation, creative play, and improved performance in high-level sports.
- Empathy as a Vehicle for Social Development: In youth sports, empathy contributes to positive youth development (PYD) and social-emotional learning (SEL), helping young athletes develop emotional empathy and self-awareness.
- Studies highlight gender differences in empathy, particularly in sports, where male and female athletes display varying levels of emotional empathy, suggesting tailored approaches to fostering empathy in each group.
- Empathy activates complex brain regions, including the medial prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and insula, underscoring empathy's biological basis and its importance in understanding human social behaviour.



1.5. From science to practice

Empathy develops progressively across childhood and adolescence as children transition from egocentric perspectives to advanced cognitive and affective perspective-taking. Scientific research highlights that genuine empathy integrates emotional resonance, cognitive understanding, perspective flexibility, and prosocial motivation. In football, empathy influences mutual support, psychological resilience, swift tactical reads, and collective team cohesion. The following stages translate these scientific insights into age-appropriate developmental priorities and practical orientation.

Stage 1 7-8 years



Awareness, safety, honesty

At this stage, empathy is primarily rooted in affective experience—children begin to notice emotions in themselves and others without yet fully understanding their causes. Emotional resonance is simple and immediate, supported by a strong need for safety and reassurance. Empathy develops through basic emotional awareness and early experiences of care, which form the foundation for later perspective-taking. The focus is on recognising emotions and responding with simple, supportive behaviour.

Stage 2 9-10 years



Expression, listening, understanding others

As cognitive capacities grow, empathy expands beyond emotional resonance toward recognising and differentiating emotions in others. Children begin to connect feelings with situations and learn that teammates may experience the same event differently. This stage reflects the early integration of affective and cognitive empathy, allowing players to listen, observe, and respond more intentionally. Supportive behaviour becomes more conscious and socially directed.

Stage 3 11-12 years



Responsibility, perspective, repair

Empathy increasingly involves perspective-taking, enabling players to understand others' emotional experiences more deeply. At this stage, empathy supports social repair—especially after mistakes, frustration, or emotional tension. Players begin to take responsibility for how their responses affect others, reflecting empathy's role in regulating social interactions. This marks a shift from noticing emotions to actively responding in ways that maintain relationships.

Stage 4 13-14 years



Regulation, timing, respectful interaction

With improved emotional regulation, empathy becomes more situationally adaptive. Players learn not only to feel with others, but to choose appropriate timing and form of response, even under pressure. This aligns with research highlighting empathy as a dynamic process involving self-awareness and emotional control. Respectful, consistent support becomes a stabilising force in emotionally demanding situations.

Stage 5 15-16 years



Proactivity, support, adaptation

Empathy at this stage becomes increasingly proactive. Players begin to anticipate emotional needs before difficulties escalate, reflecting more advanced social awareness. This aligns with models of empathy that integrate contextual understanding and social responsibility. Compassionate behaviour supports inclusion and strengthens team cohesion by preventing emotional isolation.

Stage 6 17-18 years



Leadership, reflection, performance impact

At the highest developmental stage, empathy is fully integrated into leadership behaviour and reflective practice. Players understand empathy's impact not only on relationships, but also on team performance and collective functioning. Empathy now includes awareness of broader social dynamics and intentional reflection on emotional interactions. This stage connects empathic behaviour directly to cohesion, communication, and performance outcomes.

2. COACHES' BEHAVIOUR

2.1. Coaching style

2.1.1. Scientific grounding

Certel (2013) suggests that coaches help players develop empathic behaviour by increasing their self-awareness, providing listening skills and assertiveness-trainings, and presenting experiences using “I language” and how to show respect and tolerance. Coaches as educators can play a significant role in the character development of children and adolescents (Anderson-Butcher, 2019). Silke et al. (2024) found through their focal group discussion with adolescents that other family and non-family members also can play an important role besides parents. They mention neighbours, teachers, and people in general; interestingly, nobody in the study mentioned coaches playing a role in developing empathy (Silke et al., 2024). Many different leadership styles have been analysed; empathic leadership is widely researched in the business environment, yet research in sports is relatively new (Holt & Marques, 2012).

Not every leader can positively impact others in certain leadership areas, and this can have two causes. First, the limited ability to bring people together, to agree and work on the same goals, and second, the lack of ability to understand others and show empathy and compassion (Holt & Marques, 2012). Most leaders work with a wide variety of people, and to be efficient, empathy helps to establish those relationships (Holt & Marques, 2012). Studies of compassion in leadership have shown that the more a leader's compassion or kindness moves followers, the more loyalty they show to their leader (Haidt, 2004, cited by Sear, 2023). In summary, the empathic leadership style has been recognised as its own style with unique attributes that differ from other concepts (Holt & Marques, 2012).

In team sports, empathy fosters team cohesion, better communication, and a stronger team spirit (Certel, 2013). Research has linked empathic skills to increased cooperation, creative play, and improved performance in high-level sports (Milošević et al., 2024). Empathy also contributes to positive youth development (PYD) and social-emotional learning (SEL), helping young athletes develop emotional awareness and self-regulation (Anderson-Butcher, 2019; Silke et al., 2024).

