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# **Coaches' and participants' experiences of bullying in sports**

## **Findings from the Before survey**

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## Summary of key findings

- One third of adult players and a fifth of coaches reported being bullied in sports, mostly during team sports.
- More than 60% of players have experienced bullying from coaches, mostly by being left out on purpose (12.9%) and by being addressed with hurtful names.
- Over one third of players (37.5%) and 24% of coaches who were bullied did not report it to anyone.
- The most common reason for being made to feel excluded or uncomfortable in the sports club was body type/size for both player (22%) and coach participants (17%).
- The most common negative remarks that players overheard from adults in the sports club (e.g., coaches and volunteers) related to players' performance (66%)
- The most common forms of bullying by teammates endured by player participants were spreading rumours (19%) and being excluded (18%)
- Less than 5% of players are comfortable expressing their concerns about bullying experiences to coaches and less than 3% are comfortable expressing their concerns to teammates, although they are more comfortable to report witnessed incidents.
- 1 in 2 coaches reported having witnessed bullying (by coaches, parents or players)



## Method

### Study Sample

The sample of this research included three cohorts: players under 18 years old, players over 18 years old, and coaches. However, for the present report, the under 18 cohort was excluded as the sample size was too small (N=15); therefore only the two sub-samples of players above 18 years old and coaches were retained for data analysis<sup>1</sup>.

In total, 156 players (52.6% Women) aged 26.1 years, (SD=9.6) and 312 coaches (55.5% Women) aged 40.3 years (SD=11.2) completed the survey. Almost half (48.7%) of the survey responses were from Sweden, 38.9% from Ireland, 9.6% from Spain, and 2.8% from Germany.

### Recruitment

An email containing a link to the survey was circulated via established networks across all project partners in Ireland, Sweden and Spain. A distinct survey was used for each target cohort. Stakeholders across project partners included National Governing Bodies and individual sport club contacts. Surveys were also promoted across social media platforms in order to maximise response rates. Data was collected on Qualtrics. Before completing the survey, the scope of the study was explained to participants. Furthermore, participants were informed that their answers were anonymous and that they could quit the survey at any time. Following this, they were invited to give their consent. With regards to the sub-sample of players under 18 years old, consent was first provided by their parents, and then by the participants themselves.

### Measures

A survey designed specifically for the purposes of this study was developed. The survey comprised five sections: personal background (including demographics), sporting background and experience in the sport club, experience of bullying in sport, types of bullying, and reporting bullying. Questionnaire items were derived from previously validated surveys, and some items specific for the purposes of this study were also included. Responses to open-ended questions were organised

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<sup>1</sup> Although survey responses for the under 18 year old participants in this study were too low for meaningful comparative analysis, they do provide a sound basis for future study. For example, while only 15 of the 61 children who accessed the survey answered questions about bullying, half of these reported being victimised during their time playing sport. In addition, only half felt confident in their ability to 'recognise' bullying when they see it.

thematically in line with the guidelines, as set out by Renner and Taylor-Powell (2003) for analysing qualitative data.

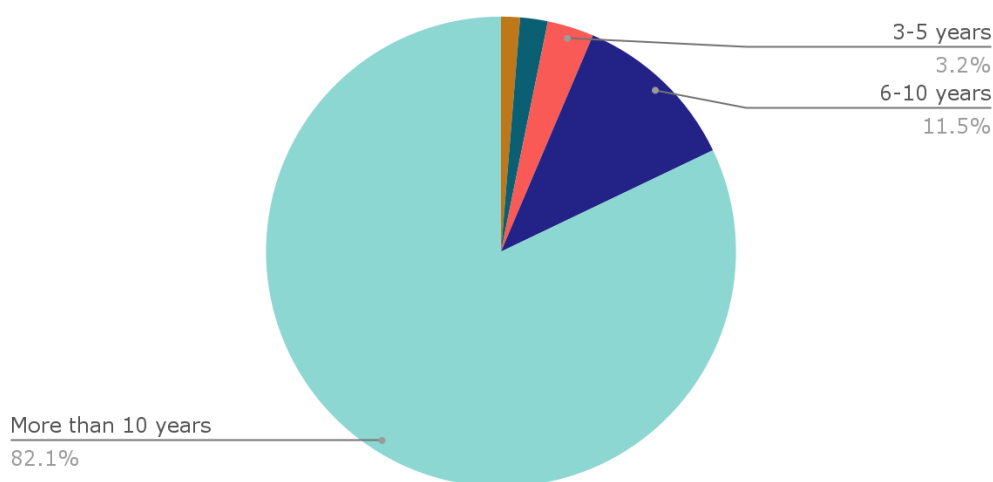
## Quantitative Findings

The findings will be presented following five themes: Participant demographics and sporting background; Sense of belonging; Personal experience of bullying in sports; Types of bullying; and, Reporting bullying.

