



# Mental Health and Youth Sport

Position Paper and Policy Recommendations  
of ENGSO Youth



# 1. Introduction

Mental ill-health is one of the greatest public health challenges in Europe, due to its high prevalence, burden of disease and associated disability. Available data shows that **more than one third of European Union (EU) citizens suffers from a mental disorder**<sup>1</sup>, including depression, anxiety and schizophrenia. This corresponds to 164.8 million Europeans affected by mental ill-health. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has also accelerated its efforts related to mental health, acknowledging that it is a crucial component of health and well-being and if left unaddressed, it contributes to premature death, human rights issues and bears substantial economic costs. Mental ill-health is also associated with poorer academic outcomes, unemployment, poor social support and substance use. The WHO is warning that there **can be no sustainable development without tackling mental health**, while alerting that 800.000 deaths per year are due to suicide. Especially alarming is that suicide has become the second leading cause for death in young people<sup>2</sup>.

Mental ill-health is the most **common health issue among young people**, with 75% of mental illness having its onset before the age of 25<sup>3</sup>. Taking into consideration that every sixth person in the world is an adolescent<sup>4</sup>, addressing mental health disorders from an early age onwards is essential for public health. **Adolescence is a critical, transformative time of life**. At this point in life, issues related to physical maturation and body image; intimacy and sexuality; peer relationships; and the quest for autonomy become directly related to the mental health status and implicitly to the quality of life<sup>5</sup>. This period of biological change, psychological challenges and social pressures, combined with many additional risk factors, makes adolescents one of the most vulnerable groups to mental health issues. Positive mental health and well-being can ease young people's physical and emotional transition from childhood to adulthood. Yet, one in five adolescents in Europe are affected by at least one psychological problem each year. Mental ill-health is at least as prevalent among young people as among adults, but adolescents' mental health problems have been often overlooked. The consequences of not addressing young people's mental health can have far-fetching implications to both present and future, limiting their opportunities to lead healthy and fulfilling lives as adults.

Many adolescents who participated in the WHO global consultation consider mental health the most important health problem faced by young people today, and would like better access to mental health care<sup>6</sup>. The World Mental Health Survey<sup>7</sup> found that many mental disorders usually start during childhood or adolescence, although diagnosis and treatment may be delayed for years. **Supportive parenting, a secure home life and a positive environment in school, youth and sport organisations** are key factors in building and protecting mental health and well-being in adolescence. Failure to adequately provide or ensure these basic elements jeopardizes health and well-being of young adults, can lead to substantial social problems, and result in **lower scholastic achievement and subsequent employment prospects**.

The current **COVID-19 global pandemic** may be impacting the mental health of young people all over the world. By **April 2020, over 90% of enrolled learners (1.5 billion young people) worldwide were denied their usual educational opportunities**. With school closures and cancelled cultural and sport events, many adolescents are missing out on some of the biggest moments of their young lives — as well as everyday moments like chatting with friends and participating in sport and physical activity.

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<sup>1</sup> Wittchen, H.U., Jacobi, F., Rehm, J., Gustavsson, A., Svensson, M., Jönsson, B., . . . Steinhausen, H.C. (2011). The size and burden of mental disorders and other disorders of the brain in Europe 2010. *European Neuropsychopharmacology*, 21, 655–679.

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2017). Web-based injury statistics query and reporting system (WISQARS). Accessed on 27th January, 2020 from: <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html>

<sup>3</sup> Kessler RC, Chiu WT, Demler O, Walters EE. Prevalence, severity, and comorbidity of 12-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Archives of general psychiatry*. 2005;62(6):617-627.

<sup>4</sup> Population dynamics by country and groups. New York: The World Bank; 2018 (<http://datatopics.worldbank.org/health/population>, accessed 27th January 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Frisé, A. (2007). Measuring health-related quality of life in adolescence. *Acta Paediatrica*, 96(7), 963-968.

<sup>6</sup> <https://apps.who.int/adolescent/second-decade/section4/page1/Mental-health-issues.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.hcp.med.harvard.edu/wmh/>

Social distancing measures can result in social isolation in an abusive home, with abuse likely exacerbated during this time of economic uncertainty and stress. In a survey carried out in March 2020, 51% of young people in the United Kingdom (UK) reported that the current coronavirus pandemic, and the resulting public health measures, have made their mental health a bit worse. Furthermore, **32% said that the impact of the coronavirus crisis has made their mental health much worse**, while only seven percent stated that their mental health has improved over this time<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. The link between sport, physical activity and mental health of young people

Evidence suggests that **regular physical activity improves mental health, overall well-being** and can reduce the risk of depression, anxiety, cognitive decline and delay the onset of dementia<sup>10</sup>. Being physically active presents an accessible, cost effective and impactful preventive approach to strengthen and improve the mental health of young people. **Organised sport and physical activity in groups** have the potential to provide a space for young people to **socially connect with others** and experience **positive emotions** and a sense of belonging. It can also provide an environment where young people can escape from aspects of their life they find difficult, and feel comfortable to reflect on their difficulties. **Participation in sport activities can enhance mental health and well-being of young people with fewer opportunities backgrounds**, especially when coaches are well-prepared to provide them appropriate mentorship and support.

