



SOCIAL COMPETENCIES

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

SHARINGOALS

THE SYSTEMIC COACHING MANUAL
FOR FOOTBALL COACHES
AROUND THE WORLD

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1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Scientific research

Huseinagić & Hodžić (2010) suggest in their research about conflict culture that many conflicts in sports are good for more productive and creative work and that constructive team leadership can lead to improvement of overall work and interpersonal relations. They state that “It’s time to start a new conflict culture.”

1.1.1. Definition

Wachsmuth, Jowett & Harwood (2017) define interpersonal conflict in sports as “a situation in which relationship partners perceive a disagreement about, for example, values, needs, opinions or objectives that is manifested through negative cognitive, affective and behavioural reactions.” Interpersonal conflicts emerge whenever two or more parties perceive their views or interests as being incompatible (Jehn, 1995), and negotiation is the decision-making process that parties with divergent interests use to reconcile their differences. Emphasizing the importance of conflicts, Majer et al. (2021) identified joint decision-making and negotiation, cooperation, and conflict resolution as inevitable in making collective progress toward sustainable living in our societies.

In the systematic review of psychological aspects of soccer and futsal players, Alves et al. (2022) found group cohesion was one of the most researched psychological aspects, and team conflict was one of the least researched. Within any organisation, as well as for sports teams, Adham (2023) recommends that organisations should strive to create a positive team climate that encourages trust, open communication, and respect for diverse opinions and cultural backgrounds. Another recommendation is to establish a safe and inclusive environment so team members will feel more comfortable expressing their viewpoints and engaging in collaborative problem-solving. In this section, we will focus on the two most common conflicts in the sports environment: conflict between athletes and conflict between coaches and athletes. We will examine how these situations that naturally and regularly occur can be transformed into positive outcomes.

Types of conflicts

According to Reblin et al. (2019), team conflict can be divided into task conflict and relationship conflict. Task conflict is often related to the content or goals of the group and is expressed through different ideas, points of view, and opinions. These types of conflicts can lead to group discussions that team members could work through with different argumentation styles, and they can create a positive effect. Relationship conflict is created by different personalities and core values, which often lead to more problems, tensions, and irritation, and is rooted in interpersonal incompatibility and a lack of willingness to adapt. On the contrary, Richardson (2020) pointed out that in the understanding of team conflict, people often assume that a relationship conflict impacts the team as a negative influence, but the influence of task conflict is positive, so people always avoid the effects of relationship conflict, making full use of task conflict to play a positive role. However, the study showed that relationship conflict and task conflict are highly correlated and always exist at the same time.

Ros-Morente et. al. (2023) identify the lack of research and recommend extending the knowledge that is needed to improve child athletes’ social and emotional competencies in order to enhance coexistence and satisfaction through a gamified pedagogical tool, in their case suggesting the Happy Sports model.

Taking a closer look at the research about how to avoid conflicts, how to deal with them, and how to mediate conflicts in Youth Sports leads us to different questions.

- How can we avoid conflicts before they even occur?
- How can we help young athletes resolve peer-to-peer conflicts by themselves without adult intervention? And even more important, how can we help athletes and coaches see conflict as a growth opportunity that, when resolved, leads to better togetherness?
- How can we identify the right moment to mediate conflicts if adult intervention is needed?

1.1.2. Impact on performance

Al-barha et al. (2023) highlighted team conflict as an important factor that profoundly affects the competition and training process. They further state that task conflict stimulates discussion among team members, facilitates critical assessment of problems and alternatives, and leads to better team decision-making.

Therefore, effective teams are characterized by an appropriate level of conflict. Low- and medium-level task conflict can have a positive impact on the group's performance because it stimulates people to discuss different viewpoints, which helps improve the group's performance to a higher level. Wachsmuth et al. (2018) discovered in their study about conflict management in the athlete-coach relationship that positive performance outcomes were mainly associated with finding an effective solution for the original problem that both parties could agree upon. Resolved conflicts seemed to improve athletes' commitment and work ethic in the long run, sometimes forming a stepping stone for future performances. Further in their research, they found that few coaches described how ongoing conflict directly led to sporting success, as the effects were attributed to a desire to prove the coach wrong or a generally improved motivation or work ethic. Not all conflict situations between athlete and coach have resulted in a positive impact on performance.

Wachsmuth et al. (2018) further report conflicts decreasing motivation and focus, low mood, increases in stress and anxiety levels, and relationship termination. In such circumstances, athletes indicated low levels of self-esteem and undermined identity beliefs as a result of interpersonal conflict.

1.1.3. Impact on social cohesion

Gonzalez-Ponce et. al. (2023) found that high role ambiguity leads to lower group cohesion and higher team conflict. Moreover, they discovered that it can also be seen that higher role conflict is related to higher levels of team conflict and lower group cohesion. Hence, if coaches clarify the players' functions and the players do not receive contradictory information about their roles, the relationships among the teammates will improve, and team conflicts may decrease.

Opstoel et al. (2020) found in 54 studies from physical education (PE) that prosocial behaviour could be an outcome. Prosocial behaviour in PE studies includes skills like taking turns, raising hands, asking for permission to speak, listening, congratulating others, relating to others, following rules, handling or dealing with conflicts, showing appreciation, expressing opinions, caring, showing empathy, having trust, showing respect, obeying or respecting authority and social and peer acceptance.

In sports studies, prosocial behaviour was associated with encouraging others, relating to others, following rules, handling or dealing with conflicts, having honesty, having loyalty, showing fair play, dealing with winning or losing, having empathy, having trust, showing respect, respecting authority, and gaining social awareness. All those skills positively impact group cohesion as they foster better togetherness amongst all team members through better interactions.



1.1.4. Scientific models for conflicts

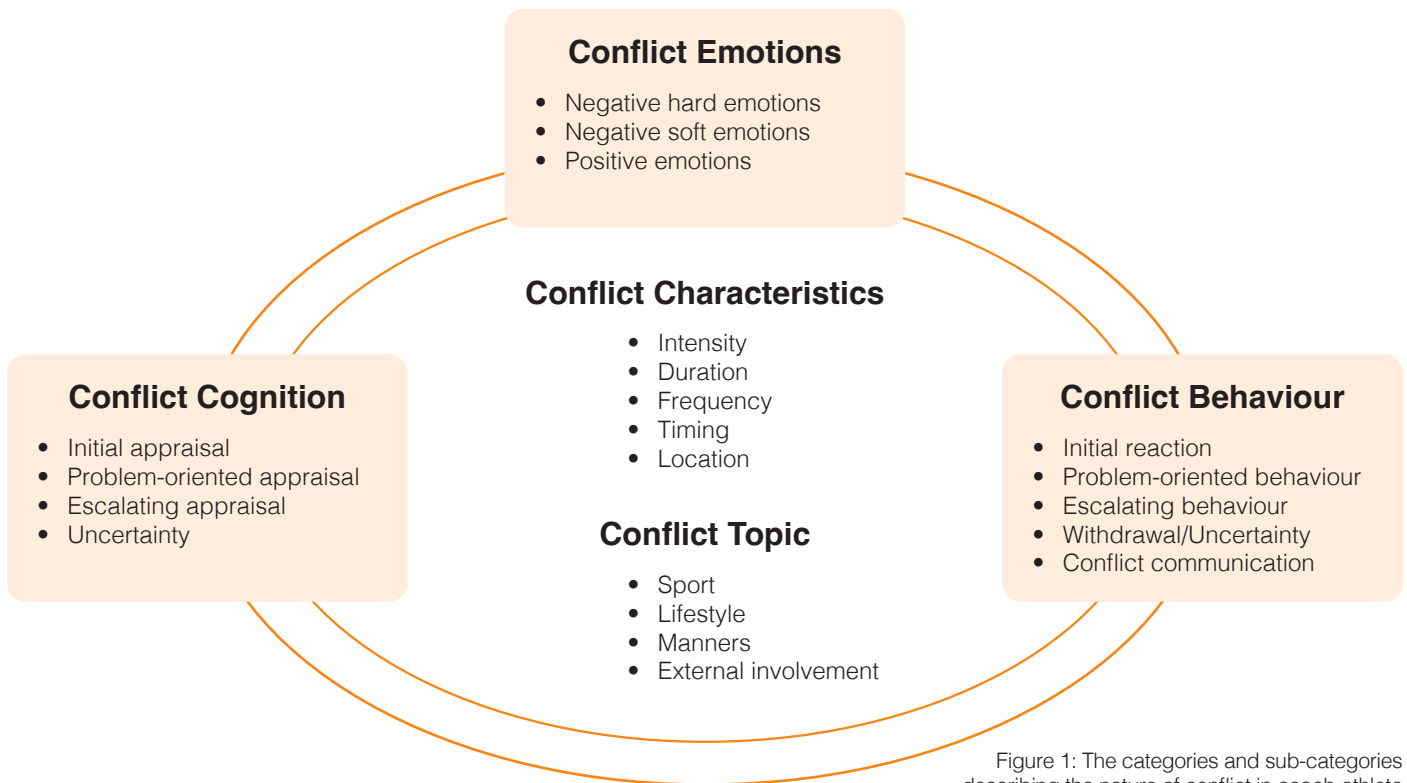


Figure 1: The categories and sub-categories describing the nature of conflict in coach-athlete relationships (Wachsmuth, 2017).