### Theme 1: Participant Demographics and Sporting Background

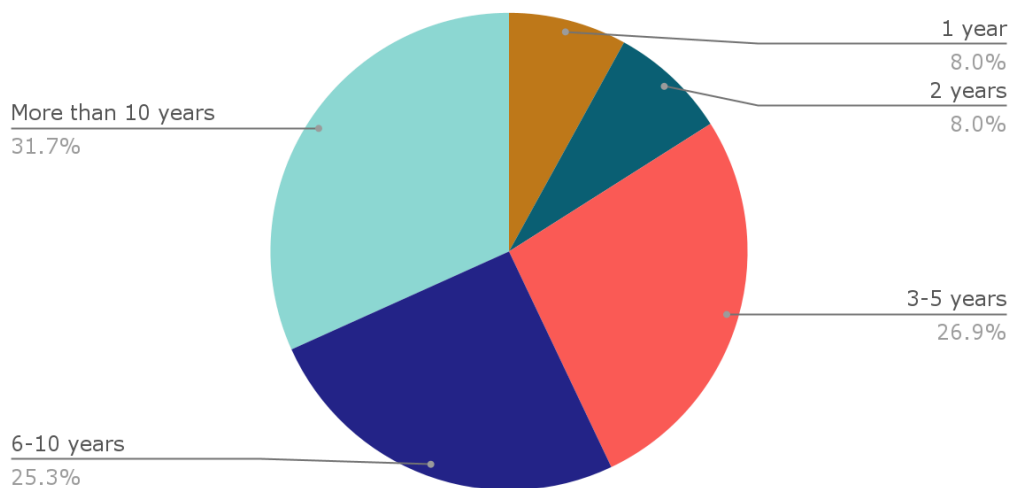
Most participants identified as heterosexual (93.2% for players, 96% for coaches), while the remaining participants identified their sexual orientation as LGBTQ+. Furthermore, a minority of participants reported having a disability (6.7% for players, 11.4% for coaches). Player participants were asked how long they have been involved in sport, with the majority reporting that they have been playing for more than 10 years (82.1%; see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Time spent playing sports for player participants**



Coaches were asked how long they have been coaching sport, and almost one third reported having coached sport for more than 10 years (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Time spent coaching sport for coach participants**



Furthermore, the majority of player participants (48.7%) and of coach participants (67.9%) were involved only in team sports, while 16% (playing) and 15.7% (coaching) were involved in individual sports, and 35.3% (playing) and 16.3% (coaching) were involved in both team and individual sports.

The percentages of participants playing different kinds of sports are presented in Table 1 and divided by sub-sample and type of sport. The most popular sports were gaelic football among player participants (35.9%) and soccer among coach participants (37.5%).

**Table 1. Sporting backgrounds of players and coaches**

	Players	Coaches
Adventure activities	8.3%	1.6%
Aerobics	4.5%	1.6%
Athletics	10.9%	7.7%
Badminton	0.6%	0.3%
Basketball	7.1%	4.8%
Boxing	3.2%	1%

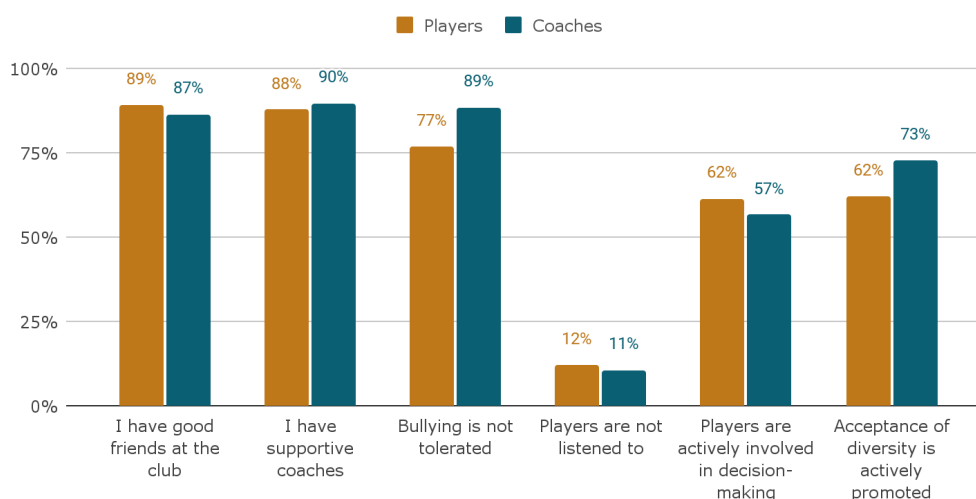
	Players	Coaches
Camogie	17.9%	4.5%
Cross country running	1.3%	2.2%
Cycling	0	0.6%
Dance	5.1%	1.6%
Figure skating	1.3%	0.3%
Floorball	1.3%	10.6%
Gaelic football	35.9%	14.4%
Golf	0.6%	0
Gymnastics	1.9%	6.4%
Handball	2.6%	6.1%
Hockey	1.3%	6.4%
Horse riding	3.2%	1.9%
Huling	13.5%	6.1%
Martial arts	3.2%	2.2%
Netball	0.6%	0
Padel	4.5%	0.6%
Rugby	5.1%	3.2%
Skiing	0.6%	1.9%
Soccer	24.4%	37.5%
Squash	1.3%	0
Swimming	10.9%	3.8%
Surfing	2.6%	0
Tennis	3.8%	2.2%
Triathlon	1.9%	0.6%
Volleyball	0.6%	0.6%
Weight training	12.8%	3.8%
Wrestling	0	0.3%
Other sport not listed	16.7%	9.6%

## Theme 2: Sense of belonging

In total, 96.8% of player participants and 94.9% of coaches indicated they felt a sense of belonging in their sports club, and a similar number (95.5% for players and 92.3% for coaches) indicated they felt safe at their sports club.

