

Hooray

GUIDE:

Guide for sport clubs, youth organisations and educational institutions. And anyone guiding teens on their physically active sports journey.

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ABOUT HOORAY PROJECT:

Youth for Youth's Mental Health through Physical Activity - HOORAY

Even before the pandemic, the mental health of young people, particularly teenagers, has been declining. The HOORAY (Youth for Youth's Mental Health through Physical Activity) project aims to address this challenge by exploring the impact and positive influence physical activity and sport can have on improving the overall well-being and mental health of young people.

Based on the EU Physical Activity Guidelines, the project team will collect good practices, and develop educational resources and an online knowledge hub for physical education teachers, youth workers, coaches, parents and other personnel working with teens that want to put more attention on mental health and health enhancing physical activity, and prioritize participation and well-being of youth over performance, pressure and results.

Those resources and activities will target both, youngsters that are already physically active or enrolled in sport activities, and those who have been inactive and/or dropping out of sport. Young people will play a key role as we will take a closer look at physical activity through the lens of teenagers and explore how they perceive sport and its impact on their well-being.

The HOORAY project started 1st of January 2023 and will continue for 30 months until 30th of June 2025. The kick-off meeting is scheduled for 16th and 17th of February 2023 in Munich, Germany.

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1. Introduction

This guide - as part of the HOORAY project Work Package 3 - incorporates recommendations, which aim to ensure that sport activities for youth are beneficial to their mental health, are enjoyable, accessible, and genuinely reflective of young people's ideas in relation to sports.

The main insights forming the basis of these recommendations were gathered through an anonymous online questionnaire targeting teenagers aged 13 to 19. Each participating country and organisation gathered responses from at least 14 teenagers (n = 134; 13 = not meeting the participation criteria), who engaged in regular physical activity outside their PE classes (at least once per week). This was done to ensure representation across age groups (having at least 2 respondents answering from each age group per country) with a preference for gender balance (male = 65; female = 56). The young respondents provided valuable perspectives on sports and mental health. The questionnaire aimed to understand their thoughts on engaging in sports activities and the conditions that make them feel safe, including the environment and coaching styles.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the responses provided, we aim to showcase actionable recommendations that align with the genuine needs and ideas of young people, fostering a positive, supportive, and effective environment for their physical and mental well-being. We drew also upon the previous research conducted by the HOORAY consortium members, namely: the studies [“What works? Understanding the relationships between sport, physical activity and mental health”](#) and [“Youth voices: how do adolescents perceive physical activities that support mental health?”](#) as well as the collection of good practices [“Compendium of practices across EU & self-review framework”](#).

The recommendations are primarily targeting the coaches, facilitators and teachers at sport clubs, youth organisations and educational institutions, but they could be considered by anyone who is interested in developing enjoyable sports experiences for adolescents with a non-formal educational approach in mind and aim to also foster the teenagers mental health (e.g. parents).

2. Survey

The online, anonymous questionnaire collected the views of teenagers (ages 13 to 19) from countries Croatia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Portugal. The respondents were not part of previous HOORAY studies and without known clinical mental health conditions. They all practised a sport or a regular physical activity (such as hiking) minimum once a week and without an upper limit (but more than 80% of the respondents did engage with their chosen sport or physical ability minimum 3 times a week). It included closed and open ended questions in the categories of: "general/demographic in nature"; "sport, relationship, coaching style related" and "community, environment impact related". When filling in the online questionnaire, 63.9% of respondents reported a happy, content mood. 32.3% of the respondents reported "no particular mood" when filling in the survey. The remaining 3.8% reported a bad or negative mood.

The respondents from Germany, Hungary and Italy were youth with no particular background fulfilling the criteria set. The respondents from Croatia (14 eligible in total) were individuals with mild non-clinical mental and/or physical disabilities as this is the target group working and fulfilling the criteria set. The respondents from Finland were immigrant girls and women and fulfilling the criteria set.

This collected data gives an interesting glimpse into the minds of the youth and their opinions without claiming representativeness for the respective countries. Yet they complement the recommendations made in this guide with interesting insights. You can find the summary of the collected data in the [annex](#) .