As a multidimensional construct that integrates affective and cognitive components, empathy supports both interpersonal understanding and broader social functioning (Cuff et al., 2016; Vieten et al., 2024).

2.1.2. Practical implications

Practically, this means that a coach consistently models emotional awareness and respectful atonement to others. Players develop empathy not primarily through instruction, but through observing how the coach responds to emotions — especially in moments of frustration, disappointment, or success.

A coach who strengthens empathy:

- Notices and acknowledges players' emotions without dismissing them
- Responds to mistakes with understanding rather than immediate criticism
- Encourages perspective-taking during disagreements
- Creates space for players to express feelings safely
- Reinforces supportive behaviour between teammates

Especially in emotionally intense moments, such as after losses or conflicts, the coach's reactions shape the team's emotional climate. If the coach regulates emotions calmly and responds with balanced understanding, players learn that emotions are manageable and do not threaten belonging.

When a coach consistently models empathy, team cohesion strengthens because players feel seen, respected, and valued. Performance benefits because emotionally secure players recover faster from mistakes, communicate more openly, and remain engaged under pressure.

2.2. Choice of words

Coaches shape empathy and compassion through their choice of language and communication style. Football-specific vocabulary makes a coach credible; empathic coaching additionally requires words that acknowledge emotions, perspectives, and interpersonal dynamics. When coaches name emotions, describe social situations, and verbalise supportive responses, players experience them as both knowledgeable and emotionally attuned.

With adolescents, language becomes a key tool for building relational depth and emotional safety. Coaches regularly facilitate conversations around personal experiences, disagreements, or emotionally charged situations within the team. This demands words that validate emotions without judgment and create a climate in which players feel safe to express themselves and listen respectfully to each other.

Stage 1 7-8 years



Language should help identify emotions in simple terms. Example phrasing:

- “How do you think they feel?”
- “Look at their face.”
- “We don’t hurt teammates.”
- “Be kind.”

Words remain concrete and direct.

Stage 2 9-10 years



Language introduces perspective-taking. Example phrasing:

- “How would you feel in that situation?”
- “Listen before you answer.”
- “Try to understand first.”
- “Respect their feelings.”

The coach guides emotional understanding.

Stage 3 11-12 years



Language supports distinction between intention and impact. Example phrasing:

- “Did you mean that, or did it just sound that way?”
- “How did your words affect them?”
- “Explain your side calmly.”
- “Understanding helps the team.”

Athletes begin reflecting on relational impact.

Stage 4 13-14 years



Language encourages emotional regulation and compassion. Example phrasing:

- “Pause and consider their perspective.”
- “Respond, don’t react.”
- “Show respect even when you disagree.”
- “Empathy strengthens the team.”

The coach reinforces respectful engagement.

Stage 5 15-16 years



Language promotes responsibility for emotional climate. Example phrasing:

- “How can you support them right now?”
- “What does compassion look like here?”
- “Your response influences team trust.”
- “Care is strength.”

Athletes are encouraged to act supportively.

Stage 6 17-18 years



Language emphasises compassionate leadership. Example phrasing:

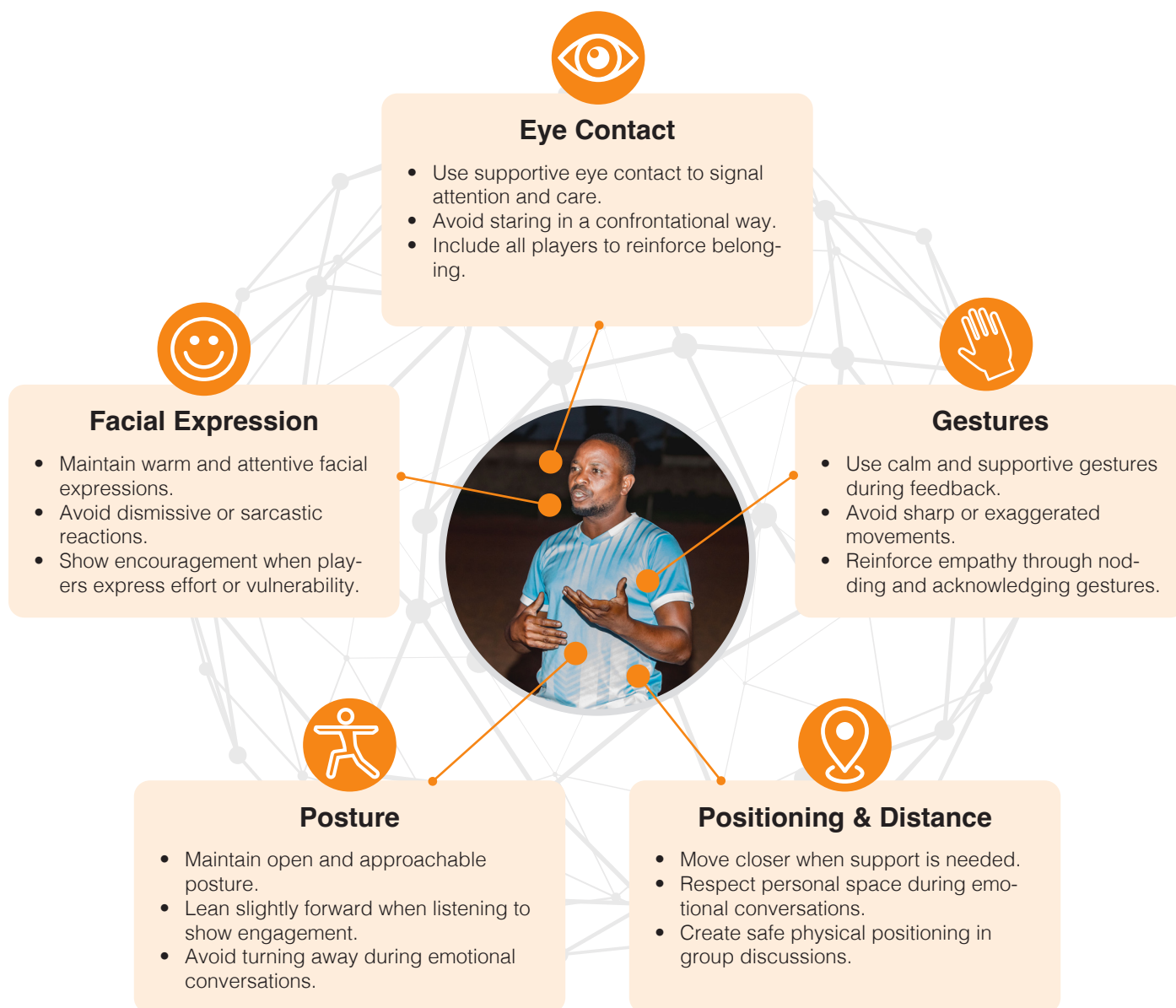
- “Lead with understanding.”
- “Protect psychological safety.”
- “Notice who needs support.”
- “Empathy is part of leadership.”