Regarding the sports club climate, most participants reported having good friends (89% for players and 87% for coaches) and supportive coaches (88% for players and 90% for coaches), and stated that, in their club, bullying is not tolerated, diversity is well accepted, and players are actively involved in the decision making process (Figure 3). Finally, most participants disagreed with the statement that players are not being listened to.

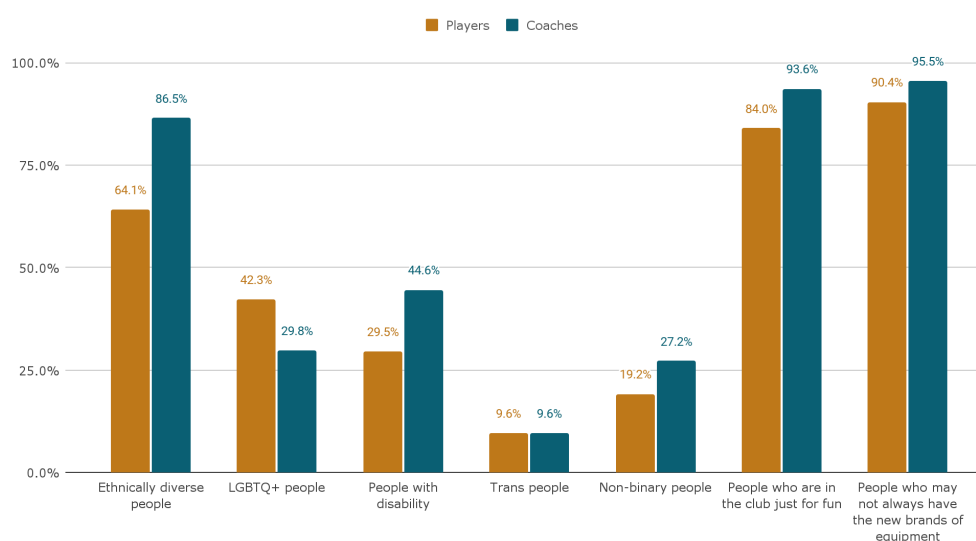
**Figure 3. Players' and coaches' perceptions of sports club climate**





Both player and coach participants reported a quite ethnically diverse environment at their sports club (see Figure 4). Furthermore, almost half of coaches (44.6%) also reported having players with disabilities, while around 42.3% of player participants reported having players belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, almost the whole sample reported that, in their club, there are players who participate in sports just for fun and who may not always have the newest sports equipment.

**Figure 4. Diversity within the sports club**



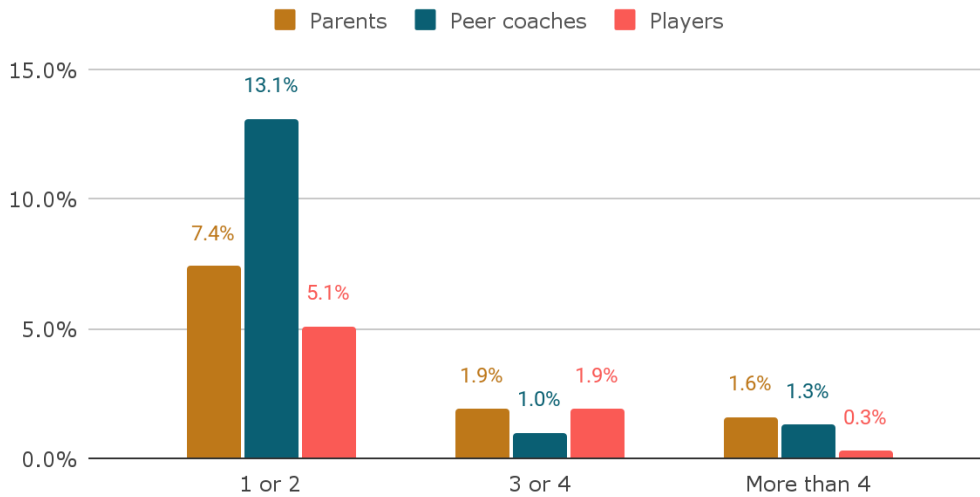
### Theme 3: Personal Experience of Bullying in Sport

When asked about their experience with bullying in sports, 31.4% of players and 20.2% of coaches reported having been bullied at least once. In most cases, participants were bullied while playing team sports (90% for players, 79.8% for coaches). In a small number of instances, participants skipped the training sessions in order to avoid being bullied (5.9% for the players' sample and 3.1% for the coaches' sample).

With regards to the player participants who have been bullied, most of them were targeted by older players (90%) or adults (80%), regardless of whether they belonged to the same or to a different club. Interestingly, at least 63% of players with experiences of bullying were targeted by a coach.