On the other hand, insufficient physical activity may have a negative effect on mental health in adolescence. Physically inactive adolescents are more likely to be obese, which may spur **low self-esteem and body image issues**<sup>11</sup>. The WHO alarms that more than 85% of girls and 78% of boys aged 11 to 17 years **do not meet current recommendations of at least one hour of physical activity per day**<sup>12</sup>. This implies that most adolescents are missing opportunities to reap the multiple benefits of being physically active. Moreover, the recent global pandemic and subsequent measures have negatively impacted adolescents' everyday participation in sport and physical activity.

From all of the above it is clear that there is a need to address the access to and quality of physical activity and sport provision in adolescence not only to improve physical health but to create contexts and practices that will **positively influence the quality of life of young people already involved in physical activity and sport programmes but also those who are not**. The mere provision of sport and physical activity is, however, not enough. It is **important to emphasise that these benefits do not come automatically from participation**. It is the quality of interactions and the relations that underlie them that will have pivotal effects in achieving psychological benefits. Sport clubs, associations and youth organisations have the potential to provide indirect benefits toward mental health via the social support and resources they offer to their members. **Quality of activities, rather than activities per se, are more likely to lead to positive outcomes**. The feasible way of ensuring this quality is to educate those closest to youth, their **coaches, teachers, physical education teachers in particular, youth workers, parents** and all others who in one way or another provide young people with physical activity and sport opportunities.

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<sup>8</sup> [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30109-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30109-7/fulltext)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1108583/young-people-s-mental-health-during-covid-19-in-the-uk/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/be-active-during-covid-19>

<sup>11</sup> Lubans, D., Richards, J., Hillman, C., Faulkner, G., Beauchamp, M., Nilsson, M., Biddle, S. (2016). Physical activity for cognitive and mental health in youth: a systematic review of mechanisms. *Pediatrics*, 138(3), e20161642.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/22-11-2019-new-who-led-study-says-majority-of-adolescents-worldwide-are-not-sufficiently-physically-active-putting-their-current-and-future-health-at-risk>

### 3. Mental health of young people and EU policies

The European Union Youth Strategy 2019-2027 specifically mentions mental health and well-being as a priority area. Through the two-year participatory process of the 'Youth in Europe: What's next? Structured Dialogue', young people all over the EU identified mental health and well-being as a key area for action and cooperation. The **European Youth Goal 5 on Mental Health & Well-being** aims to achieve better mental well-being and end stigmatisation of mental health problems, thus promoting social inclusion of all young people. Its targets are: To encourage the development of self-awareness and less competitive mindsets by fostering appreciation for individual skills and strengths;

- To safeguard the rights to work and to study of people with mental health problems to ensure their ability to pursue their own ambitions;
- To develop an inclusive intersectional approach to mental health provision for all, especially marginalised groups;
- To provide all professionals working with young people as well as family and friends with quality mental health first aid training;
- To provide inclusive, respectful and well-funded care by incorporating high quality mental health provision;
- To focus on prevention measures that ensure young people are equipped with the knowledge and the skills required for better mental well-being;
- To fight stigma about mental health problems by developing awareness programmes.

Apart from the health benefits for young European citizens, good mental health is increasingly important for economic growth and social development in Europe. In 2005, the Commission published a **Green Paper – Promoting the Mental Health of the Population** as a first response to the WHO's Mental Health Declaration for Europe. In 2013, a **Joint Action Mental Health and Well-being** was launched with financial support from the EU Health Programme. The Joint Action on Mental health and Well-being, launched in 2013 and running until 2018, resulted in the **European Framework for Action on Mental Health and Wellbeing**<sup>13</sup>, which supports EU-countries to review their policies and share experiences in improving policy efficiency and effectiveness. It aims to:

- Develop mental health promotion and prevention and early intervention programmes;
- Ensure the transition to comprehensive mental health treatment and quality care;
- Strengthen knowledge, evidence and best practice sharing in mental health.

The **EU Compass for action on mental health and well-being**<sup>14</sup> assisted with the implementation of the framework by communicating the Joint Action's priorities. It monitored mental health and wellbeing policies and activities of EU countries, and non-governmental actors.