Coach-athlete conflicts

In her extensive research about interpersonal conflicts between the coach and athlete, Wachsmuth (2018) proposes the division of conflict nature into five categories, describing them by their characteristics and content (topics), as well as cognitive, emotional, and behavioural aspects that were linked to the process of conflict.

- **Conflict characteristics**
In this model, conflict characteristics are divided into intensity, duration, frequency, timing, and location. Participants in her study considered some topics trivial and others as crucial.
- **Conflict topics**
Topics can be sport-related, lifestyle-related, involve external parties, or be related to personal manners.
- **Conflict cognition**
Conflict cognition is related to the individual evaluation of the conflict situation. The initial appraisal of the situation can leave people with uncertainty about the implications of a conflict. This attribution often shifts at a later time in the conflict. Escalating appraisal often leads to disbelief, perception of unfair treatment or personal attack, or blaming the other party as being the cause of the conflict. Withdrawal behaviors are often the consequence of uncertainty. The problem-oriented appraisal is linked to minimizing conflict, using thought processes, setting goals, and taking the perspective of the conflict partner.

- **Conflict emotions**
The affective responses of the involved parties are described in conflict emotions and divided into three different categories: negative hard emotions, negative soft emotions, and positive emotions.
- **Conflict behaviour**
Those emotions and cognitions resulted in different conflict behaviors showing uncertainty, escalation, or problem orientation. In most of the conflicts of Wachsmuth's study, active communication processes were the main tool to resolve the differences. Some participants in the study further reported that by actively approaching the problem, some of the conflicts could be prevented. She further describes the overall reaction of coaches as more controlled and athletes' reactions as more negative and less adaptive or skillful. The variety of reactions included refusal to talk, irrational excuses, crying, shouting, or not adhering to instructions. Other athletes also reported negative and inappropriate behaviors from coaches like shouting, using foul language, swearing, ignorance, not taking responsibility, or remaining unwilling to solve the conflict. Escalating behaviour showed as well in communication styles: rhetorical questions, harsh tone, loud voice, giving an opinion in a firm or confident manner, and standing up for one's point of view.

Intrateam conflicts

While extensive research has examined coach–athlete conflict from a dyadic perspective (Wachsmuth et al., 2018a, 2018b), intrateam conflict requires a group-dynamics framework. Drawing primarily from Jehn's (1995, 1997) intragroup conflict model and sport-specific extensions (Paradis et al., 2014; Leo et al., 2015), intrateam conflict can be understood as a multidimensional process consisting of structural, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components that influence performance and social cohesion.

- **Structural dimension**
Intrateam conflict can be differentiated into task conflict, relationship conflict, and process conflict (Jehn, 1995). Task conflict refers to disagreements about tactics, strategy, effort, or decision-making. Relationship conflict is rooted in interpersonal incompatibilities and emotional tension. Process conflict concerns disagreements about responsibilities, role clarity, or decision procedures. In sport teams, role ambiguity and role conflict have been shown to increase overall team conflict and reduce cohesion (Leo et al., 2015).

Beyond type, intrateam conflict is characterized by its frequency, duration, intensity, visibility, and the formation of coalitions. These characteristics determine whether conflict remains functional or escalates into dysfunctional dynamics.

- **Cognitive dimension**
Conflict escalation is strongly shaped by cognitive appraisal processes (Paradis et al., 2014). Athletes evaluate the fairness of a situation, attribute intent to teammates, assess potential threats to status or role, and determine the importance of the issue. When behaviors are interpreted as intentional or unfair, escalation becomes more likely. Problem-oriented appraisal, however, supports constructive engagement.
- **Emotional dimension**
Cognitive interpretations are closely linked to affective responses. Intrateam conflicts may evoke negative hard emotions such as anger or hostility, negative soft emotions such as frustration or insecurity, and positive emotions following constructive resolution, including relief and restored trust. Relationship conflict is particularly driven by emotional escalation and is consistently associated with reduced cohesion (Jehn, 1995).
- **Behavioural dimension**
Athletes respond behaviorally through avoidance, confrontation, criticism, coalition building, or problem-oriented communication. Constructive

behavioural responses—especially active communication and perspective-taking—are associated with improved team functioning (Paradis et al., 2014).

Outcomes:

Intrateam conflict affects two primary domains:

- **Impact on performance**
Moderate levels of task conflict may stimulate discussion and improve decision-making quality. However, higher levels of unresolved conflict are associated with lower collective efficacy and reduced motivation (Leo et al., 2015).
- **Impact on social cohesion**
Relationship conflict consistently predicts lower group cohesion and weaker affective commitment. Both task and relationship conflict have been linked to athletes' intentions to leave their team, with relationship conflict being the stronger predictor (López-Gajardo et al., 2022).

1.1.5. Theoretical approach for prevention, mediation and transformation of conflicts

Preventing conflicts

Lund's "Conflict Prevention" (2002) refers to a range of activities and strategies aimed at identifying and addressing the underlying causes of potential conflicts before they escalate into violent confrontations. It encompasses measures that reduce the risk of conflict by fostering peaceful relations and promoting social, economic, and political stability. Smolyaninova & Korshunova (2019) emphasise that in order to prevent a conflict, it is important to understand the behaviour of the counterpart deeply and objectively, to comprehend his or her current emotional condition, intentions, and attitude toward others. They further state that the psychological mechanisms of perception and understanding in interpersonal communication include identification, social perception, and empathy, highlighting the organic connection between empathy and mediation. Kharimova (2014) claims that conflict prevention will undoubtedly promote the improvement of educational process quality.

Transformation of conflicts

Conflict resolution is the predominantly used term that is utilized in literature and extensively researched. Recently researchers have studied the transformation of conflicts, and that is going to be my focus in this section.

Majer et al. (2021) argue that conflict transformation and finding mutually beneficial solutions require decision-makers to reconcile present and future interests (i.e., intrapersonal conflicts over time) and to align them with those of other decision-makers (i.e., interpersonal conflicts between people). With the aim to transform a conflict into a learning situation that provides growth opportunities for both actors, Olsson (2021) conducted a study about the transforming role that curiosity can play. She discovered the emotional complexity of conflict interactions, creating space to consider how prosocial enactments of curiosity help actors handle conflicts constructively. Understanding the roles prosocial emotions play in constructive conflict handling is indispensable to investigating and encouraging their accomplishment. Similarly, and perhaps more importantly, understanding how actors evoke prosocial emotions during interpersonal conflict illuminates the relational nature of these emotions.

Her study demonstrated how setting aside assumptions and “just asking” helps conflict actors focus on solutions rather than problems. Specifically, Olsson revealed how conflict actors accomplish relational curiosity in three qualitatively distinct ways. The first case exemplified curiosity as reframing and demonstrated how conflict actors can look back on painful situations, critically interrogate their conduct, and envisage better ways of handling similar situations in the future. The second case demonstrated curiosity as stimulating and showed how relational curiosity and constructive conflict actors can encourage conflict partners to contemplate the consequences of their conduct and determine a more beneficial course of action. Finally, the third case illustrated curiosity as transforming and details how actors can set aside assumptions and elicit missing information from conflict partners. All of these cases of curiosity are relational because conflict actors accomplish them in concert with others.

There are conflicts where it is advisable that adults intervene and step into the mediator role, yet as much as possible children should learn at an early age how to solve their own conflicts.

Conflict mediation

Conflict mediation, as claimed by Fraidenburg & Teale (2024), possesses a transformative power that few other endeavors can match. It's not just about resolving disputes; it's about fostering cooperation, building bridges, and mending relationships. It's about taking part in the delicate dance that turns conflict into collaboration, guides individuals toward understanding and acceptance, and ultimately leaves behind a legacy of lasting peace. Mediators play a vital role in

this success. Schrumpf, Crawford & Bodine (1997) define mediation as a communication process in which the people with the problem work together, with the assistance of a neutral third party, cooperating to resolve their conflict.

Another mediation concept, the Sulha (in Arabic settlement), is a traditional Arab conflict-management method. It is practised alongside the legal system and helps to resolve serious disputes between clans. Pely (2016) views that the Sulha process works by facilitating the Qur'anic prescription, effecting an attitudinal transformation of the victim's clan from a desire to avenge to a willingness to forgive. Such transformation takes place through a process of gradual restoration of the victim side's sense of honour. The agreement achieved through the Sulha process is considered binding for the disputant, for all generations, past, present, and future.

As Ramahi (2008) states, the West knows the primacy of law, and the Arabs know the primacy of interpersonal relationships. Sulha requires acknowledging mistakes, admitting guilt, and giving a sincere apology. Luckily, interpersonal conflicts in sports do not often get to the same level of seriousness as clan disputes, but the process can inspire the mediation process of interpersonal conflicts in the sports world in terms of their aim and ability to transform a conflict into a growth opportunity that ultimately leads to a better mutual understanding. The main mediator in the sports environment is the coach. Nevertheless, children and adolescents as well can be in that role and go through a peer-to-peer mediation process. We will explore both situations.