The coach fosters athlete-driven relational awareness.

A growth-oriented perspective supports this development, where emotional challenges, conflicts, and mistakes are seen as opportunities for learning rather than failures. Coaches reinforce this mindset by acknowledging emotional effort, highlighting supportive behaviour, and describing feelings, intentions, and impact precisely, which helps players connect emotional awareness with action. With increasing maturity, phrasing shifts from naming emotions to promoting responsibility for relational impact.

2.3. Body language

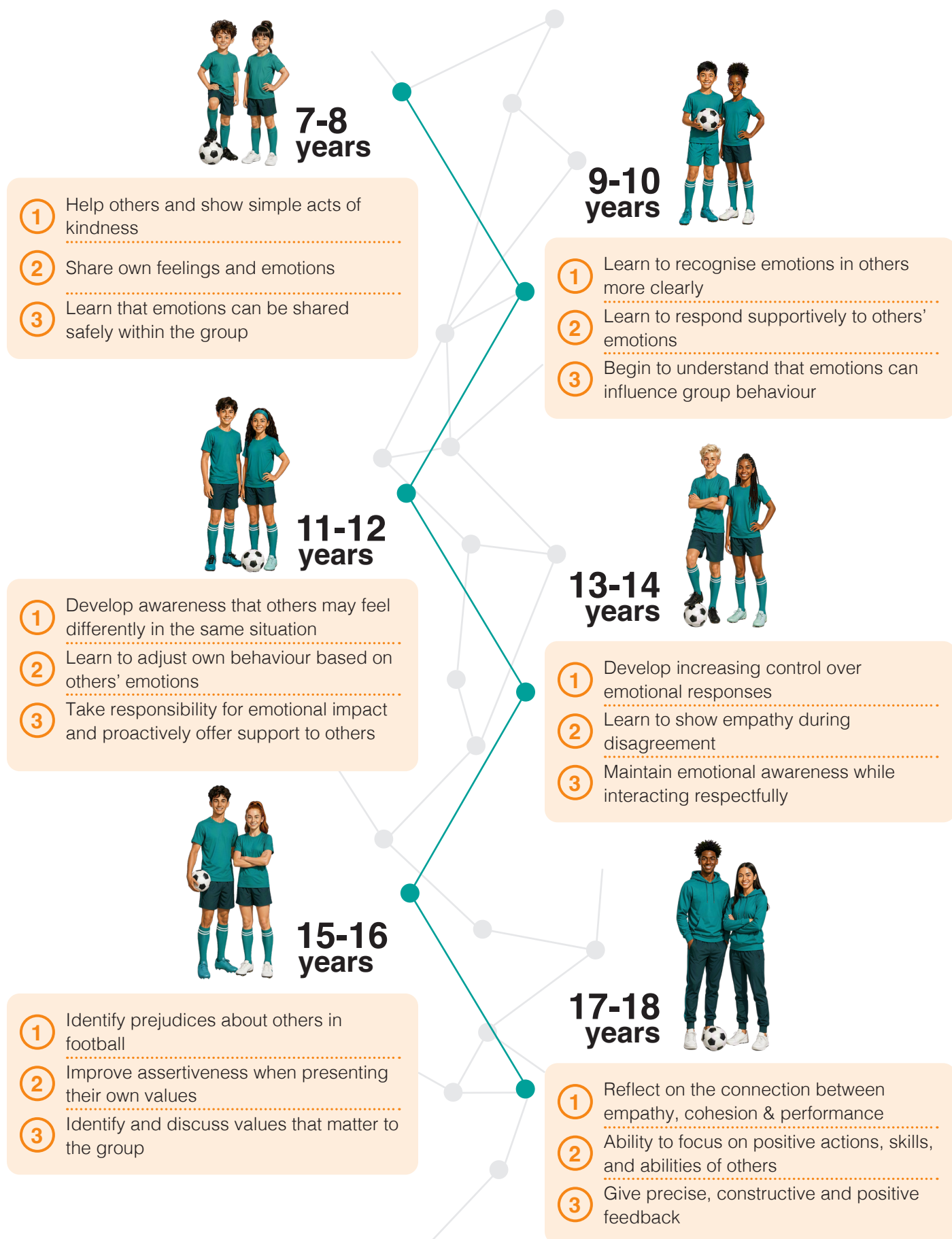
A coach's body language communicates emotional awareness and respect. Non-verbal behaviour often signals understanding before words are spoken. Consistent and attuned body language strengthens connection and emotional safety within the team.