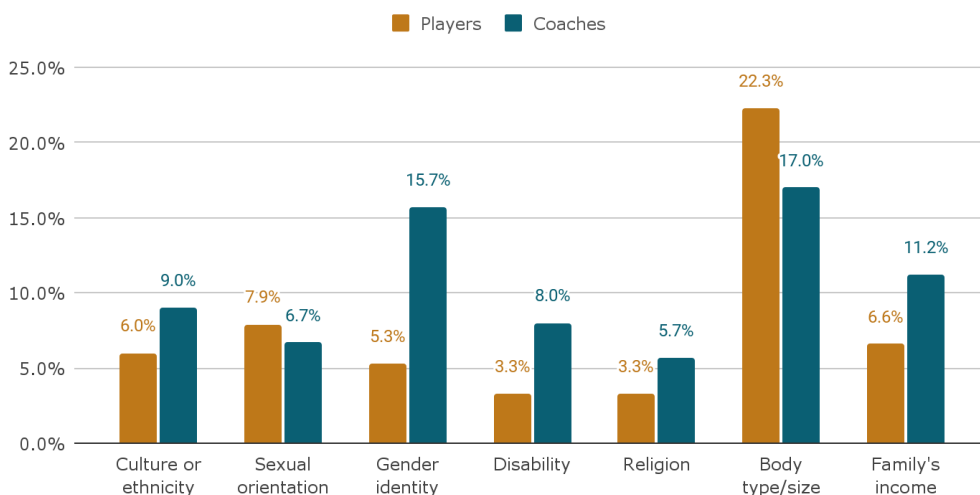
Figure 5 summarises how frequently coaches were bullied by players' parents, peer coaches, or players during the last season, with peer coaches being the most common perpetrators (13.1%).

**Figure 5. Coaches' report of the number of parents, peer coaches, and players targeting them**



Participants were also asked on what basis they had been made to feel excluded, uncomfortable or unsafe in their sports club, and in most cases this happened on the grounds of participants' body type and body weight (22.3% for players and 17% for coaches; see Figure 6).

**Figure 6. Reasons why participants were made to feel excluded, uncomfortable, or unsafe in the sports club**



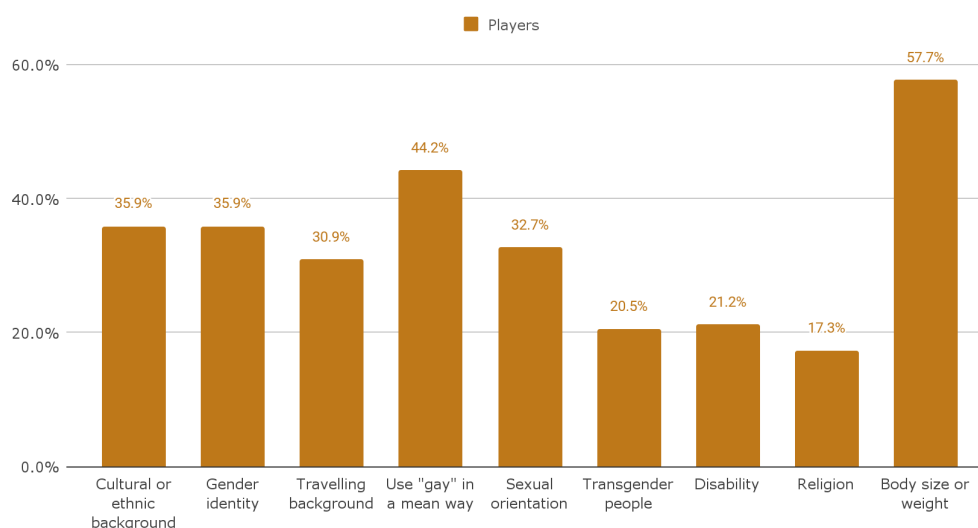
Participants tended to report their experiences of bullying. Most of the players expressed their concerns to their parents (35.5%) or to their friends (24.4%), while reports to coaches (4.4%), siblings (4.4%), and

teammates (2.2%) were not as frequent. Regarding coaches, they mostly talked about being bullied to club members (33%), family (28%), peer coaches (27%) and friends (24%), while only 12% reported it to the senior coaches. Despite this, 37.5% players and 24% coaches among those that have been targeted did not tell anyone about having been bullied.

When it comes to witnessing bullying, rather than being targeted, one in two coaches (50.3%) reports that they have witnessed such behaviours at least once either by coaches, parents or players.