Peace-building programs

Peace-building programs aim to rather restore peace after conflicts or establish a peaceful togetherness that is sustainable. Clarke, Jones & Smith (2021) inform that the transition process from conflict to peace has attracted increasing interest in recent decades, moving from peace-making (the brokering of truces) and peacekeeping (enforcement of truces) to peacebuilding. It is considered to be a continuous process of recovery and development, which can be used to move beyond a precarious ceasefire to more stable and positive peace. The term peacebuilding is often used more in the international context to establish peace in post-conflict communities with a broader perspective. For this context, mainly focusing on interpersonal conflicts, we will not further elaborate on the interventions of interstate or intrastate conflicts.

Clayton et al. (2001) compared Peace programs to anti-violence and conflict resolution programs and identified weaknesses in both types of programs. They further conclude that antiviolence programs do not provide children with any way of dealing with interpersonal conflicts or violent interactions should they occur. Similarly, conflict-resolution programs give children the means to solve interpersonal conflicts but do not really give them the skills for building relationships with themselves and others that preclude violence. The recommendation from their review is to combine the goals, skills, and interventions from both programs so that children know how to lower violence, prevent and resolve conflict, and establish long-lasting relationships that are peaceful. To show age-appropriate learning objectives, we have selected the most important learning objectives from all three program types.

1.1.6. Development of Conflict Management Competences

Conflict management competence develops through structured engagement with disagreement rather than through the avoidance of tension. Within educational and sport settings, conflicts represent meaningful learning opportunities when they are framed not as threats but as situations for growth. In line with Dweck's (2006) growth mindset framework, conflicts can be interpreted as challenges that promote learning, perspective expansion, and relational strengthening. When athletes understand that interpersonal difficulties are part of development and not indicators of personal failure, they are more likely to engage constructively rather than defensively.

The systematic development of conflict management competence can be supported through a structured five-step resolution model:

- **Pause.**

Athletes learn to interrupt immediate emotional reactions by applying calming strategies. This step strengthens emotional regulation and reduces impulsive escalation.

- **Describe.**

The situation is reconstructed based on observable facts rather than interpretations. Separating perception from assumption supports cognitive clarity and reduces attribution bias.

- **Express.**

Individuals articulate their own perspective and emotional experience using responsible communication (e.g., "I"-statements). This strengthens self-awareness and communicative competence.

- **Understand.**

Athletes actively listen to the perspective of others and attempt to reconstruct their viewpoint. This step connects conflict management with empathy and perspective-taking.

- **Agree.**

Participants collaboratively define a solution or next step. The focus shifts from blame to shared responsibility and future-oriented action.

Repeated application of this model transforms conflict from a reactive event into a structured learning process. Over time, athletes internalize these steps and require less external guidance. What initially depends on adult facilitation gradually becomes self-regulated competence.

Reflection is essential for consolidation. Guided debriefings after conflicts help athletes analyse triggers, emotional responses, communication patterns, and resolution strategies. Through reflective practice, situational learning becomes generalized competence.

At advanced stages, conflict management competence extends beyond personal regulation toward mediation and leadership. Older adolescents can facilitate dialogue between peers, protect team cohesion, and model constructive disagreement. Conflict thus becomes a space in which responsibility, fairness orientation, and collective accountability are strengthened.

Within the Sharing Goals framework, conflict management competence integrates emotional regulation, empathy, communication clarity, moral reasoning, and leadership capacity. Its development depends not on the absence of conflict, but on the presence of structured, growth-oriented engagement with disagreement.

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.

Conflict is a constant feature of early peer life, and the way children resolve it changes systematically with age. A series of meta-analyses of peer conflict resolution found that coercion is common among children, while disengagement is rare (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001). Conflicts at this age are concrete and rule-bound, which makes them well suited to teaching simple fairness principles and basic negotiation routines rather than sophisticated mediation.

Across middle childhood, improvements in perspective-taking and rule understanding create the conditions for structured dialogue and for separating a disagreement about the task from a conflict with a person. The developmental direction is consistent: negotiation increases and coercion declines with age across most peer relationships, assessment procedures and reporters (Laursen et al., 2001).

In adolescence, the emotional resources supporting that shift continue to mature. From age eleven into adulthood the use of adaptive emotion regulation strategies tends to increase overall, although the pattern varies by strategy and by the emotion involved, with anger, fear and sadness following different courses (Zimmermann & Iwanski, 2014). This is the period in which players become capable of mediating disputes rather than only resolving their own.

The evidence therefore describes a gradual, directional trend rather than a phase of accelerated growth: conflict resolution moves steadily from coercion towards negotiation across the whole age range covered by this framework, with no identifiable window in which it develops disproportionately fast. Stating this plainly matters, because it means no single stage can be treated as the one in which conflict management is finally taught.

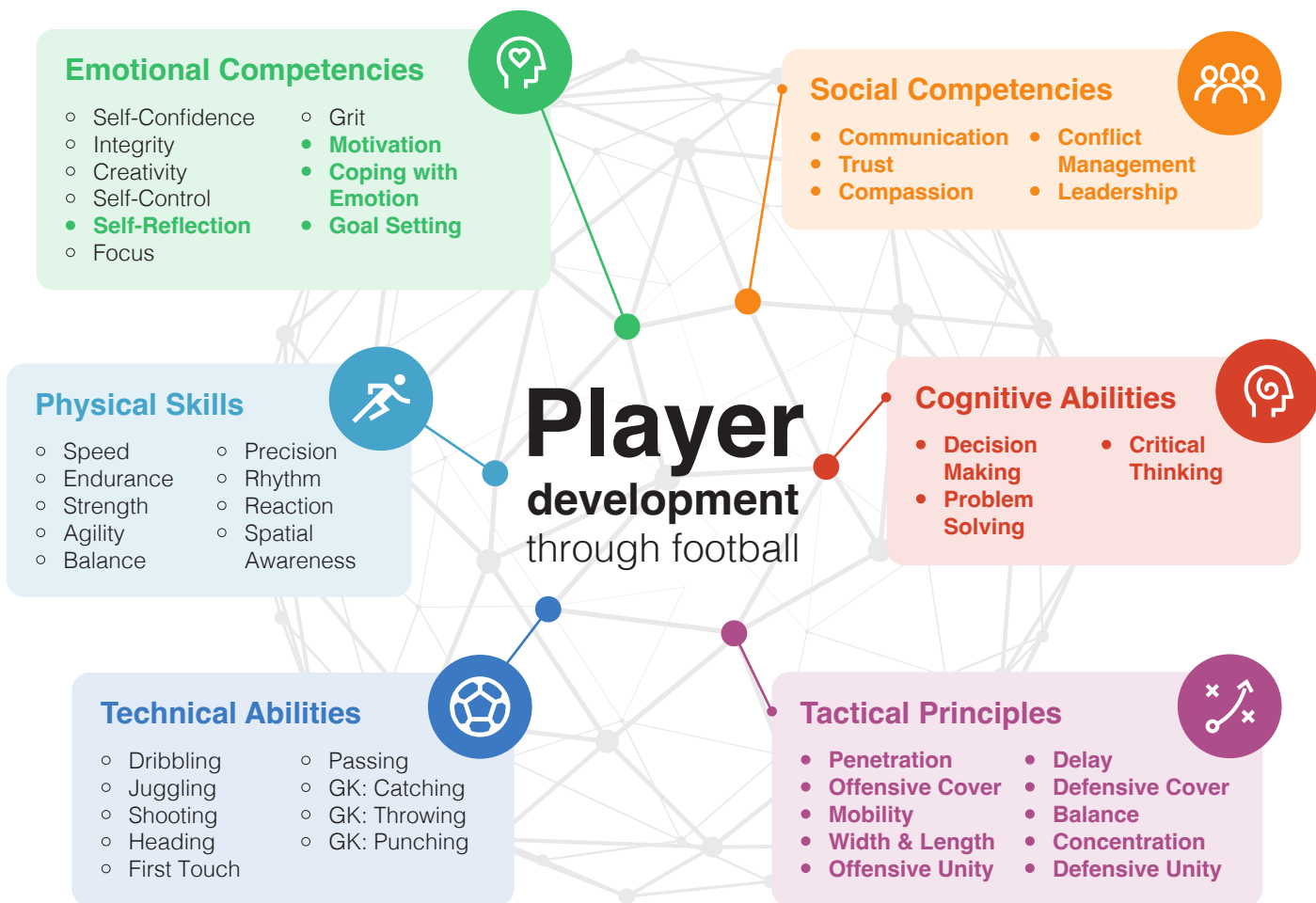
One further finding from the same meta-analyses has a direct consequence for how the competence is trained. Presented with hypothetical disputes, young people overwhelmingly choose negotiation; when actual conflicts are observed, coercive resolutions predominate (Laursen et al., 2001). Discussion alone



therefore produces the correct answer rather than the behaviour. Football is valuable here precisely because it generates genuine disputes over contact, fairness and selection, in a setting where a coach is present to shape how they end.