When body language reflects understanding and respect, players feel emotionally secure. This strengthens cohesion and supports performance through confidence and mutual support.

3. TRAINING

The development Journey of compassion from foundation to maturity:



Training

7-8
years



3.1. Stage 1 (7-8 years)

3.1.1. Stage characteristics

At this early age, empathy is mainly rooted in emotional imitation and simple emotional contagion. Children may feel what others feel, but they are just beginning to understand that these emotions belong to someone else. They often show empathy when they see someone crying or visibly upset, reflecting an automatic and spontaneous response rather than a deep understanding. Their empathy is largely affective; they react to others' emotional expressions but have limited capacity to cognitively take another's perspective. Empathy is generally directed toward people within their immediate environment. Empathy for animals can develop, especially if they have pets, as direct interaction with animals provides them with an opportunity to practice caring and nurturing behaviour. However, their empathy for broader groups (like other children or unfamiliar animals) is limited by a narrow social and emotional scope.

3.1.2. Specific learning objectives

Games or guided play that encourages "pretend" scenarios can help them practice recognising and naming emotions in themselves and others, laying the groundwork for empathy.

Modelling is crucial at this stage, as children largely adopt the behaviours and attitudes they see in adults, especially their parents. When parents show kindness, concern, or compassion—toward people or animals—children begin to internalise these actions as appropriate responses. At this age, children often have a strong attachment to caregivers, making it easier for them to mimic the care they see directed toward family members or pets.

During the reflection phase, players should be able to:

- 1 Help others and show simple acts of kindness
- 2 Share own feelings and emotions
- 3 Learn that emotions can be shared safely within the group

3.1.3. Coach insight

At this stage, empathy develops primarily through emotional modelling and safety. Children imitate the emotional responses they observe in adults. Coaches should consistently demonstrate calm, warm, and encouraging reactions, especially after mistakes. Emotional language should be simple and concrete ("I can see you feel upset"). The goal is not deep discussion, but normalising emotions and reinforcing that feelings can be expressed safely within the group.

EXERCISE

TEAM CELEBRATION IN A 3V3 GAME



	Players	6+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	24 × 16 m
	Equipment	2 balls, 3 bibs (for one of the two teams), 4 mini-goals, 8 cones
	Duration	total: 20 min play: 4 × 3 min breaks: 1 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Set up a field with 4 goals
- 3 vs. 3
- Each player has one minute to think about their personal celebration ritual (individual or collective) and present it to their team
- Ask players to memorise the celebrations
- If this player scores a goal, all team members celebrate together
- If one player is sad because of missing a scoring chance or making a bad pass, the closest teammate gets closer and makes a shoulder tap or shares some encouraging words
- Variations:
 - Adjust field size and number of players according to players available
 - Have a prize ready for the best unified celebration ritual

Coaching Tips

1. Encourage players to come up with a **new way** of celebrating
2. Encourage players to **exaggerate** when celebrating
3. Limit celebration time if players act too wild



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players **notice** teammates' emotions and **react** in a simple supportive way (e.g. smile, stay near).

- What emotions did you notice in others today and how did you support each other?

2

Players **stay emotionally engaged** with teammates (e.g. celebrate together).

- How did you feel when you celebrated together?

3

When a teammate **shows emotions**, players **respond** with **supportive behaviour** (e.g. encouragement).

- How did emotions influence the way your team played together and how did you help when someone was down?

Training

9-10
years



3.2. Stage 2 (9-10 years)

3.2.1. Stage characteristics

During this period empathy becomes more nuanced as children start to recognise that others' emotions may differ from their own experiences. This is the beginning of cognitive empathy, where they not only react emotionally but also start to understand that someone else's experiences may cause different feelings.

Social interactions with peers become important, as they provide opportunities to empathise with others outside the family. Peer relationships encourage them to understand diverse perspectives, and positive peer role models can reinforce empathic behaviours. Parents' continued modelling of empathy toward various targets helps reinforce the relevance of empathy in different contexts.