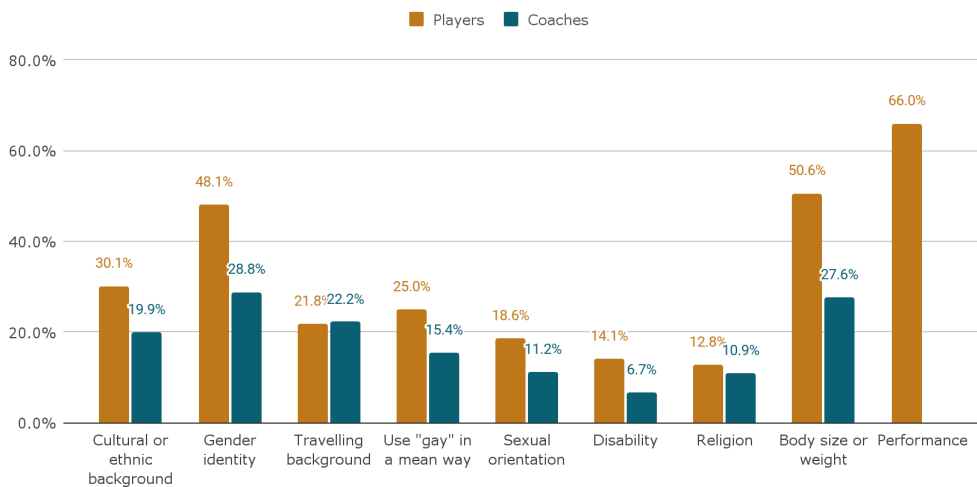
With regards to players, they reported that they frequently heard body-shaming (57.7%) and homophobic remarks (44.2%) by fellow players (either from the same team or from a different one) towards other players (see Figure 7).

**Figure 7. Reasons of negative remarks made by fellow teammates or other players at the sports club, according to players' perception**



Player participants also reported having heard negative remarks about players' performance (66%), body weight (50.6%) and gender identity (48.1%) by coaches or other adults in the sports club (see Figure 8). In the case of coaches, the most frequent negative comments they heard by other coaches regarded players' gender identity (28.8%) and body weight (27.6%).

**Figure 8. Perceived reasons of negative remarks made by coaches, volunteers and/or other adults at the sports club**



*Note. Coaches were not presented the "performance" option.*

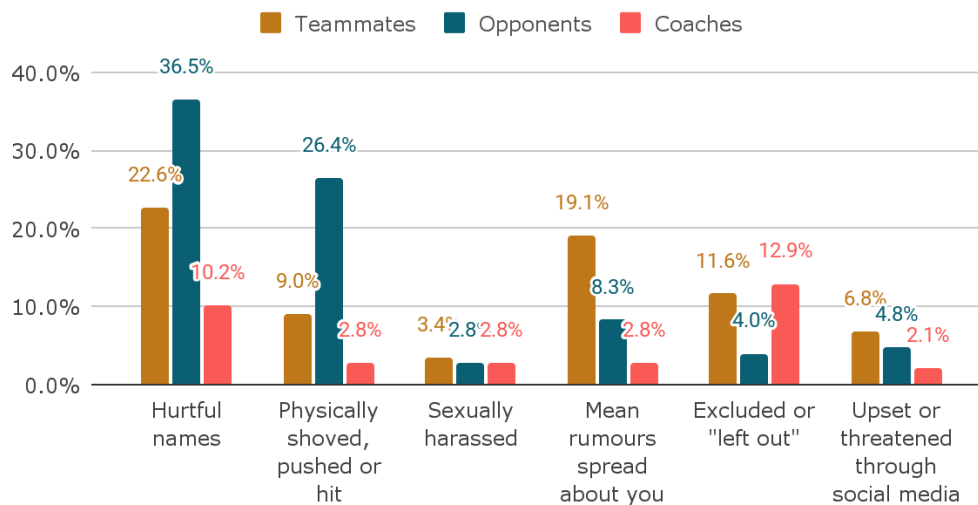
About 10% of player participants indicated that they had engaged in bullying behaviours; the rate dropped to less than 3% for coaches.

## Theme 4: Types of Bullying

In the fourth section of the survey, participants were asked about the specific types of bullying they endured as targets in their sport club.

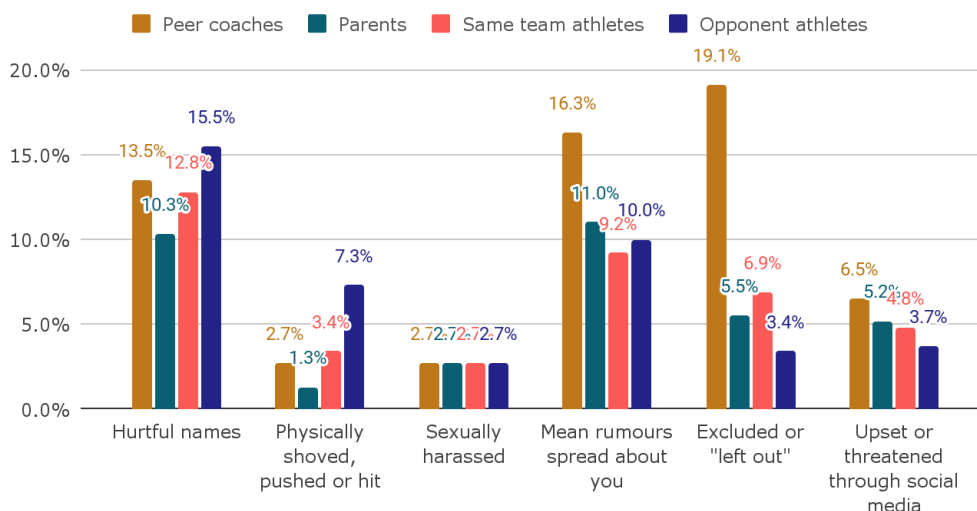
Players reported that being called hurtful names (22.6%) and having mean rumours spread about themselves (19.1%) were the most common types of bullying they endured by their own teammates, while being called hurtful names (36.5%) and being physically shoved (26.4%) were the most common forms of bullying perpetrated by opponent players towards participants (see Figure 9). Finally, players reported that they were mostly targeted by coaches by being left out on purpose (12.9%) and by being addressed with hurtful names (10.2%).