Conflict management therefore warrants attention at every stage, and above all in live disputes rather than in discussion of hypothetical ones.

1.3. Correlation with other skills and competencies



Correlation with Emotional Competencies

Conflict management is closely linked to emotional development. Self-reflection helps individuals recognise their role in conflicts and understand how their behaviour affects others. Motivation and goal setting support a solution-oriented approach, while coping with emotions enables constructive responses under pressure.

Correlation with Physical Skills

While no direct connection is identified, conflict management can indirectly support physical performance by reducing distractions caused by interpersonal tensions and maintaining cooperation during demanding activities.

Correlation with Technical Abilities

While no direct connection is identified, conflict management can indirectly support technical development by creating a positive learning environment. Constructive handling of disagreements encourages feedback, learning from mistakes, and mutual support.

Correlation with Social Competencies

Conflict management is strongly connected to all social competencies. Communication is essential for expressing concerns and finding solutions. Trust enables open dialogue, while empathy and compassion help individuals understand different perspectives. Leadership supports the prevention and resolution of conflicts within the group.

Correlation with Cognitive Skills

Conflict management relies on decision-making, problem-solving, and critical thinking. Individuals must analyse situations, consider different perspectives, and identify appropriate solutions. Constructive conflict resolution strengthens collaborative problem-solving and responsible decision-making.

Correlation with Tactical Principles

Conflict management supports all tactical principles by strengthening cooperation, communication, and team cohesion. Teams that manage conflicts constructively can coordinate more effectively, adapt to changing situations, and work together towards common objectives.

1.4. Key learnings

- While group cohesion is widely studied in sports psychology, team conflict remains under-researched, yet it can be beneficial when managed constructively through positive team climate and leadership.
- Interpersonal conflict in sports arises from perceived disagreements and requires negotiation, cooperation, and conflict resolution to achieve collective progress.
- Conflict characteristics, cognition, and emotional responses influence how conflicts unfold in sports, with active communication playing a crucial role in resolution, while escalation often results from negative emotional reactions and poor communication styles.
- Task and relationship conflicts are interconnected in team dynamics and understanding how to manage both—rather than simply avoiding relationship conflict—can lead to improved coexistence and personal growth, especially in youth sports.
- Conflict prevention involves identifying underlying causes, fostering stability, and developing empathy and understanding in interpersonal communication to mitigate potential conflicts before they escalate.
- Conflict transformation emphasises growth and relationship-building, moving beyond mere resolution by fostering curiosity, understanding, and constructive dialogue.
- Mediation, whether through coaches, peer-to-peer processes, or traditional methods like Sulha, plays a crucial role in turning conflicts into opportunities for collaboration and deeper mutual respect in sports and youth development.
- A moderate level of task conflict can enhance team performance by encouraging discussion, critical thinking, and better decision-making, making conflict management an essential aspect of effective teamwork.
- While resolving athlete-coach conflicts can strengthen commitment and motivation, unresolved conflicts may lead to negative psychological effects such as stress, anxiety, and decreased self-esteem, highlighting the importance of constructive conflict resolution.
- High role ambiguity and role conflict contribute to increased team conflict and reduced group cohesion, emphasizing the importance of clear role communication from coaches to enhance team dynamics.
- Prosocial behaviors—such as empathy, respect, and conflict resolution—play a crucial role in fostering group cohesion by improving interpersonal interactions in both physical education and sports settings.



1.5. From science to practice

Conflict is a natural and inevitable part of sport and social interaction. Scientific research shows that conflict is not inherently negative; rather, its impact depends on how it is perceived, regulated, and resolved. In football, constructive task conflict can

stimulate discussion and improve decision-making, while unmanaged relationship conflict can damage trust, motivation, and cohesion. Conflict competence therefore develops progressively across childhood and adolescence and becomes a key factor in team performance and collective stability.

Stage 1 7-8 years



Recognising conflict as normal

At this stage, children begin to understand that disagreements are a normal part of play. Conflicts are usually simple and emotional, often linked to rules, turn-taking, or fairness. The key developmental task is recognising and naming conflict without escalation.

When children learn that conflicts are normal and solvable, team cohesion grows through emotional safety. Managing emotional reactions also helps maintain focus and reduces interruptions during play.

Stage 2 9-10 years



Basic problem-solving and fairness

Children now develop simple strategies to resolve disagreements, such as taking turns, voting, or asking for clarification. They begin to understand that fair solutions require listening and compromise. Conflicts are still concrete but can be approached with structured problem-solving.

Cohesion strengthens when players experience that conflicts can be resolved without blame. Performance benefits as small disputes are handled quickly, allowing play to continue with minimal disruption.

Stage 3 11-12 years



Perspective-taking and repair

As cognitive abilities expand, players begin to understand that conflicts often arise from different viewpoints rather than intentional harm. They become capable of explaining their perspective and listening to others. Repairing misunderstandings through dialogue becomes possible.

At this stage, cohesion grows through mutual understanding and reduced personalization of disagreements. Performance improves as players engage in constructive task-related discussions without allowing relationship tensions to dominate.

Stage 4 13-14 years



Emotional regulation and constructive dialogue under pressure

With increasing competitive intensity, conflicts may involve stronger emotions and identity-related concerns. Players must regulate frustration, manage impulsive reactions, and differentiate between task conflict (about tactics or decisions) and relationship conflict (about personalities or values).

Constructive handling of task conflict can stimulate better tactical decisions, while controlling relationship conflict prevents long-term damage to cohesion. Teams that manage emotional escalation maintain stability and competitive focus.

Stage 5 15-16 years



Negotiation, responsibility, and proactive prevention

Adolescents at this stage are capable of more complex negotiation and can anticipate potential conflicts before they escalate. They begin to understand how role clarity, communication, and empathy prevent unnecessary tensions. Conflict management becomes proactive rather than reactive.

Cohesion is strengthened as players take responsibility for maintaining respectful interaction and fair solutions. From a performance standpoint, proactive conflict management reduces distraction, preserves energy, and supports collective decision-making under pressure.

Stage 6 17-18 years



Leadership, mediation, and performance stability

At the highest developmental stage, conflict competence becomes a leadership skill. Players can guide peers through disagreements, mediate tensions, and turn conflict into learning opportunities. They know when peer resolution is enough and when adult support is needed.

Constructive conflict leadership strengthens team dynamics and long-term cohesion. Task-related disagreements can improve tactical clarity. It supports performance by maintaining emotional balance, accountability, and collective focus in key moments.

2. COACHES' BEHAVIOUR

2.1. Coaching style

2.1.1. Scientific grounding

"Coaches shape how athletes experience and manage conflict. The way a coach reacts to disagreement, tension, or misunderstanding becomes a model for the team." (Wachsmuth, Jowett & Harwood, 2018; Holt, Knight & Zukiwski, 2012). When coaches remain calm, fair, and solution-oriented, they signal that conflict is manageable and does not threaten belonging or team stability (Keisu & Tafvelin 2021; De Dreu & Van Vianen (2001).

A constructive coaching style frames conflict as a normal part of teamwork. Barki & Hartwick 2004; Jehn, 1995). Disagreements about tactics or decisions can improve performance when handled respectfully (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Bradley et al., 2015). At the same time, personal tensions require emotional awareness and guided communication. Coaches should distinguish between task-related disagreements and relationship-based conflicts and respond accordingly (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; de Wit, Jehn & Scheepers, 2013).

Clear communication about roles and expectations reduces unnecessary tension (Leo et al. 2015). When athletes understand their responsibilities and feel supported, confusion and frustration decrease. Consistency in language and expectations strengthens psychological safety.

Coaches should also use conflict situations to promote empathy and responsibility. Encouraging athletes to listen to one another, respect different viewpoints, and search for shared solutions strengthens team cohesion (Dimas & Lourenço, 2015; Gillham et al., 2015). Rather than suppressing disagreement, coaches guide athletes toward constructive dialogue.

In tense moments, emotional composure is essential (Keisu & Tafvelin, 2021). Calm, neutral communication and structured turn-taking help prevent escalation. By consistently modelling respectful interaction, coaches create an environment in which conflict becomes an opportunity for learning and growth rather than division.

Effective conflict management is increasingly recognised as a core leadership competence, as leaders who respond constructively to interpersonal

tension are more likely to maintain team effectiveness and athlete satisfaction (Dimas & Lourenço, 2015; De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2001). In sport contexts specifically, the way coaches handle disagreements has been shown to influence the quality of coach-athlete relationships and the overall functioning of the team, directly affecting cohesion and performance outcomes (Wachsmuth, Jowett, & Harwood, 2018; Bradley et al., 2015).

2.1.2. Practical implications

Practically, this means that a coach consistently models emotional regulation, fairness, and constructive handling of disagreements. Players develop conflict competence primarily by observing how the coach reacts to tension, mistakes, and interpersonal challenges.