3. Recommendations from Youth to Peers & Adults

The recommendations are categorised by the **PERMA (Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment)** framework, introduced in the HOORAY study: "Youth voices: how do adolescents perceive physical activities that support mental health?". They are meant as high level suggestions that can potentially provide valuable tips or highlight "new approaches" for anyone coaching or instructing teenagers in sports or anyone guiding them in their regular physical activity of choice. Each section or point below can be "deep dived" into. We also encourage the readers to engage with all HOORAY studies and outputs mentioned so far and presented by the partners in the framework of this project.

3.1. Positive Emotions

3.1.1. Providing Support

- **Accessible Coaches and Trainers:** Sports organisers shall encourage coaches to be **approachable and supportive**, as many youngsters turn to them for guidance and comfort. Sport clubs can promote coaching techniques that are **youth-centred, and focused on personal growth** rather than competition or be supplementary to an achievement oriented approach. This includes emotional support.

Quote from a Hungarian respondent, age 14: *"That they [coaches] listen to me when I'm not confident about something, and that they can understand my situation."*

- **Parental and Peer Involvement:** Sports clubs should facilitate communication and support from parents and peers. For instance, they could host **family sports days** where young participants can invite their families to join in on the activities, helping to build a supportive community around the program. This could lead to a broader support network.

Practical Tip from the HOORAY team: Appoint responsible people in rotating roles. The network may be less active at times but having it at least there, is already an important step to take.

Quote from "Luca", Germany, "youth voices" study: *"When I have support from my parents, I can just play in a more relaxed way, and I don't have any pressure. Some parents also pressure their children. I think my parents do that very well. They just let me decide freely."*

- **Alternative Support Channels:** Sport and youth clubs, educational institutions could offer additional support channels such as **counselling services, social media support groups**, or engaging activities like music and online videos for those who may not seek direct personal support.

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: Sports clubs could develop a dedicated online platform or social media group where participants can share their experiences, achievements, and ideas, fostering a sense of community beyond physical activities. Keeping in mind the importance of safeguarding in the online sphere too.

3.1.2. Building Trust and Respect

- **Reliable Support System:** Strong connections with coaches, peers, and parents play a significant role in the youths positive experiences. Sport and youth clubs, educational institutions shall ensure that trusted individuals such as **coaches and to a certain extent, teammates provide consistent support, help, and advice**. This includes active listening and understanding needs. In addition, the HOORAY team found that a supportive team community is a significant buffer against mild to moderate depressiveness (“what works?” study).

Quote from a German respondent, age 13: “That I can tell them when something doesn't suit me and that they are there for me. They can cheer me up when I'm not doing so well or something isn't working out.”

- **Confidentiality:** Sports professionals, youth workers and educators shall maintain confidentiality to build trust. They shall encourage an environment where teenagers feel safe to share their feelings without fear of exposure.

Quote from a Portuguese respondent, age 17: “If I tell them something important for them to not share it with others and also for them to be there when I may need them because I would do the same for them.”

Quote from a Hungarian respondent, age 13: “they [the coach] shouldn't tell my things to others”

- **Protection and Respect:** Sport and youth clubs, educational institutions shall foster an environment where **participants feel protected and respected**. They shall ensure that all interactions are based on **mutual respect** and understanding.

Quote from a Portuguese respondent, age 18: “To be there for me, when I need. Treating me with respect.”

Quote from a German respondent, age 15: “He [the instructor] should be able to help you well with the exercises and you should be able to talk to him well about many things.”

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: Actively ask coaches to train themselves not only in their expertise needed for a certain sport but also in soft skills and psychological aspects of giving support. Raise awareness about the topic!

3.1.3. Addressing Negative Experiences

- **Failure and Mistakes:** Sports professionals, youth workers and educators shall implement a supportive approach to handling failure and mistakes. They shall encourage a growth mindset where mistakes are seen as learning opportunities rather than setbacks.

Quote from Portuguese respondent, age 16: "When practising isn't going well, when I can't do something I normally can or when my coach says something that really hurts me."

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: You can dedicate one day a week to activities focused on mental wellbeing, such as guided meditation, or workshops on stress management. Each person is different. While a general methodology is important and gives structure, remember to focus on understanding how the young person in front of you works best. Do they need more positive encouragement? Do they want motivation through extra challenges? Does their willingness to learn change periodically?

- **Injury Prevention and Management:** instructors should prioritise injury prevention through proper training techniques and provide prompt support and rehabilitation for injured participants. Injuries will happen but try to minimise the likelihood.

