



# The Psychological and Emotional Benefits of Playing Football on Girls and Women in Europe.

Project Report  
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Together #WePlayStrong

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# Introduction

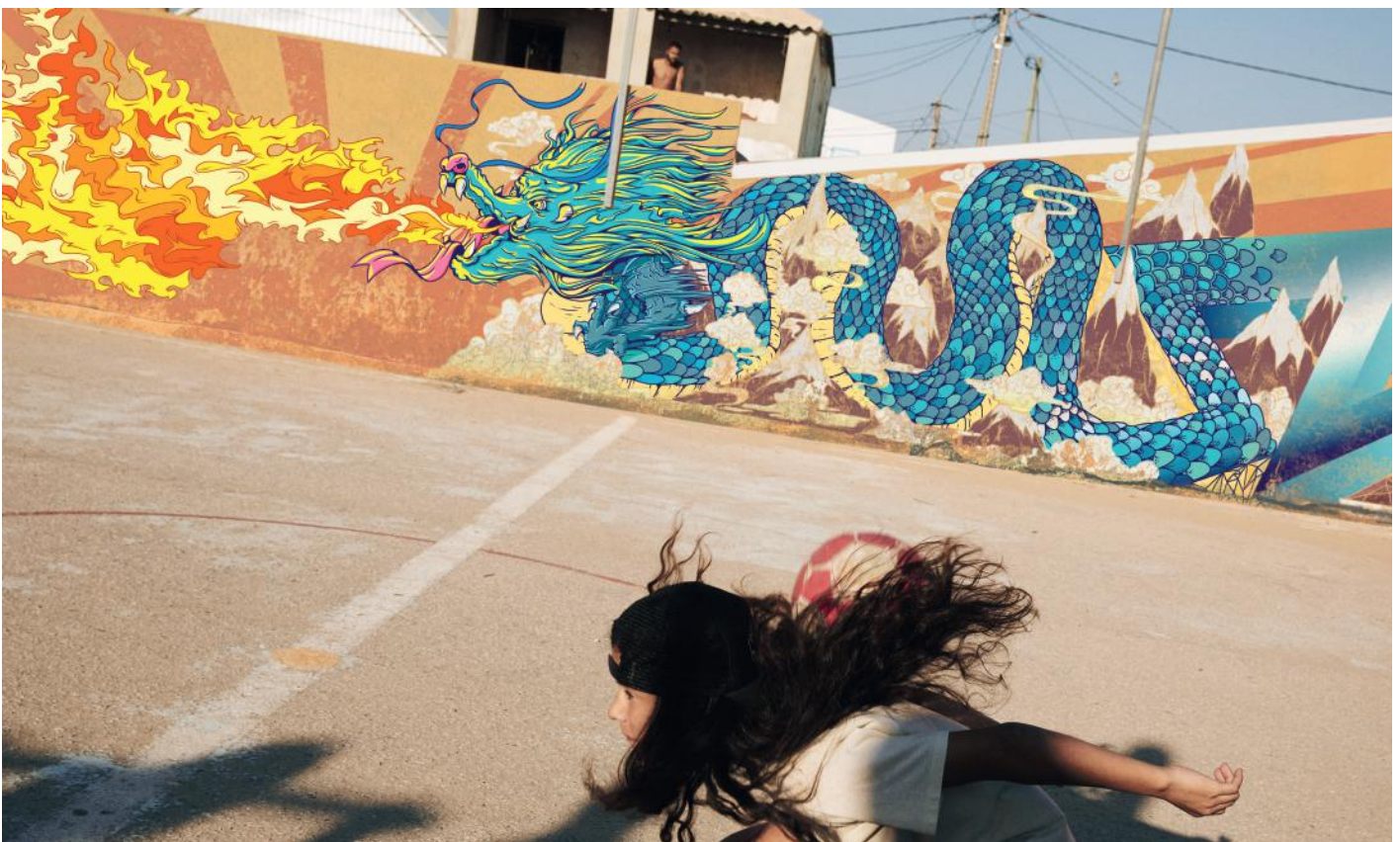
As the governing body of European football, UEFA is committed to protecting and promoting the game across the continent. The development of women's football is a priority for our organisation. Together with our 55 National Associations, we are working to ensure women's football is the number one played sport for women across Europe by 2020. As part of this commitment, in June 2017, we will launch our **'Together #WePlayStrong'** strategic plan to encourage girls to take-up and continue playing football.