A coach who strengthens conflict management:

- Remains calm and composed during disagreements
- Differentiates between task-related issues and personal attacks
- Facilitates dialogue instead of imposing immediate solutions
- Encourages responsibility without assigning blame
- Reinforces solutions that restore fairness and cooperation

Especially in emotionally charged situations, the coach's composure determines whether conflicts escalate or transform into learning opportunities. By modelling controlled responses and structured dialogue, the coach demonstrates that conflict is manageable and can be constructive.

When a coach consistently models constructive conflict management, team cohesion strengthens because players experience fairness, emotional safety, and structured resolution of disagreements. Performance benefits because emotional escalation is reduced, cognitive resources remain available for tactical decision-making, and task-related disagreements can be used to refine strategies rather than disrupt focus. Under competitive pressure, this stability enables faster recovery after mistakes and more composed collective responses in decisive moments.

2.2. Choice of words

Language shapes how athletes interpret and respond to conflict. In emotionally charged situations, short, clear, and developmentally appropriate wording supports regulation, fairness, and constructive dialogue. The coach's phrasing should gradually shift from directive guidance toward shared responsibility and mediation.

Stage 1 7-8 years



Language should be concrete and calming. The coach provides structure and fairness.

Example tone:

- "Stop. Let's take a breath."
- "Tell me what happened."
- "We solve this fairly."
- "We are teammates."

Sentences are short and reassuring. Abstract reasoning is avoided.

Stage 2 9-10 years



Language begins to include emotions and shared solutions.

Example tone:

- "I can see you're upset."
- "Let's hear both sides."
- "What would be fair for both of you?"
- "How can we fix this together?"

The coach still guides but introduces shared responsibility.

Stage 3 11-12 years



Language supports differentiation between task and personal conflict.

Example tone:

- "Is this about the play or about each other?"
- "Explain your point calmly."
- "Listen first, then respond."
- "What helps the team most?"

The tone encourages analytical thinking and structured communication.

Stage 4 13-14 years



Language emphasises emotional regulation and accountability.

Example tone:

- "Pause. Control your reaction."
- "What triggered you there?"
- "Say what you need without attacking."
- "Respect comes first."

The coach reinforces composure and constructive expression.

Stage 5 15-16 years



Language promotes ownership and negotiation.

Example tone:

- "What part of this is yours?"
- "How can you repair this?"
- "Find a solution that protects the team."
- "Disagreement is fine. Disrespect isn't."

The coach shifts from directing to facilitating.

Stage 6 17-18 years



Language encourages mediation and leadership.

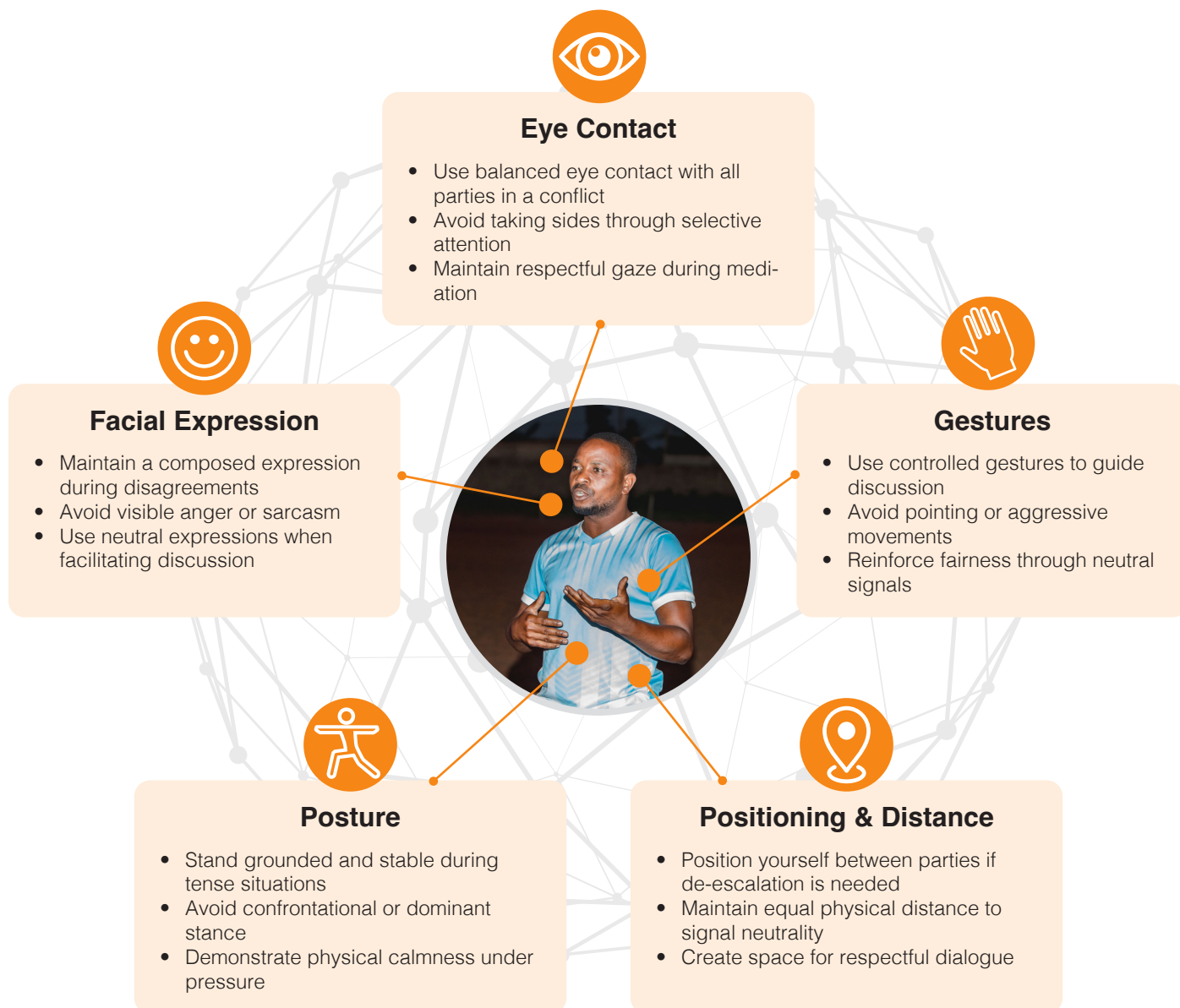
Example tone:

- "Handle this as leaders."
- "Guide the conversation."
- "Make sure everyone is heard."
- "Turn this into improvement."

The coach increasingly steps back and empowers athlete-led resolution.

2.3. Body language

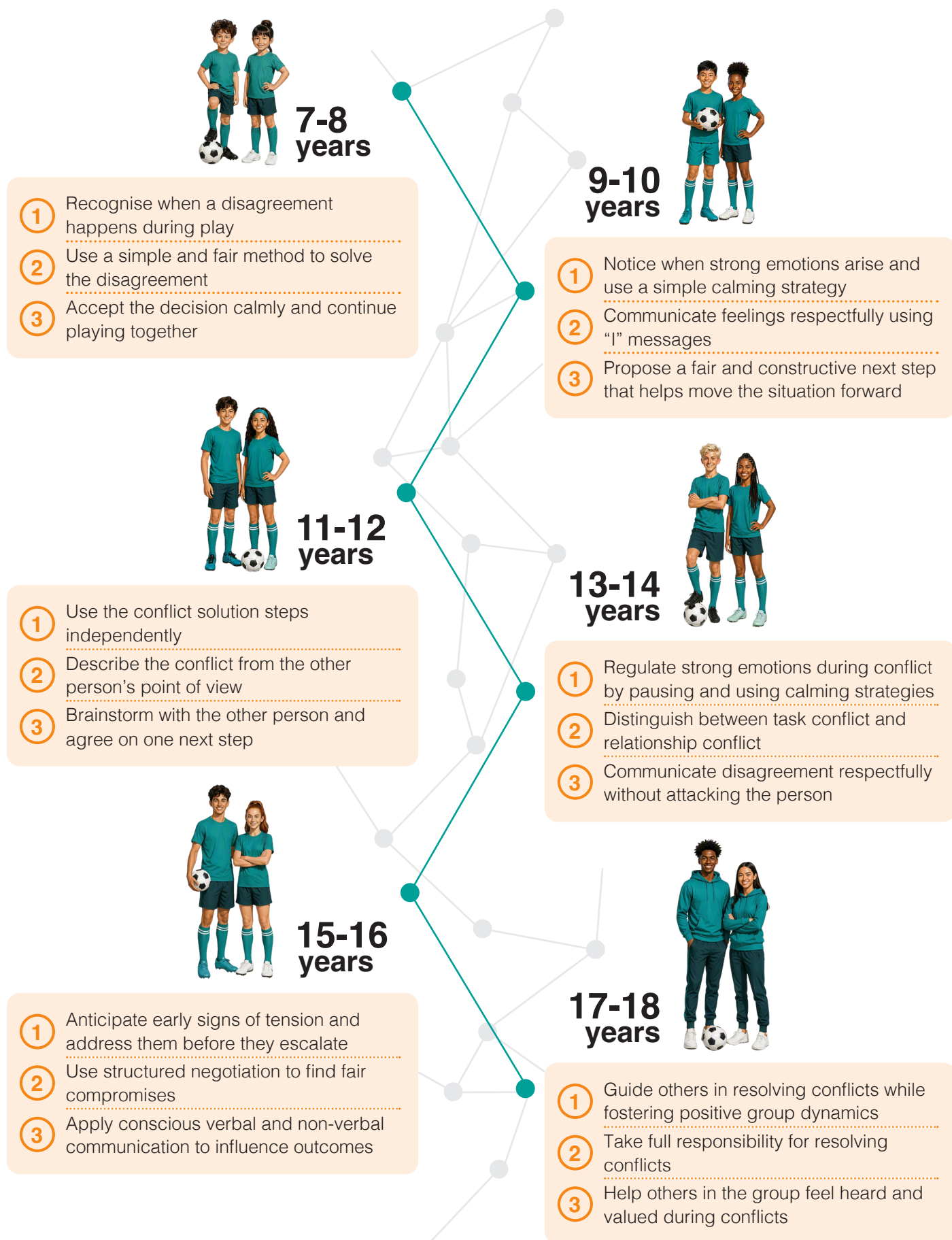
A coach's body language determines whether conflicts escalate or stabilise. Non-verbal signals often set the emotional tone before words are spoken. Calm and controlled body language models constructive conflict handling.