**Figure 9. Types of bullying endured by players and perpetrated by teammates, opponents, and coaches**



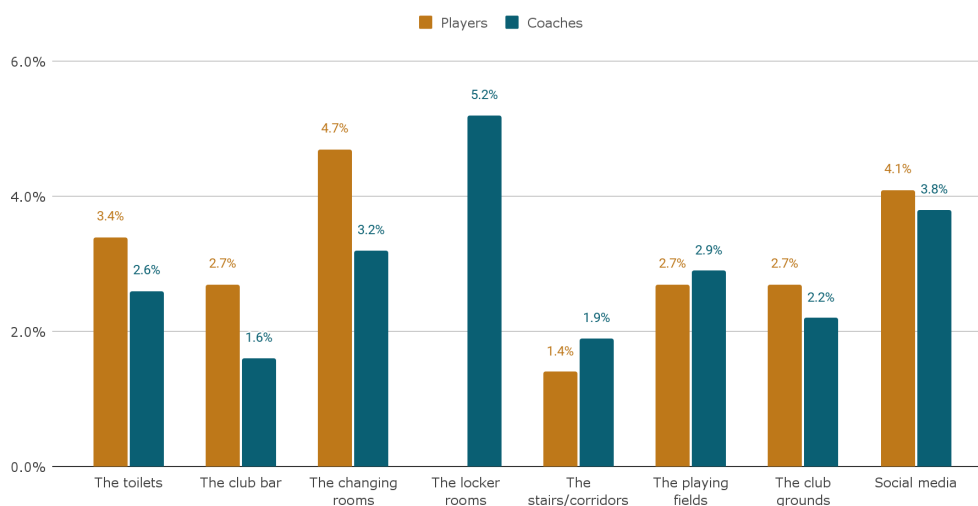
As far as coaches are concerned, they were usually targeted by other coaches through exclusion (19%) and mean rumours spread about them (16.4%; see Figure 10). They also reported that being called hurtful names and having mean rumours spread about them were the most common forms of bullying perpetrated towards them by parents (respectively 10.4% and 11.1%), by athletes of their team (respectively 12.8% and 9.3%), and by opponent athletes (respectively 15.6% and 10%).

**Figure 10. Types of bullying endured by coaches and perpetrated by peer coaches, parents, athletes from the same team, and opponent athletes**



According to players, the places that they would avoid the most in order to hide from bullying are the changing rooms (4.7%) and social media (4.1%); similarly, coaches stated that they would avoid locker rooms (5.2%) and social media (3.8%; see Figure 11).

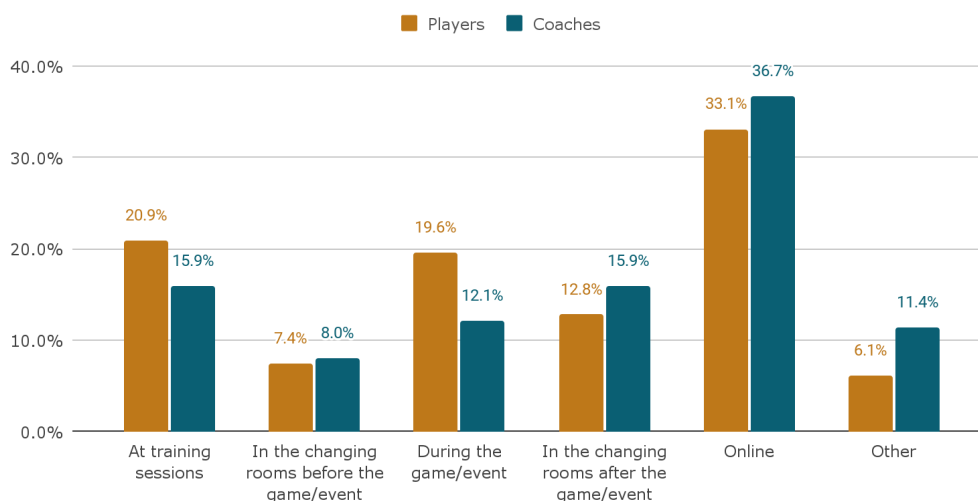
**Figure 11. Places that participants would avoid in order to hide from bullying**



Note. Player participants were not presented the "locker rooms" option.

According to both players' and coaches' perceptions, bullying takes place mostly online (33.1% and 36.7% respectively; see Figure 12).