As children's social circles expand, so does their empathy range. They begin to extend empathy toward people outside the family, such as friends and classmates.

3.2.2. Specific learning objectives

Children may become more aware of fairness and justice in a broad sense, as they are increasingly able to take on simple perspective-taking tasks, understanding why someone might feel sad or angry even if they do not feel the same way themselves. Role-playing and cooperative team activities at this age can help deepen their capacity to relate to others and reinforce the social importance of empathy.

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

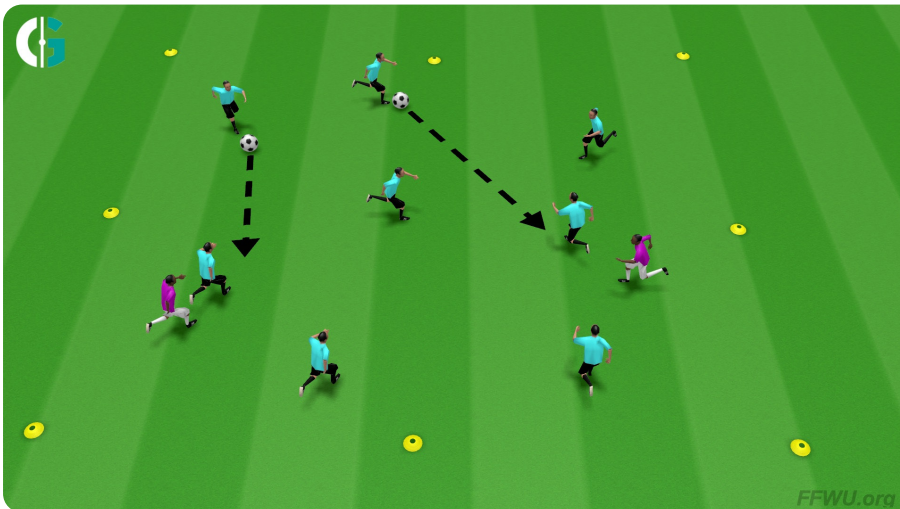
- 1 Learn to recognise emotions in others more clearly
- 2 Learn to respond supportively to others' emotions
- 3 Begin to understand that emotions can influence group behaviour

3.2.3. Coach insight

As perspective-taking begins to develop, coaches should intentionally slow down emotional situations and encourage listening before reacting. Guided questions such as "How do you think your teammate felt?" help expand cognitive empathy. Coaches should model respectful disagreement and reinforce that different emotional reactions are normal. Structured discussions can begin to support emotional differentiation.

EXERCISE

SAFETY-BALL



	Players	8+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	15×15 m (per 8 players)
	Equipment	2 balls per field, 8 cones per field
	Duration	total: 12 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- 1 player is the tagger
- All other players try to escape from the taggers
- Goal is that all teammates are staying safe for a period of 1 min without being tagged
- If someone gets tagged, they immediately become the tagger
- 2 balls can be thrown around with their hands and whoever has the ball is “safe” and can’t be tagged
- Variations:
 - Play football and have players pass the ball around to each other

Coaching Tips

1. Add taggers (more difficult for the group) or add balls (easier to stay safe) to give players a **real chance** to **stay safe as a team** for 1 min
2. Remind tagging players to focus on **players without the ball** (some players naturally focus on the ball)
3. Switch taggers after **each round** of 1 min



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players **recognise positive** (e.g. happy) and **negative** emotions (e.g. frustrated) in teammates during play.

◦ What emotions did you notice in others today?

2

Players **notice how emotions** affect team behaviour and **adjust their behaviour** to support the group.

◦ While you were playing, how did emotions influence the way you performed as a group?

3

Players **celebrate together**; respond with **supportive behaviour** when teammates show negative emotions.

◦ How did it feel celebrating your team effort together?
◦ How did your encouragement help your teammate?

Training

11-12
years



3.3. Stage 3 (11-12 years)

3.3.1. Stage characteristics

Preteens develop both cognitive and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy allows them to more fully understand others' experiences, while affective empathy enables them to feel for others in a deeper and more reflective way.

The influence of peers is stronger, and children are increasingly motivated by social approval and acceptance, making empathy more socially reinforcing. Empathic behaviours toward different target groups depend on exposure and social norms, which begin to shape preteens' sense of who deserves empathy and why.

Preteens' empathy may begin to extend to people they don't know directly, such as fictional characters or individuals they hear about in stories.

3.3.2. Specific learning objectives

They begin to grasp that people have unique perspectives, thoughts, and feelings that aren't always outwardly expressed. This stage is marked by an increase in emotional complexity and an ability to empathise with more nuanced emotions. They are more likely to support friends emotionally and offer advice or sympathy, indicating a maturing ability to balance their own emotions with those of others.