When body language remains calm and neutral, conflicts are less likely to escalate. This protects team cohesion and stabilises performance during emotionally demanding moments.

3. TRAINING

The development journey of preventing, dealing with, and resolving conflicts from foundation to maturity:



Training

7-8
years



3.1. Stage 1 (7-8 years)

3.1.1. Stage characteristics

Children in this age group experience simple and concrete conflicts, often related to rules, turn-taking, or fairness. Emotional reactions can be immediate, and misunderstandings happen quickly during play. With guidance, they can learn that disagreements are a normal part of games and can be solved safely without harming friendships.

3.1.2. Specific learning objectives

In this developmental stage, children begin to recognise simple disagreements and practise fair solutions with adult support.

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

- ① Recognise when a disagreement happens during play
- ② Use a simple and fair method to solve the disagreement
- ③ Accept the decision calmly and continue playing together

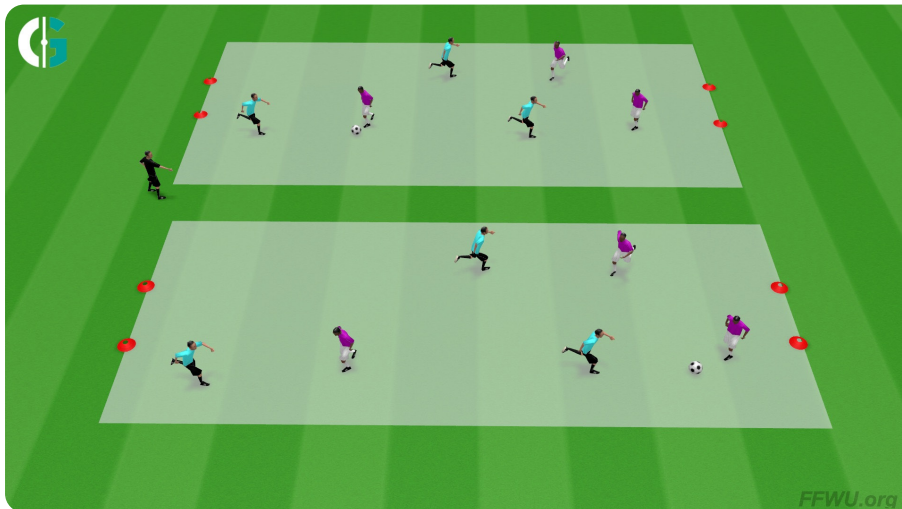
3.1.3. Coach insight

At this stage, conflicts are concrete, emotional, and often short-lived. Disagreements usually arise from rule misunderstandings, fairness issues, or turn-taking. Children are not yet able to regulate emotions independently or analyse different perspectives deeply.

The coach's role is to normalise conflict and model simple, calm resolution strategies. Provide clear and consistent methods, such as replaying a situation or using rock-paper-scissors. Reinforce that disagreements are part of playing together and can be solved safely. The focus is on fairness, calm acceptance, and continuing play.

EXERCISE

PASS & RESOLVE



	Players	6+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	20 x 12 m
	Equipment	2 balls, 8 cones
	Duration	total: 15 min play: 4 x 3 min breaks: 1 min
	Author	Sascha Bauer

Description

- Divide players into small teams and play 3v3 small-sided games.
- Before the game starts, explain that every player must touch the ball at least once before their team can score a goal.
- If a disagreement happens (e.g., did every player touch the ball?, two players want to take a kick-in), they must use „rock-paper-scissors“ to decide quickly.
- Once a decision is made, play continues immediately.
- Variations:
 - Take Turns Rule: Before the game, assign rotating roles for set plays (e.g., each player takes a turn doing a throw-in or corner kick). This prevents conflicts before they start.
 - Team Vote: When a conflict arises, the entire team votes on a fair resolution together, reinforcing compromise and group decision-making.

Coaching Tips

1. Encourage fairness (understand basic conflict): Reinforce that **small disagreements are normal** and can be resolved easily.
2. Keep it simple (use simple problem-Solving): Young players need clear methods, so emphasise „**rock-paper-scissors**“ as an easy way to decide.
3. Praise cooperation (understand basic conflict): **Highlight** when players **accept decisions calmly**.



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players understand that **small disagreements are normal** during games.

- When did you and a teammate disagree today?
- What was it about? How did you feel?

2

Players use a **simple and fair method** to solve disagreements quickly.

- What method did you use to decide?
- Did it help you solve the problem?

3

Players **accept the result calmly** and continue playing together.

- Did you accept the decision right away?
- How did your team continue after solving the conflict?
- Did the game stay fun?

Training

9-10
years



3.2. Stage 2 (9-10 years)

3.2.1. Stage characteristics

Children in this age group are capable of handling minor conflicts and developing strategies for resolving minor conflicts, like deciding who takes the next shot in a game or using a fair method like rock-paper-scissors.

Children in this age group are more independent and start managing minor conflicts on their own. They can often see different points of view but may need help when conflicts become emotional.

3.2.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, players begin to recognise emotions during disagreements and practise simple strategies for resolving minor conflicts independently. The focus is on emotional awareness, respectful communication, and solution-oriented thinking.

Recognise and Calm Down

Notice when strong emotions arise during a disagreement and use a simple calming strategy (e.g., take a deep breath, pause before speaking).

Use “I” Statements to Express Feelings

Communicate feelings respectfully using “I” messages (e.g., “I feel frustrated when...”), instead of blaming or accusing.

Suggest a Solution for the Future

Propose a fair and constructive next step that helps move the situation forward (e.g., replay, take turns, agree on a rule).

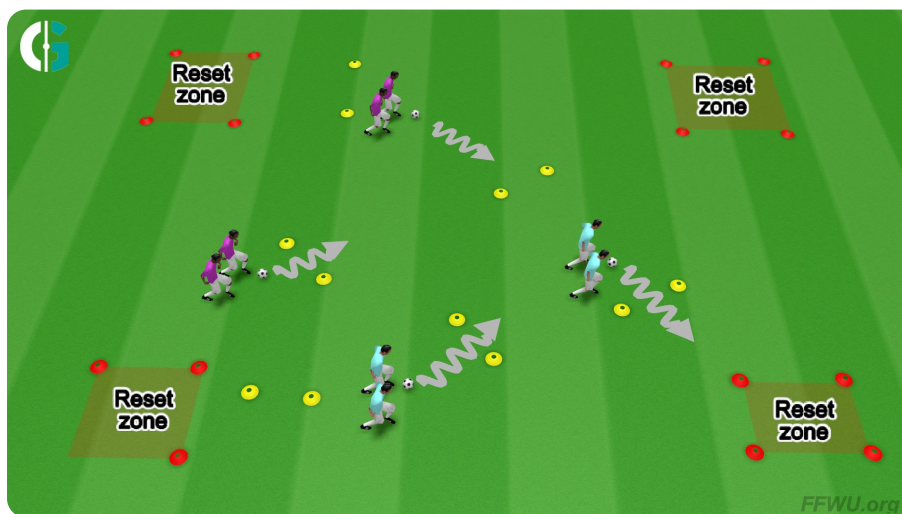
In the reflection phase, we want the children to be able to:

- 1 Notice when strong emotions arise and use a simple calming strategy
- 2 Communicate feelings respectfully using “I” messages
- 3 Propose a fair and constructive next step that helps move the situation forward

3.2.3. Coach insight

Players in this stage begin to recognise emotions during disagreements but still struggle with impulsive reactions. They are highly sensitive to fairness and may interpret situations personally. The coach should explicitly model the 3-step approach: pause and breathe, use “I” statements, and suggest a solution. Encourage players to name their feelings and express them respectfully. When disagreements occur, guide them to use the Solution Spot independently and keep interventions brief. The coach gradually shifts from solving the conflict to guiding players to manage it themselves.