At UEFA, we have always believed strongly in the positive impact football has on all who play. Before launching our new strategy, it was important to us that we understood the difference football could make to the lives of girls and women across Europe. We are pleased that this academic research confirms this belief. In the largest study of its kind, conducted by Dr Paul Appleton from the University of Birmingham, it was found that teenage girls who

play football feel more confident than those girls who play no sport at all. Most strikingly though, they feel more confident than those girls who choose to play other sports.

At an age when self-esteem can be at its most fragile, football has now been proven to provide a powerful boost in confidence. Being part of a football team gives girls a strong sense of self-esteem, helps them to overcome anxiety, makes them feel less self-conscious, and crucially, empowers them with the confidence to reach their goals.

At UEFA, we are incredibly proud to play a role in bringing football, and in turn, its benefits, to girls across Europe. We hope this research and our strategic plan will encourage even more girls, parents, schools, and other organisations to get involved with football. Together, we can make a real difference to girls across Europe. We invite girls and women across Europe to **Come Play.**



# Our Approach

This academic research was designed to understand more about the impact of playing football on the psychological and emotional health of teenage girls across Europe. It explores issues ranging from confidence, self-esteem,

well-being, friendship, and togetherness. We also consider the longer-term effects on life skills, motivation, schoolwork, and careers.

The project was comprised of three strands:

# 1

An exhaustive review of literature and existing research concerning the positive links between playing football/team sports and confidence, self-esteem, emotional well-being, life skills, and personal development in females.

# 2

A quantitative survey providing data on girls playing football and a comparison of the positive psychological and emotional states associated with playing football, with those derived by girls playing the other main team sport in the surveyed country. A comparison with girls not involved in any sports in the surveyed country was also provided. (See table below).

# 3

Qualitative one-on-one interviews, providing personal testimonies regarding the links between playing football and positive psychological and emotional states in girls and women in Europe. Interviews were conducted with 48 young female footballers (13-17 years old) and 12 older footballers (18 years and older).

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected in different regions across Europe, including England, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Poland and Turkey.

PARTICIPANT CATEGORY	AGE BRACKET	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
Young footballers	13-17	1266
Older footballers	18+	382
Girls playing other popular sports	13-17	1220
Non-sport participants	13-17	1270



# Our Key Findings

Across all our measures, we consistently found that young female footballers reported higher levels of confidence, self-esteem, well-being, and motivation than girls who play no sport at all. More powerfully, the results showed that young girls who play football also reported higher scores than those girls who play other sports.

Crucially, the benefits of playing football extend off the pitch as well. The female footballers we spoke to talked about how football helped

them to solve problems, deal with pressure at school/work, and feel empowered to overcome difficulties. They also spoke at length about the enduring and supportive friendships they made from participating in football.

The results make a compelling case: if you want teenage girls to feel more confident, get them playing football.

**80%**

**OF YOUNG FOOTBALLERS FEEL MORE CONFIDENT AS A RESULT OF PLAYING IN THEIR TEAM**

**48%**

**OF YOUNG FOOTBALLERS FEEL MORE CONFIDENT THAN OTHER GIRLS THEIR AGE VS/ 46% OF GIRLS WHO PLAY OTHER SPORTS**

**48%**

**OF YOUNG FOOTBALLERS FEEL LESS SELF-CONSCIOUS AS A RESULT OF PLAYING FOOTBALL VS/ 40% OF GIRLS WHO PLAY OTHER SPORTS**

**87%**

**OF YOUNG FOOTBALLERS LIKE PLAYING THEIR SPORT VS. 63% OF GIRLS WHO PLAY OTHER SPORTS**



# The Results

## Phase 1: Review of Existing Research

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Before we even began our own primary research, the scoping review revealed a number of interventions that confirmed football as an activity that leads to the promotion of positive psychological and emotional states in females. It also uncovered a number of smaller studies that suggested female footballers report better psychological and emotional states compared to females playing other sports and/or non-sport participants. The review identified a range of factors (e.g. coaching styles, psychological characteristics) that influence females playing sport (including football). Likewise, the review also identified a number of factors (e.g. burnout levels, performance) that are influenced by the psychological and emotional states of female footballers.



# The Results

## Phase 2: Quantitative Survey

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The quantitative data demonstrated that 80% of the young footballer scored “agree = 4” or higher on a scale of 1-5 on the statement “I feel more confident as a result of playing within my team”. Around 46%, 34% and 43% of the young footballers also scored 4 or higher for total confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem.

The benefits of playing football were also shown to extend beyond boosting confidence. The majority of the young females also reported high levels of togetherness, positive motivation towards playing football, were passionate about playing football, and felt empowered as a result of their participation. The results were also very similar in the older footballers.