### 4. ENGSO Youth's recommendations on youth sport and mental health

**Decision makers at EU, national and regional levels shall:**

**Develop strategies, policies and action plans:** decision makers at all levels shall develop mental health and well-being strategies and action plans in the field of sport or within existing strategies on mental health and well-being, sport and physical activity shall be specifically mentioned. Young people should be the main target groups of such policies, since 75% of mental illness have its onset before the age of 25.

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.mentalhealthandwellbeing.eu/assets/docs/publications/Framework%20for%20action\\_19jan%20%281%29-20160119192639.pdf](http://www.mentalhealthandwellbeing.eu/assets/docs/publications/Framework%20for%20action_19jan%20%281%29-20160119192639.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/health/non\\_communicable\\_diseases/mental\\_health/eu\\_compass\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/health/non_communicable_diseases/mental_health/eu_compass_en)

**At EU level, the upcoming Work Plan on Sport** (to be adopted under the German EU Presidency) shall take into account and prioritize the link between sport, physical activity and mental health of young people. The new Erasmus youth and sport programmes shall recognize the role of physical activity in preventing and treating mental health disorders.

**Promote awareness-raising and educational initiatives:** building the capacity of sport and youth organisations to support mental health outcomes, begins with ensuring that there is a common understanding of the importance of mental health.

**Educational and awareness-raising programmes** shall be made available to coaches, trainers, athletes, staff and youth workers which may be through using the existing courses or developing mental health specific courses for delivery in clubs and associations.

**Promote access to physical activity and sport:** although physical activity and sport participation may have an important role in promoting mental health, it is still necessary that young are part of it. Young people, especially those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds, still face problems in accessing sport and physical activity, while being the ones most exposed to health problems. Thus, promoting access for all and reducing inequalities in this field should be a priority mission.

**Enhance skills development of sport coaches:** consideration should be given to the integration of effective mental health and well-being programmes into coaching qualifications. Sports coaches would benefit from sector investment in training and education to develop skills and understanding for the delivery of sport programmes favouring mental health and well-being outcomes for young people.

**Foster research in the field:** the evidence for the effectiveness of mental health awareness programmes in youth sport settings lacks a sound methodological foundation on which to determine what types of programmes are most effective. Given this gap in knowledge, steps should be taken to support research and partnership in the field.

**Build partnerships:** a range of key stakeholders from across the public, private and voluntary sectors should be encouraged to work in partnership to develop the strategy and interventions in mental health and well-being in youth sport.

**Good practice from Europe:** *#21by21 is a national campaign that brings together UK sport organisations with business and policy makers in a pledge to provide 21,000 community sports coaches and volunteers with mental health awareness training by 2021. The campaign is being coordinated by The Sport for Development Coalition and aims to help more organisations feel more comfortable talking about mental health within their sport/activity setting and, by de-stigmatising the subject, for it to become commonplace.*<sup>15</sup>

## Youth sport organisations shall:

**Support the capacity building on mental health and well-being:** youth sport organisations shall strive to develop knowledge on mental health and educate their staff members. By providing training and education for coaches, administrators and even parents, organisations can develop a culture of support ensuring that those needing assistance receive timely and expert care. For young people exposed to trauma, their coach is a person who can facilitate safety, relationships, and build their competencies, on and off the field. In order to best support youth, coaches must be educated and provided proper resources.

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.connectsport.co.uk/21by21>

**Identify mentors:** supporting mental health takes a lot of work, and although it is a collective effort it is important to have key people driving the mental health agenda. Mentors are ideally role models who promote a positive and supportive culture in the sport organisation and act as a source of information and support to young athletes. Mentors are particularly in charge of paying attention to issues or behaviours that might need a response.

**Promote open communication channels:** encouraging open communication about mental health in sporting organisations can support young people to share their concerns, problems and bad experiences. Mental ill-health, anxiety and stigma shall be communicated as openly as physical injuries. Getting rid of the taboos and adapting language to young people is an essential way to identify mental health issues. Open communication about mental health in sporting clubs can take place:

- between staff, leadership and athletes
- among young athletes
- among family, friends, and other club supporters.

It is important to note that youngsters might not take advantage of these open communication channels as they don't often express their feelings. **Coaches, family members and staff shall act as 'feeling detectives'** who are able to identify negative experiences of youngsters by paying attention to their behavior, body language, comments and communication.

**Embrace and promote inclusion and diversity:** young people with fewer opportunities, especially those coming from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds or facing disability can be at increased risk of mental ill-health. Youth sport organisations shall create **a welcoming atmosphere that favours inclusion and diversity** while facilitating positive mental health for youngsters with fewer opportunities.