DRIBBLE TOGETHER



	Players	4+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	20×15 m
	Equipment	4 balls, 16 cones
	Duration	total: 10 min play: 6×1 min breaks: 30 sec
	Author	Sascha Bauer

Description

- Divide players into pairs. Each pair has one ball and must dribble through as many cone goals as possible within 1 minute while holding hands.
- One player dribbles, the other supports.
- Disagreements or moments of frustration may occur during the task.
- After 1 minute, all pairs immediately move to the Team Reset Zone. The 30-second reset starts when all pairs are inside their zones. During the reset, players answer.
 - Did we have a disagreement or feel frustrated?
 - How did we react in that moment?
 - What will we do differently in the next round?

Coaching Tips

1. Keep the reset strictly to 30 seconds.
2. Emphasise that disagreement is normal but must be handled calmly.
3. Reinforce short “I” statements.
4. Avoid long discussions.
5. Praise improvement in conflict handling, not only goal count.
6. Ensure all pairs are inside their zone before starting the timer.
7. If needed, they practise:
 - One deep breath.
 - One “I” statement (e.g., “I feel frustrated when we lose the ball.”).
 - One clear agreement for the next round.



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players **recognise moments** of frustration or disagreement and **pause** before reacting.

- Did you notice when you felt frustrated?
- Did you take a breath before speaking?
- Did that help you stay calm?

2

Players use an **“I” statement** to explain their feelings during a disagreement.

- What did you say using an “I” message?
- Did you avoid blaming your teammate?
- How did your teammate respond?

3

Players agree on a **fair next step** so they can continue the task calmly.

- What did you decide to do differently in the next round?
- Did agreeing help you work better together?
- Was the next round smoother?

Training

11-12
years



3.3. Stage 3 (11-12 years)

3.3.1. Stage characteristics

Children in this stage show stronger social reasoning and problem-solving skills and begin to manage conflicts with less adult support. They can increasingly understand that disagreements may come from different perspectives and can start separating task-related disagreements (about ideas or decisions) from personal conflict. However, peer approval and ego involvement can intensify reactions, and when emotions rise, children may still struggle to stay constructive without a clear structure.

3.3.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, children begin to think critically about conflicts and practice working through disagreements by considering different perspectives and brainstorming solutions.

- Use the conflict solution steps independently by pausing to calm down, expressing feelings with “I” statements, and focusing on solving the problem instead of blaming.
- Show perspective-taking by describing the conflict from the other person’s point of view before suggesting a solution.
- Brainstorm at least two fair solutions with the other person and agree on one next step that helps you move forward together.

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

- 1 Use the conflict solution steps independently
- 2 Describe the conflict from the other person's point of view
- 3 Brainstorm with the other person and agree on one next step

3.3.3. Coach insight

Players at this stage show growing perspective-taking abilities and are increasingly capable of recognising their own contribution to a disagreement. They can distinguish between task-related conflict and personal attack, but peer influence and ego involvement may still intensify emotional reactions. The coach should reinforce the structured conflict solution steps while gradually increasing player responsibility: pause and regulate emotions, use “I” statements, listen actively to the other person’s idea, and encourage each player to suggest a possible solution before agreeing together.

Emphasise that disagreement about ideas can improve performance, but disrespectful behaviour is not acceptable. Interventions should remain brief and supportive, guiding players toward dialogue, shared decision-making, and constructive resolution rather than solving the conflict for them.

TWO WAYS TO SCORE



 Players	10+
 Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
 Pitch	35×25 m
 Equipment	1 ball, 2 goals, 4 bibs, 8 cones
 Duration	total: 30 min play: 10 x 2 min breaks: 1 min
 Author	Sascha Bauer

Description

- Play a 4v4 game. Each game is 2 min.
- Before every kick-off or restart, the team in possession must quickly choose one of two scoring options:
 - Option A: Team Goal – Every player must touch the ball before scoring.
 - Option B: Fast Goal – Score within 10 seconds after winning the ball.
- The team must agree on one option within 10 seconds before play resumes.
- If players disagree about the strategy or whether a goal counts, play stops and the involved players move to the side. Before returning to play, they use the conflict solution step (see coaching tips). Once they agree, the game continues.
- Variations:
 - Rotate one player per round who initiates the strategy discussion.

Coaching Tips

Reinforce the importance of respectful conflict solution steps:

1. Pause and **calm down** (take one deep breath).
2. Use an **“I” statement** (for example: “I feel frustrated when we shoot too quickly.”).
3. Listen carefully and **try to understand** the other person’s idea.
4. Each person makes **one suggestion**.
5. Agree on **one solution** before returning to play.



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players apply **structured conflict resolution** during tactical disagreements in the game.

- Did you pause and calm down before speaking?
- Did you use an “I” statement?
- What difference did it make for the discussion?

2

Players show **perspective-taking** when discussing different scoring strategies.

- How did you show that you understood a teammate’s idea?
- What was different about their idea?
- Did listening change your reaction?

3

Players suggest and agree on **constructive solutions** under time pressure.

- What suggestion did you make?
- What suggestion did your teammate make?
- Why did your team choose the final strategy?

Training

13-14
years



3.4. Stage 4 (13-14 years)

3.4.1. Stage characteristics

Adolescents in this stage experience stronger emotional intensity and increased sensitivity to respect, fairness, and social status. Peer influence and group dynamics become more important, and conflicts may escalate quickly, especially in competitive or public situations. Players are capable of reflective thinking but may struggle to regulate emotional reactions in the moment. They begin to understand the long-term impact of their behaviour on relationships and team cohesion.

3.4.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, adolescents practise emotional regulation under pressure and learn to consciously differentiate between task-related disagreement and relationship-based conflict.

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

- 1 Regulate strong emotions during conflict by pausing and using calming strategies
- 2 Distinguish between task conflict and relationship conflict
- 3 Communicate disagreement respectfully without attacking the person

3.4.3. Coach insight

Emotional intensity increases significantly during early adolescence. Conflicts may involve identity, status, or belonging, and disagreements can escalate quickly in competitive or public situations. At this stage, players must consciously learn to differentiate between task conflict (disagreement about tactics, decisions, or performance) and relationship conflict (attacks on character, status, or belonging).

The coach must model composure under pressure at all times. Public humiliation, sarcasm, or emotional escalation from the coach will magnify relational conflict. Teach players explicitly that disagreement about ideas can improve performance, while personal attacks damage team cohesion. Reinforce emotional regulation, active listening, and respectful debate. Guide players to challenge decisions constructively while protecting relationships.

HANDICAP GAME



 Players	10+
 Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
 Pitch	40×30 m
 Equipment	1 ball, 2 goals, 5 bibs, 8 cones, handicap cards
 Duration	total: 35 min play: 5× 5 min breaks: 2 min
 Author	Sascha Bauer

Description

- Play a 5v5 game with normal rules. Before each round, one player per team is the Decision Leader.
- Each team receives 5 handicaps and the Decision Leader distributes them before play starts:
 1. maximum 2 touches,
 2. must use weaker foot,
 3. cannot enter final third,
 4. must complete one pass before shooting,
 5. must stay in defensive half for 1 minute.
- Before distributing, remind players: “You may disagree with a decision. Challenge the decision, not the person.”
- If a disagreement escalates, play stops and the involved players step out briefly before play continues.
- Rotate Decision Leader every round.

Coaching Tips

1. Emphasise that **handicaps are part of the challenge**, not punishment.
2. Use the **conflict steps** consistently when play stops: pause and calm down; use an “I” statement; listen to the Decision Leader’s reasoning; agree whether to keep or adjust the handicap, then restart.
3. Ask: “Is this **about the rule** or about how you feel treated?”
4. Intervene **only if conflict becomes personal or disrespectful**.
5. Highlight when players **separate decision criticism** from personal attack.



Learning Objectives



Reflection Questions

1

Players **regulate emotional reactions** when decisions feel unfair.

- Did you notice your first reaction?
- How did you control it?
- What helped you stay respectful?

2

Players **differentiate between task conflict and relationship conflict** in competitive situations.

- What was your disagreement about?
- Did you criticise the decision and not the person?
- Did that prevent escalation?

3

Players **communicate disagreement respectfully** under status and pressure.

- How did you express your feelings without attacking?
- How did listening affect the outcome?
- What would you improve next time?

Training

15-16
years



3.5. Stage 5 (15-16 years)

3.5.1. Stage characteristics

At this stage, adolescents demonstrate increased emotional control and cognitive maturity, allowing them to anticipate potential conflicts before they escalate. They are capable of negotiating solutions independently and can engage in dialogue with peers and authority figures. Social hierarchy and group dynamics strongly influence disagreements, and conflicts often involve fairness, roles, or status. Players begin to understand how verbal and non-verbal communication shapes group climate and outcomes.

3.5.2. Specific learning objectives

In this stage, adolescents practise proactive conflict management, structured negotiation, and conscious use of verbal and non-verbal communication.