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

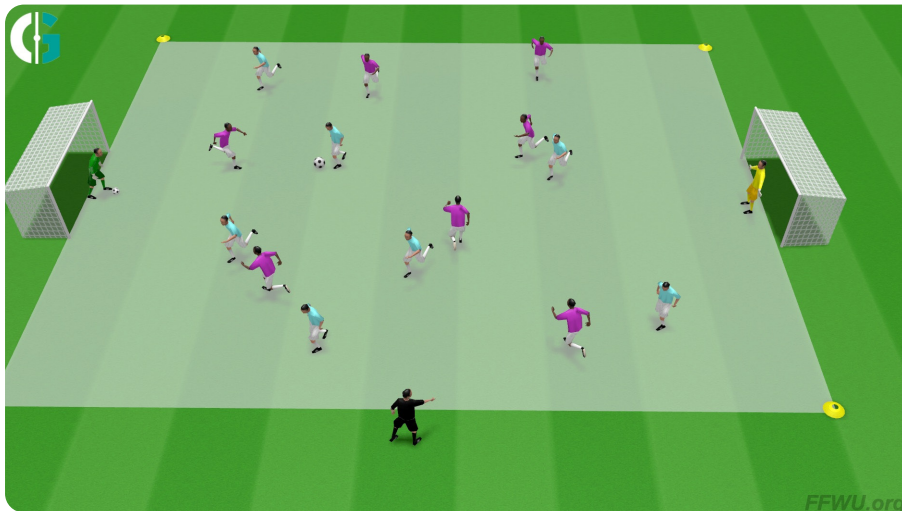
- 1 Develop awareness that others may feel differently in the same situation
- 2 Learn to adjust own behaviour based on others' emotions
- 3 Take responsibility for emotional impact and proactively offer support to others

3.3.3. Coach insight

Peer influence becomes central during this stage. Coaches should allow space for players to resolve minor emotional tensions themselves while guiding responsibility and repair when needed. Instead of solving conflicts, coaches should facilitate reflection ("What could you say to repair this?"). Empathy now includes accountability. The coach's role shifts from modelling to scaffolding emotional problem-solving.

EXERCISE

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?



	Players	16+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	40×30 m
	Equipment	1 ball, 2 goals, 4 cones, 8 bibs
	Duration	total:30 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Divide your players into two teams; free play
- The coach shares a signal with the players to immediately stop moving (e.g. freeze, ice)
- If one of the following happens, the coach stops the game to reflect with players about their behaviour as teammates:
 1. Missed a chance
 2. Missed a penalty (coach blows the whistle even if it's not a foul)
 3. Scored an own goal (ask a player secretly before the training session to score an own goal)
 4. Gets an injury (ask another player secretly before the training session to fake an injury)
- Variations:
 - Adapt field sizes
 - Add different situations where empathy is needed (e.g. referee decisions)

Coaching Tips

1. In the session intro, **encourage players** to think about empathy and how they can **show empathy** on the field
2. Encourage players to **proactively react** to their teammates



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players listen to teammates' **emotional** reactions and **show understanding** after challenging moments.

- How did you feel when missing a chance?
- Did someone feel different when missing a chance?

2

Players **adapt** their behaviour when noticing teammates' **emotional state** (e.g. offering support after mistakes).

- What did you recognise in your teammate that made you change how you acted?

3

Players **reflect** on how their actions **affected** teammates' emotions after emotionally tense moments.

- What did you do when your teammates were unsuccessful?
- What words did you use to support your teammate in a difficult situation?

Training

13-14
years



3.4. Stage 4 (13-14 years)

3.4.1. Stage characteristics

In a qualitative study with adolescents, Silke et al. (2023) have reported that simply due to the extensive amount of time young people spend with each other compared to time spent with parents, the impact of empathic behaviour from friends becomes more important. Adolescents at this age experience heightened emotional awareness and regulation challenges, making empathy both more intense and complex. They can engage in abstract thinking, allowing them to empathise with more diverse perspectives and social issues. The affective side of empathy is particularly strong, but adolescents are also developing cognitive control over empathic impulses, helping them manage emotional responses in social situations. They may become more attuned to social injustices or ethical dilemmas, often reacting passionately as they explore moral values. They can empathise with people outside their immediate circle more readily and may begin developing a sense of responsibility toward global or societal issues.

3.4.2. Specific learning objectives

Peer norms and social acceptance strongly impact empathy. Adolescents often model empathic behaviours from peers or mentors they admire, especially as they navigate complex social dynamics in and outside their immediate circle. Exposure to diverse experiences, cultural events, and values in school or media reinforces empathic attitudes toward broader groups.

Group discussions, debates, and activities focused on social justice or ethics can help them channel empathic responses constructively.