**Figure 12. Most common locations where bullying takes place according to participants' perception**



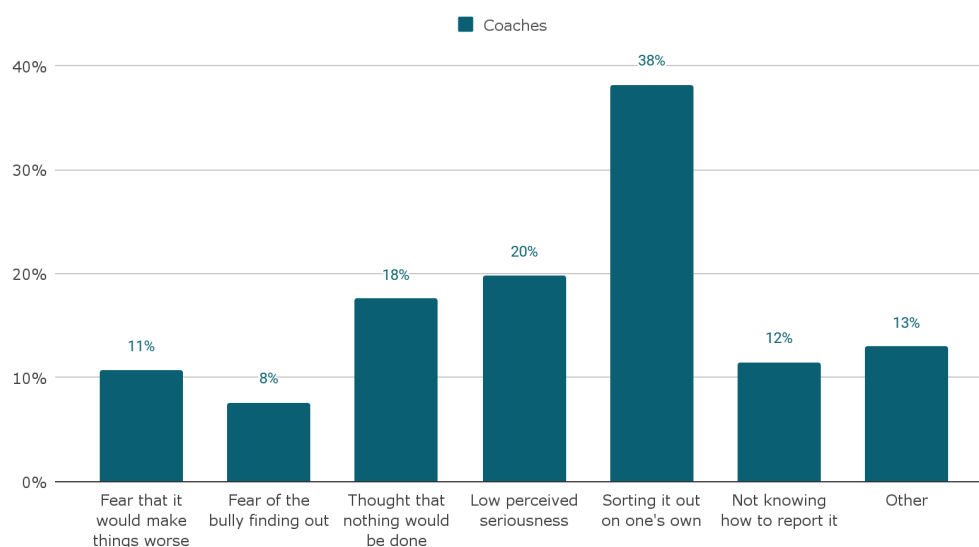
## Theme 5: Reporting Bullying

In the fifth section of the survey, participants were asked about their habits regarding bullying reports in their sports club.

Only 14.2% of players stated that they reported the bullying they endured to a coach, parent or other club member. Furthermore, 37.2% of players stated that they witnessed other athletes being bullied, and among them only 21.6% reported it to a coach, a parent, or another player.

Among coaches, it was more common to report bullying incidents: 39.5% of coaches reported to management their personal bullying incidents. When they didn't, the most common reason was that they sorted out the incident on their own (38%; see Figure 13). With regards to other people's experiences, 26.3% of coaches witnessed another coach being bullied, and 47.7% witnessed players being bullied, and in 60.9% of cases they reported the witnessed incident.

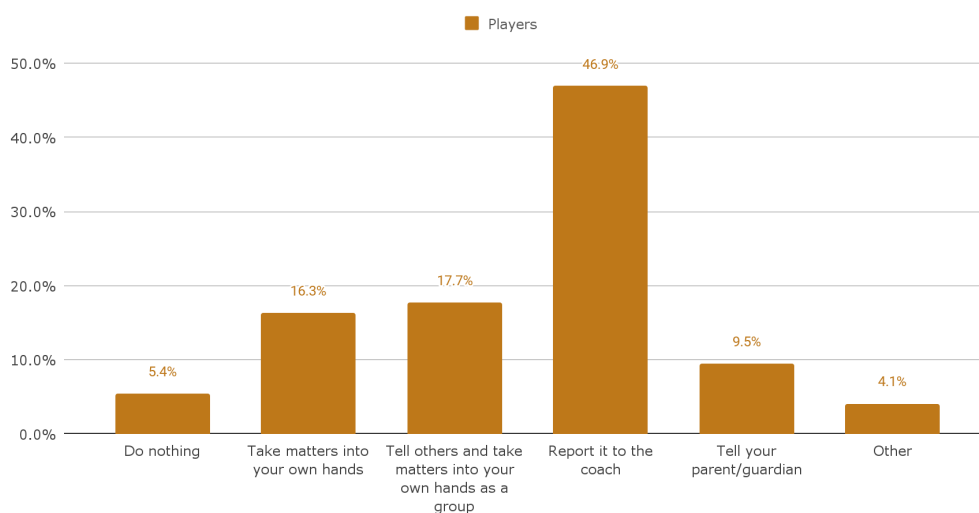
**Figure 13. Reasons for coaches not reporting their personal bullying incidents**



Most players (66.7%) and particularly coaches (83.6%) reported that they knew whom they should report incidents of bullying. However, around one quarter of players (30.6%) and coaches (22.9%) indicated they were unsure or would not feel comfortable reporting bullying to a coach or parent. Similarly, 29.5% of coaches and 26.5% of participants indicated they were not confident or unsure in their ability to notice bullying.

About half of player participants stated that, if they witnessed bullying in the sports club, they would report it to the coach (46.9%; see Figure 14), whereas for coaches the most common choice was to take the matters into their own hands (45.3%), followed by telling others and dealing with it as a group (42.6%; see Figure 15).