# The Results

The quantitative data also revealed that, for the majority of the targeted variables, young footballers reported statistical significantly higher scores compared to girls not taking part in sport. The scores for the older footballers and girls taking part in other popular sports were also generally statistically significantly higher than girls playing no sport. When comparing the younger footballers and their peers

from other popular sports, there were some statistically significant differences in favour of the footballers. In particular, young footballers' scores were statistically significantly higher compared to girls from other sports for the following self-confidence statements as well as their overall score for psychological and emotional well-being (measured on a scale of 1-5):

## 1

“I HAVE MORE SELF-CONFIDENCE  
AS A RESULT OF PLAYING  
IN MY TEAM

YOUNG FOOTBALLERS

**4.03**

OTHER SPORT

**3.91**

## 2

“I HAVE OVERCOME A LACK OF  
SELF-CONFIDENCE AS A RESULT  
OF PLAYING MY SPORT”

YOUNG FOOTBALLERS

**3.60**

OTHER SPORT

**3.46**

## 3

“I AM LESS CONCERNED  
ABOUT WHAT OTHERS THINK  
ABOUT ME AS A RESULT OF  
PLAYING MY SPORT”

YOUNG FOOTBALLERS

**3.50**

OTHER SPORT

**3.23**

## 4

“I AM LESS SELF-CONSCIOUS  
AS A RESULT OF PLAYING  
MY SPORT”

YOUNG FOOTBALLERS

**4.32**

OTHER SPORT

**3.20**

## 5

“OVER THE PAST 3-4 WEEKS  
I WAS CONFIDENT ABOUT  
REACHING MY GOALS”

YOUNG FOOTBALLERS

**3.82**

OTHER SPORT

**3.64**

## 6

GENERAL PSYCHOLOGICAL  
AND EMOTIONAL  
WELL-BEING SCORE

YOUNG FOOTBALLERS

**3.55**

OTHER SPORT

**3.45**



# The Results

There were also some statistically significant differences between the young footballers and girls from the other sports in terms of their feelings of togetherness, motivation and life skills gained from playing sport. For example, for the statement: “We feel stronger because we are part of a team”, young footballers’ score (4.29) was statistically higher than girls from other sports (4.15). Likewise, overall feelings of relatedness with teammates were statistically significantly higher in young footballers (4.02) compared to other sport (3.94). In terms of the amotivation score (i.e. an absence of motivation to continue playing sport), young footballers reported a score of 1.66 compared to a score of 1.84 reported by girls from other sports. Regarding life skills (measured on a scale of 1 = Yes, definitely, 4 = not at all), young footballers’ overall score (2.13) was statistically significantly lower compared to girls from other sports (2.20), as well as for specific life skills (including problem solving, time management, anxiety management, and interpersonal skills).

Beyond the targeted variables described above, we also collected data about the extent to which the females received negative criticism about their participation in sport from 1) males their age; 2) females their age, and; 3) family members. 32% and 37% of the young and older footballers, respectively scored 4 or above (on a scale of 1-5) regarding criticism from males their age. In contrast, 16% of girls from other sports scored 4 or above. In terms of criticism from females their age, more than 16% of young and 22% of older female footballers scored 4 or above, whereas 11% of girls from other sports scored 4 or above. Finally, the percentage of girls receiving criticism from family members was lower for the three groups (7% young footballers; 8% older footballers; 4% other sport). Thus, it seems that female footballers, in comparison to girls playing other popular sport, are especially likely to receive criticism about playing their sport from males.



# The Results

## Phase 3: Qualitative Research

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The qualitative data was rich and provided insight into the many benefits of playing football for females. Upholding the findings of our quantitative survey, the interviews revealed that playing football had increased the girls' feelings of confidence, self-esteem, overall well-being and development of life skills. Perhaps most interestingly, these benefits were shown to extend into other areas of their lives, namely at school and in work.

The participants also described in detail the role of football in developing new and important friendships. These friendships were often considered to be more important than friendships developed in other life activities

and contributed to feelings of confidence, self-esteem and well-being. Older footballers also spoke about how friendships developed in football were long-lasting. The interview data supported the findings from the questionnaire, revealing that young girls' primary motivations for playing football are autonomous and intrinsic in nature (e.g. I play football because I like it, I love it, I make friends, I learn new skills).

This type of motivation has been consistently linked with positive psychological and emotional states in previous research. Finally, the interview data provided insight into the reasons why the girls first started to play football. Family members and the school setting, in particular, were identified as influencing the girls' decision to play football at an early age.

Full report available on request.





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