Quote from German respondent, age 15: "I was once injured on my wrist, so I always felt sad because I couldn't do so many things. Or when someone wasn't so nice during training."

- **Positive Practice Environment:** Coaches and sports organisers shall ensure that training sessions are productive yet manageable. They shall avoid overly strenuous practices that could lead to frustration and burnout.

Quote from Hungarian respondent, age 16: "He [the coach] is professionally good and strives to improve, behaves humanely, and supports his team and players."

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: You can implement brief mental health check-ins at the beginning and end of each session where participants can share how they feel or rate their mood, helping coaches monitor overall well-being. Next to an injury free body and stable mental mindset is key to a healthy person.

- **Anti-Bullying Policies & Fair Play:** Sport and youth clubs shall establish and enforce strict **anti-bullying policies** to ensure a safe and respectful environment for all participants. Promoting fair play - even through non-formal methods - by dedicating certain practice sessions to educate the participants on the importance of respecting themselves, each other and the referee (decisions). During a session or at a competition, in the heat of the moment emotions will come to surface - that is

acceptable too - but preparedness and knowledge about fair play can minimise the frustration related to perceived unfairness.

Quote from German respondent, age 17 : *"In other words, no one can simply insult or attack as they please, and that's also bound by all the others in the group, so that everyone can be who they want to be and also do sport as they have the opportunity to do so."*

3.2.Engagement

3.2.1. Enhancing Social Aspects of the Game

- **Inclusive Environment:** Sport professionals shall create an inclusive and welcoming environment where everyone feels they belong. They shall **encourage interactions and friendships within the group**. Respecting personal space, encouraging does not mean forcing social behaviour at all times.

Partnering up with educational institutions and youth clubs, sport clubs could initiate regular workshops for coaches and educators on inclusive coaching techniques, ensuring they can effectively engage with participants from diverse backgrounds and abilities.

Quote from a German respondent, age 14: *"When I do sport with friends, I think it's a very safe environment."*

- **Family Involvement:** They shall encourage family involvement in sports activities and events. They shall organise family days and activities that include parents and siblings, fostering a community spirit.

*Practical tip from the HOORAY team: You can organise **themed sports days** that mix traditional sports with fun, creative elements (e.g., "Superhero Day" where participants dress up as their favourite heroes or "Obstacle Course Adventure" inspired by TV shows). We highly encourage to include families in the organisation of these themed sport days which could be perfectly aligned with regular family days. This could be done also "off season" for sport clubs where there is a bigger emphasis on competing.*

*You can also offer **joint workshops for parents and youth** on topics like nutrition, mental health, and teamwork, fostering a shared understanding and support network.*

- **Team Building Activities:** Instructors shall organise regular social activities, such as retreats, workshops, or fun group challenges, to strengthen camaraderie among participants. For instance, setting up low-pressure, social sports leagues where the focus is on fun, teamwork, and making new friends, rather than competition, could be a way to go!

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: You can also introduce weekly or monthly creative challenges, such as designing a new sport, inventing new game rules, or creating a team cheer, to engage participants in fun, innovative ways.

- **Partnerships with Schools:** Sport clubs shall develop partnerships with local schools to promote sports and physical activities. This can help in creating a supportive network for young athletes.

Quote from a Finnish respondent, age 15: "Sport is a break from classes and a really good way to laugh and spend time with my friends."

Quote from a German respondent, age 15: "For example, when I have a lot of stress at school or something like that, sport is always a great way to relax, and then I'm always happy to go to training. So that I can think about something other than school."

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: You can encourage young participants to engage in community projects, such as organising charity sports events (collecting donations) or volunteering for local causes, to strengthen their connection to the broader community.

3.2.2. Ensure Accessibility for All

- **Inclusive Programs:** Sports professionals shall ensure activities are adaptable to include everyone and they should design programs that accommodate participants of all skill levels and physical abilities. Moreover, they could organise **cultural exchange days** where participants can learn about and try sports or games from different cultures, fostering inclusivity and appreciation for diversity.

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: You could encourage diverse role models and mentors to participate in programs, providing inspiration and support for all participants. Bear in mind, this does not exclude having contests and challenges but complement it.

- **Financial Support:** Sport clubs shall provide financial assistance or scholarships for young people who may not afford participation fees. They shall ensure that cost is not a barrier to participation.