**Figure 14. Behaviours that player participants would adopt if they witnessed bullying**



**Figure 15. Behaviours that coach participants would adopt if they witnessed bullying**

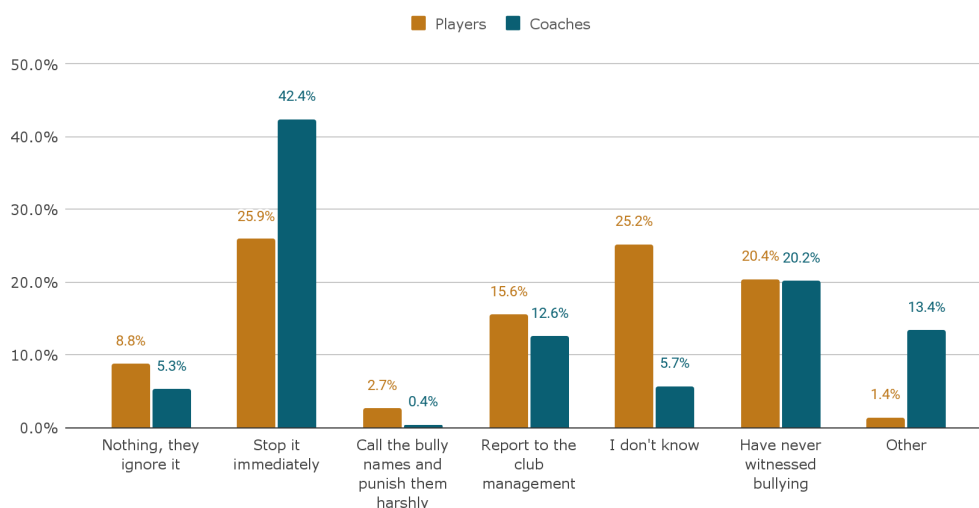


Finally, participants were asked what the adults (or fellow coaches, in the case of coach participants) do when they see a bullying incident. For 25.9% of players and for 42.4% of coaches stopping the bullying was the most frequent behaviour that (fellow) adults in the club adopted to



deal with bullying. Interestingly, around one quarter of participants above 18 y.o. (25.2%) were not aware of how adults deal with bullying (see [Figure 16](#)).


**Figure 16. Anti-bullying measures undertaken by adults in the sports club, according to participants' perception**



## Recommendations


The findings from the present survey serve as a starting point for several recommendations regarding new ways to tackle bullying in sports.

- First of all, there seems to be a need for intensive training for coaches with a focus on several bullying topics. In fact, around one third of coaches reported not feeling confident in recognising bullying, and more than half of the players reported having been bullied by a coach, mostly by being left out and by being addressed with hurtful names. Therefore, coaches should be informed of the **definition of bullying** and of the various types, stressing the fact that exclusion and verbal aggressions can be classified as bullying too. Furthermore, coaches should be trained on the harmful consequences that bullying can have on youngsters, and that negative remarks are not “just words” but that they can negatively impact young people.
- Training for coaches should also include a focus on different topics regarding diversity and inclusion, as several of our participants reported having overheard coaches making negative remarks about players’ body image, gender



identity, and migrant background. Specifically, the training should concern the subject of **body acceptance**, stressing the importance of this matter especially for adolescents who are still in a phase of development. Coaches should be made aware of the consequences that negative remarks about players' body image can have, and they should be informed about the correct terms to use when talking about the body. Similarly, coaches should be trained on the importance of including players from different **cultural backgrounds and gender identities**, as their players are reportedly very diverse and as people who belong to a minority already experience considerable minority stress. Training subjects should therefore cover the topics of ethnicity-based bullying and homophobic bullying.

- According to players' reports, coaches made negative comments particularly about players' performance. Therefore, training for coaches should enhance the importance of **fairplay** and of not pressuring players to win at all costs. The focus could also be on the use of language and constructive criticism, so that coaches can learn how to give feedback to players' performance in a non-offensive way.
- Coaches were not the only ones to make negative comments: players reportedly made negative remarks too, specifically about body type, cultural background, gender identity, and sexual orientation. In order to work on these matters, coaches could be trained on how to organise **group activities** with the players to improve empathy and team spirit, to increase the acceptance of diversity, and to stress the importance of inclusion.
- Players' reports showed that less than 5% of them have ever reported personal experiences of bullying to the coaches. This could be due to players' distrust of the measures taken by coaches, as, according to them, coaches manage to stop bullying only in 26% of the cases. It could also be due to a lack of knowledge on how to report bullying, as shown by around 34% of our participants. Therefore, training for coaches could contain instructions on how to design **clear anti-bullying guidelines** and spread them. This way coaches, together with their club board members, will be able to establish clear guidelines on how to manage bullying incidents, for example by nominating an



anti-bullying committee or a contact person in charge of collecting cases of bullying, and by outlining a clear route that both players and coaches should follow when encountering bullying. Following this, coaches should make sure to inform their players of such guidelines, even by hanging posters in the sports club; furthermore, they should make sure that new coaches and club members are informed about the anti-bullying guidelines. Finally, coaches should be trained on how to create a **safe space** within their sports club, by practising active listening and applying the appointed measures for bullying incidents: this way, players will feel comfortable with reporting bullying incidents to the coach (or contact person) and they will trust that measures will be taken.

# Appendix

## Appendix 1. Infographic of key findings.