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

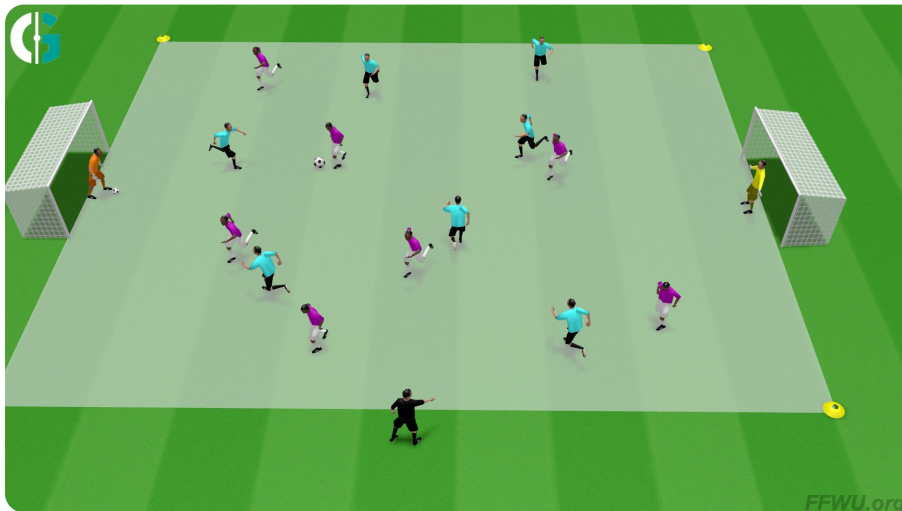
- ① Develop increasing control over emotional responses
- ② Learn to show empathy during disagreement
- ③ Maintain emotional awareness while interacting respectfully

3.4.3. Coach insight

Emotional intensity increases significantly during early adolescence. Coaches must model emotional regulation under pressure and avoid reactive or sarcastic behaviour. Clear boundaries combined with respectful communication are essential. Coaches should explicitly address emotional dynamics during competitive situations and reinforce that empathy is not weakness but emotional control and maturity.

EXERCISE

THE GREY ZONE GAME



	Players	16+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	40×30 m
	Equipment	1 ball, 7 bibs, 4 cones
	Duration	total: 28 min play: 4× 7 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Divide players into two groups
- Each group will receive different rules to play with
- Assign rules without the other team knowing rules of their opponents
- Team A:
 - Rule 1: Physical contact allowed
 - Rule 2: Throw-in
 - Rule 3: Minimum 5 passes before allowed scoring
- Team B:
 - Rule 1: Minimum physical contact
 - Rule 2: Kick-in
 - Rule 3: Free play
- Variations:
 - Adapt field sizes
 - Add different situations where empathy is needed (e.g. referee decisions)

Coaching Tips

1. In the session intro, **encourage** players to **think about empathy** and **how they can show** empathy on the field
2. Encourage players to **proactively react** to their teammates
3. Use an incentive to **increase level of competition**, yet do not reveal what it is (suggestion: fair play and empathy award)



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players **manage** their tone, expression, and body language during intense moments.

◦ How did your emotional control influence the situation?

2

Players **acknowledge** teammates' **emotions** during disagreements.

◦ When you had a disagreement, did you manage to realise how your teammate felt?

3

Players **stay aware** of teammates' **emotions** and **communicate calmly** under pressure.

◦ Did you manage to stay respectful with your words in a heated situation?

Training

15-16
years



3.5. Stage 5 (15-16 years)

3.5.1. Stage characteristics

Kanch et al. (2023) identify adolescence as a critical period for developing empathy and further emphasise the strong influence of socioeconomic and environmental circumstances. Adolescents during this developmental stage start to integrate both cognitive and affective empathy into a more stable, mature response. They can analyse the context around emotional responses, making empathy less impulsive and more thoughtful. Emotional regulation skills improve, enabling them to respond empathically without becoming overwhelmed. This stage sees a refinement of values, where adolescents may evaluate empathy as part of their personal identity or ethical framework.

Empathy toward both humans and animals reflects individual preferences and values. Adolescents may develop empathy for diverse groups if these align with personal or social values, though selective empathy—favoring certain groups or causes—is common as they align with specific beliefs or social circles.

3.5.2. Specific learning objectives

Social and cultural values, along with individual traits like emotional sensitivity or expressiveness, play significant roles in shaping empathy. Adolescents may align their empathy with personal or group values, sometimes influenced by moral or philosophical reasoning.

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

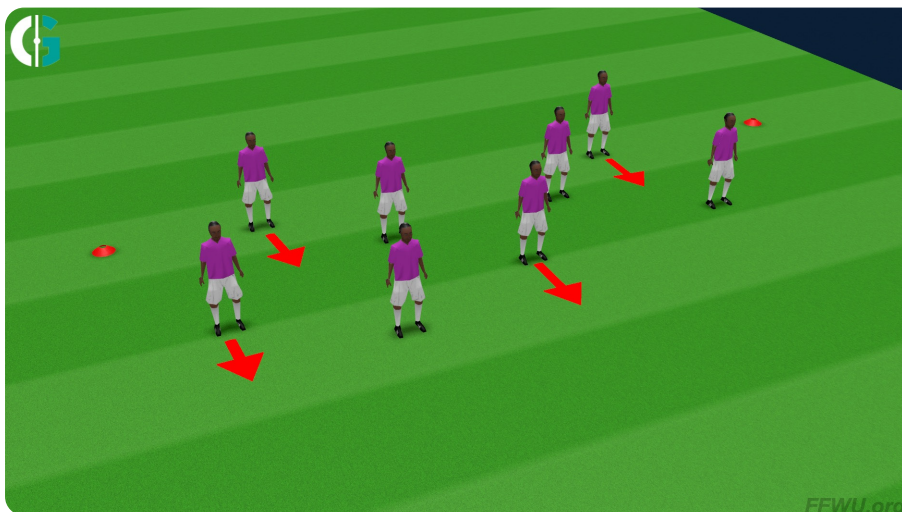
- ① Identify prejudices about others in football
- ② Improve assertiveness when presenting their own values
- ③ Identify and discuss values that matter to the group

3.5.3. Coach insight

As moral reasoning and social awareness deepen, coaches should involve players in discussions about team values, inclusion, and responsibility for group climate. Empathy becomes proactive rather than reactive. Coaches should encourage players to notice early signs of exclusion or discouragement and act independently. Leadership roles can be assigned to reinforce ownership of emotional culture.