- Anticipate early signs of tension and address them before they escalate into open conflict.
- Use structured negotiation to find fair compromises that consider individual needs and team goals.
- Apply conscious verbal and non-verbal communication to influence conflict outcomes positively.

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

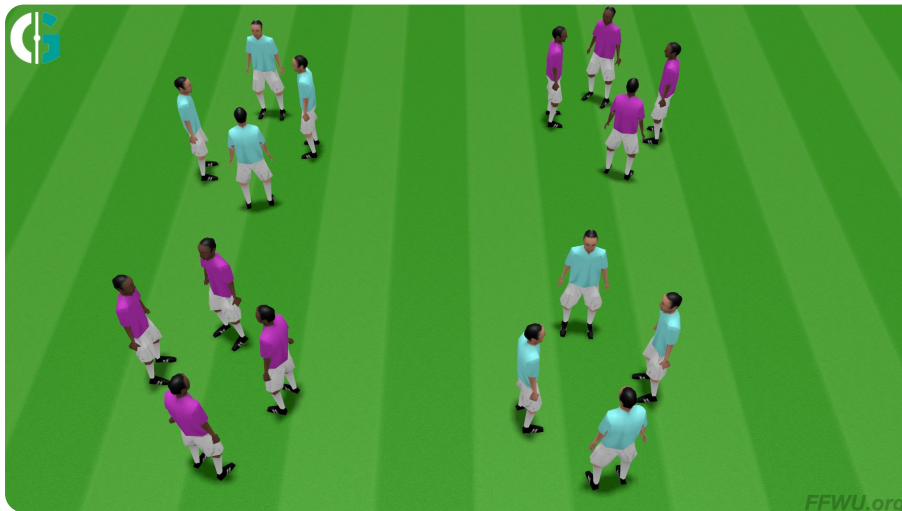
- 1 Anticipate early signs of tension and address them before they escalate
- 2 Use structured negotiation to find fair compromises
- 3 Apply conscious verbal and non-verbal communication to influence outcomes

3.5.3. Coach insight

Adolescents at this stage are capable of anticipating conflicts and negotiating solutions independently. Disagreements may involve playing time, roles, leadership, or perceived fairness, often influenced by social hierarchy. Emotional regulation is more stable, but status sensitivity remains strong.

The coach's role shifts toward facilitator and culture shaper. Encourage players to address tensions early, express boundaries clearly, and negotiate solutions that protect both individual needs and team performance. Reinforce awareness of non-verbal communication, as body language and tone can either escalate or de-escalate disagreement. Step in only when necessary, allowing peer-to-peer resolution to develop leadership and responsibility within the group.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION NEGOTIATION



	Players	16+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	-
	Equipment	Role cards, 40 tokens
	Duration	total: 10 min play: 10 min breaks: -
	Author	Sascha Bauer

Description

- Divide players into 4 groups of 4.
- Each group receives this scenario:
Your team has received funding for one of three options:
 1. New training equipment
 2. Team trip
 3. Extra coaching sessions
- Each player receives a hidden role card with a personal priority (1. "You care most about improving performance," 2. "You value team bonding," 3. "You want fairness for everyone," 4. "You feel your position group is often overlooked.").
- The group receives 10 resource tokens and must distribute them across the three options and reach an agreement within 10 minutes.
- No voting allowed — only negotiation and compromise.

Coaching Tips

1. During negotiation, players **express their priorities clearly**.
 - Use respectful language.
 - Be aware of tone and body language.
 - Seek compromise rather than dominance.
2. Observe **who dominates and who withdraws**.
 - Highlight non-verbal communication
 - Encourage players to express boundaries clearly.
 - Reinforce that compromise doesn't mean losing but shared ownership.
 - Do not step in unless negotiation becomes personal or disrespectful.



Learning Objectives

1

Players anticipate tension and **address competing interests** proactively

2

Players use **structured negotiation** to reach **fair compromise**.

3

Players apply **conscious verbal and non-verbal communication** during negotiation.



Reflection Questions

- When did you notice tension building?
- How did you address it before it escalated?
- Did early communication help?

- What did you give up?
- What did you gain?
- How did you find middle ground?

- How did your tone influence the discussion?
- Did you notice moments where non-verbal signals changed the atmosphere?

Training

17-18
years



3.6. Stage 6 (17-18 years)

3.6.1. Stage characteristics

Older teens are refining their conflict resolution skills and are often capable of handling complex conflicts independently. They have a clearer understanding of how to manage both interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts effectively.

3.6.2. Specific learning objectives

At this stage, teens refine their leadership skills and learn how to guide others in resolving conflicts while fostering positive group dynamics.

They should take full responsibility for resolving conflicts and guiding others through resolution and they should encourage positive group dynamics by helping others in the group feel heard and valued during conflicts.

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

- 1 Guide others in resolving conflicts while fostering positive group dynamics
- 2 Take full responsibility for resolving conflicts
- 3 Help others in the group feel heard and valued during conflicts

3.6.3. Coach insight

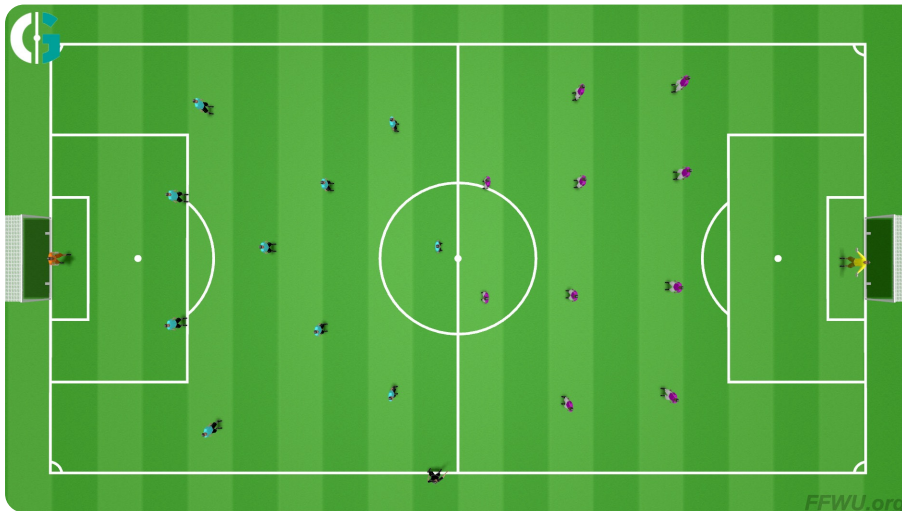
Older adolescents can manage complex interpersonal conflicts and take leadership roles in mediation. At this stage, conflict competence becomes a leadership skill and a performance stabiliser.

The coach should delegate responsibility for resolution when appropriate and guide reflective discussions afterward. Encourage leaders to structure dialogue, ensure fairness, and connect conflict handling to team performance. Emphasise that constructive task conflict can enhance decision-making, while unmanaged relationship conflict undermines cohesion and results.

At this level, conflict management is not only a social skill but a competitive advantage.

EXERCISE

CONTROLLED INJUSTICE WITH CAPTAIN'S COUNCIL



	Players	24+
	Age	07–08 09–10 11–12 13–14 15–16 17–18
	Pitch	full field
	Equipment	1 ball, 2 goals, 10 cones, 10 bibs
	Duration	total: 45 min play: 2 x 20 min break: 5 min
	Author	Sascha Bauer

Description

- 11v11 match with one substitute. Captains decide who begins as substitute.
- The coach acts as referee and intentionally makes several unfair decisions favouring one team (e.g., soft fouls, unjust penalty).
- Players are not informed beforehand that this is intentional. Captains are responsible for managing team reactions during the match and if emotional escalation occurs, captains may request a 1-minute leadership huddle to stabilize.
- After the match, a structured mediation and reflection session takes place.
 1. Perceived referee bias, 2. Selection decision (who sits), 3. Emotional response to injustice, 4. Public disagreement under pressure.
- Variations:
 - Rotate captains each match to give different players leadership experience.

Coaching Tips

1. Observe emotional reactions, body language, and peer regulation.
2. The 5-minute substitute rotation creates selection tension—**monitor how captains justify decisions** and how players respond.
3. Reinforce **separation** of task frustration from personal attacks.
4. Allow leadership huddles if escalation rises; **intervene only if respect or safety is at risk**.
5. After the game, **reveal the design** and guide reflection on how conflict handling influenced cohesion and performance.



Learning Objectives

1

Players maintain **emotional control and task focus** under perceived injustice.

2

Players demonstrate leadership by **stabilising teammates** during emotional escalation.

3

Players **protect team cohesion** during authority and selection tension.



Reflection Questions

- How did you react to unfair decisions?
- Did frustration remain task-focused or become personal?
- How did your reaction influence team performance?
- Who took responsibility when tension increased?
- How did leadership behaviour influence the group?
- Did a huddle change the atmosphere?
- How did the substitute rotation affect emotions?
- How were disagreements handled?
- Did conflict management strengthen trust and cooperation?

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