**Encourage participation:** when young people experience mental ill-health they often disengage from sporting activities. This can lead to a vicious cycle of disengagement from exercise and social interactions, which can lead to worsening mental health. Encouraging young people to participate and maintain engagement with their sporting activities is a key priority in supporting their well-being. **The importance of mental health and well-being should be prioritized over performance in youth sport.**

**Build partnerships:** partnerships between youth sport organisations, mental health services, educational bodies, local authorities and the civil sector (e.g. youth clubs) are a key ingredient of success. **The ideal model of support for young people's mental health involves a broad system of supports** that work collaboratively with each other. This ensures that there are multiple people who can detect mental health issues in young people and also act as sources of support.

**Good practice from Europe:** *Game of Our Own delivered by Youth Sport Trust (UK) is focused on introducing more girls to the game by teaching leadership skills, which can then be applied in girls' own schools to engage their peers. It also supports schools and teachers to have a better understanding of barriers to participation and how to engage girls. 40% of the girls who took part in a post programme survey said that their mental well-being had been improved by taking part. It also revealed that 90% of girls who had helped to lead and deliver the programme said their confidence had been improved generally – with more girls feeling that their confidence to play football had been boosted.*<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/news/football-boosting-young-girls-mental-wellbeing-and-confidence>

## Recommendations for young individuals during COVID-19 times:

**Look after your physical wellbeing:** your physical health has a big impact on how you are feeling emotionally and mentally. At times like these, it can be easy to fall into unhealthy patterns of behaviour which in turn can make you feel worse. Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, drink enough water, exercise at least once a day, sleep enough and try to avoid harmful substances such as alcohol or smoking.

**If you can, once a day get outside, or bring nature in:** spending time in green spaces can benefit both your mental and physical wellbeing. If you can't get outside much you can try to still get these positive effects by spending time with the windows open to let in fresh air, arranging space to sit and see a nice view (if possible) and get some natural sunlight, or get out into the garden if you can.

**Recognize that your anxiety is completely normal:** in a situation like this, it is normal to feel sad, worried, confused or scared. You should know that you are not alone and should talk to someone you trust about your feelings, such as a parent or a trusted adult, so that you can protect yourself and your health. Stay connected to friends and family: find new ways to connect with friends, nowadays digital technology offers various opportunities.

**Find some time to relax and meditate:** take a break from watching, reading, or listening to news, including social networks. Take a deep breath, stretch out or meditate. Try to combine things you have to do with activities you enjoy. Focus on yourself, on your long-term goals and think of something positive every day.

**Be kind to yourself and others:** do not stigmatize and exclude your peers and do not tease anyone that they are ill; remember that the virus does not know about geographical boundaries, ethnicity, age, ability or gender.

## Useful Guides and ToolKits for Sports and Youth Organisations:

- <https://www.aspenprojectplay.org/coronavirus-and-youth-sports>
- <https://www.orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/Physical-and-sexual-health/Toolkits/Supporting-mental-wellbeing-in-community-sport/MH-in-community-sports-toolkit-WEB>
- <https://www.orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/Physical-and-sexual-health/Toolkits/Supporting-mental-wellbeing-in-community-sport>
- <https://www.mhe-sme.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Young-People-and-Mental-Health-Infographic.pdf>
- [https://www.mind.org.uk/media/23415439/guides-1-to-4\\_sport-and-physical-activity.pdf](https://www.mind.org.uk/media/23415439/guides-1-to-4_sport-and-physical-activity.pdf)
- [https://www.mhe-sme.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Guidance-note\\_European-Youth-Strategy-and-Goals.pdf](https://www.mhe-sme.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Guidance-note_European-Youth-Strategy-and-Goals.pdf)

## Other References:

- [http://www.activityalliance.org.uk/assets/000/000/434/Mind\\_Get\\_Set\\_to\\_Go\\_original.pdf?1463229654](http://www.activityalliance.org.uk/assets/000/000/434/Mind_Get_Set_to_Go_original.pdf?1463229654)
- <http://www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/AYPH-health-and-sport-review-Nov-2016.pdf>
- [https://network.streetgames.org/sites/default/files/StreetGames\\_Brunel\\_Youth%20Sport%20%26%20Mental%20Health%20Report.pdf](https://network.streetgames.org/sites/default/files/StreetGames_Brunel_Youth%20Sport%20%26%20Mental%20Health%20Report.pdf)
- [https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/knowledge\\_base/high\\_performance\\_sport/performance\\_preparation/athlete\\_mental\\_health](https://www.clearinghouseforsport.gov.au/knowledge_base/high_performance_sport/performance_preparation/athlete_mental_health)
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- <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/how-protect-your-mental-health-during-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic>
- <https://www.unicef.org/serbia/en/take-care-yourself-time-covid-19-outbreak>