EXERCISE

WHAT DO WE THINK ABOUT OTHERS?



	Players	4+
	Age	07-08 09-10 11-12 13-14 15-16 17-18
	Pitch	none
	Equipment	none
	Duration	total: 30 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Players line up, side by side on the starting line
- The coach asks a series of questions
- Each question can only be answered with yes or no, BUT players do not answer, they take...
 - a step forward if the answer is yes
 - stay where they are if the answer is no
- After each step, the group discusses and shares opinions, staying at their positions:
 1. Ask 5 questions about common prejudices in the world
 2. Ask players to think about their most important values (and present them).
 3. Agree on the most important values for the group
- Variations:
 - Develop other questions according to a topic that is relevant for your group

Coaching Tips

1. Sometimes players respond differently, **use those different opinions** about the same question to **initiate the discussion** with the players
2. Use **assertiveness questions** to make **players reflect** on them, **expressing their thoughts and opinions**
3. You may use the players' challenge **in the week before** so that players have time to **think** about their **most important values** in life and football to arrive prepared



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players identify **common prejudices** about others in football.

- Have you ever judged someone's physical appearance?
- Have you ever felt uncomfortable around someone from a different ethnicity?

2

Players present their **most important value** that they want to bring to the team.

- What do you think is the most important value for our team?
- Can you be that convincing that others agree with you?

3

Players identify and discuss **values that matter to the group**.

- Are you respecting others' value while standing up for your own?

Training

17-18
years



3.6. Stage 6 (17-18 years)

3.6.1. Stage characteristics

In late adolescence, empathy may peak or become more narrow as cognitive empathy takes precedence over affective responses. The ability to empathise with different perspectives is well-developed, and empathy is often guided by a sense of personal ethics or values. Adolescents at this age understand that empathy does not require emotional absorption and can be extended thoughtfully to various contexts without feeling overwhelmed.

Players at this age may exhibit more selective empathy, guided by personal or philosophical beliefs. Those with high trait empathy may extend it to both humans and animals broadly, while others show empathy selectively based on personal experiences or values, such as justice, equality, or environmental responsibility.

3.6.2. Specific learning objectives

Individual disposition, life experiences, and values are strong influences. Adolescents are likely to reflect on their empathic responses and choose when and where to apply empathy as part of their identity, sometimes influenced by moral, philosophical, or cultural factors.

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

- 1 Reflect on the connection between empathy, cohesion & performance
- 2 Ability to focus on positive actions, skills, and abilities of others
- 3 Give precise, constructive and positive feedback

3.6.3. Coach insight

At this stage, empathy should be integrated into leadership and identity formation. Coaches should shift toward reflective dialogue rather than directive instruction. Players can analyse how empathetic behaviour influences cohesion, communication, and performance. Coaches should emphasise precise, constructive feedback and role modelling, helping players understand empathy as a performance-stabilising competence.

EXERCISE

EMPATHY BUDDY



	Players	8+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	half-field
	Equipment	1 ball, several bibs in 2 different colors, 2 goals
	Duration	total: 24 min play: 4 × 5 min breaks: 1 min
	Author	SJ Weber

Description

- Divide players into two teams (depending on the number of available players); now build pairs within each team
- One player will play, the other player becomes the “hyper-buddy.” This player’s role is to positively coach the other player
- After 5 min, players get together for 1 min for a quick feedback phase
- The player will receive only positive feedback from their buddy
- Afterward, they change roles
- Reflect with players after each round
- Each player will experience both roles two times
- Variations:
 - Smaller teams will require the players to exert more communication and movement

Coaching Tips

1. If there is an odd number of players, they can form a trio of empathy
2. Remind players of the two main reactions:
 - **Praise** when there is success
 - **Encourage** if there is room for improvement
3. Give **some examples of praise** during the game to **model the behaviour** and **emphasise praise** precisely in the **reflection phase** (e.g., “I like the way you passed the ball with just the right amount of force and great accuracy to your teammate”)



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players have the **ability** to focus on positive actions, skills, and abilities of others.

- What is the best skill, action or mental ability you have seen from your teammate so far?
- What exactly did they do well in that situation?

2

Players **reflect on how empathetic behaviour** contributed to team performance under pressure.

- How often did you contribute positively to your buddy?
- How did your positive words impact them?

3

Players **consistently demonstrate** empathy and compassion, **influencing** team culture **positively**.

- What exact words did you use?
- What did you tell your buddy while playing and during the reflection? Was there a difference?

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