*Practical tip from the HOORAY team: You can develop **an equipment library** where participants can borrow sports gear or adaptive equipment, ensuring that financial constraints don't prevent them from participating. You could also **introduce sliding scale fees** or **flexible payment plans** to make participation affordable for all families, regardless of their financial situation.*

- **Accessible Facilities:** Sport clubs shall ensure that facilities are accessible to all participants, including those with disabilities. They shall regularly review and update accessibility features.

- **Flexible Scheduling:** Sport clubs shall offer activities at various times, including weekends and after-school hours, to accommodate different schedules and responsibilities.

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: You could offer free "try it out" sessions where young people can experience different sports or activities without committing to full programs, making it easier for them to find what they enjoy.

3.2.3. Empowering Youth Leadership

- **Youth Councils:** Establish youth councils within sport clubs and organisations - have terms & changes in roles - to give young people a platform to voice their ideas and concerns. This empowers them to take an active role in planning and decision-making.

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: take the example of ENGSO Youth, the autonomous youth body of the European Sports NGO. Ever since ENGSO Youth has been created it has been advocating for the rights of young people in the European sports movement, achieving considerable successes along the way.

- **Peer Mentoring Programs:** Sports clubs shall develop peer mentoring systems where experienced young athletes mentor newcomers, fostering leadership skills and a sense of responsibility. Cooperation with educational institutions and schools sport clubs could provide training for older youth participants to become peer mentors or junior coaches, helping them develop leadership skills while offering support to younger members.
- **Inclusive Planning Committees:** Include young people in planning committees for events and activities. Their input can ensure the activities are engaging and relevant to their interests.

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: Another way of empowering youth leadership is hosting monthly forums where young participants can voice their opinions on current and upcoming sports activities. You can allow them to propose new ideas or changes and involve them in the planning and decision-making process.

- **Surveys and Feedback:** Regularly conduct surveys and feedback sessions to gather insights from young participants about their preferences and experiences. Use this feedback to continuously improve the programs.

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: Regular can also mean quarterly or longer but as long as it is on a regular basis, the data is collected in a fair way, used and fluctuations in the group are accounted for. The HOORAY team has also developed a self-review framework which consists of a set of thoughtfully crafted questions. Check out our self-review framework in the [Compendium of Practices!](#)

3.3. Relationship

3.3.1. Developing as close to Ideal Coaches and Instructors as possible

- **Training and Development:** Sport clubs shall provide ongoing training for coaches to develop their listening, understanding, and technical skills. They shall encourage them to be friendly, humorous, and approachable while maintaining the ability to be strict when necessary. They shall emphasise the importance of understanding and addressing the individual needs of young participants.

Quote from a German respondent, age 14: *"He has to be nice and friendly, so that you can get on well with him, but he also has to be a bit strict so that you can achieve something. You have to be able to trust him."*

- **Motivational Techniques:** Sport clubs, shall equip coaches with motivational techniques to inspire and uplift participants. They shall ensure they can balance discipline with encouragement effectively. Having a working, institutional support network for trainers is important to consider.

Quote from a German respondent, age 13: *"You should motivate the children, give them the joy of it & convey the feeling that you can trust them."*

- **Trustworthiness:** Sport clubs shall promote trustworthiness among coaches by encouraging transparency, reliability, and empathy in their interactions with participants.

Quote from an Italian respondent, age 19: *"In my opinion, she/he should create a relationship of mutual trust and a serene environment; at the same time, she/he should be serious and strict if necessary. She/He should also understand the pupil's mental and physical state to be able to push them and improve as much as possible without stress or anxiety."*

- **Open Communication:** Sport clubs shall encourage open communication between coaches and participants. Coaches should regularly check in with their athletes to understand their challenges and provide necessary support.

Quote from a Finnish respondent, age 15: *"Open to listening, pushing to train well but not over the limit, understanding when feelings like embarrassment or discomfort show up, most important: realising that the person who's training also has a life and can't always give 100%."*

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: Everyone has better and worse days. We encourage a mindset where instructors bear this in mind and try to stay empathetic and a role figure as many days a year as possible, sometimes it does not work out but there is always the next day!

3.3.2. Creating a Safe Environment

Quote from an Italian respondent, age 17: *"An environment where the people around you do not make you uncomfortable and where the people in charge of the place care about the health and well-being of the young people."*

- **Emotional and Psychological Safety:** Sports professionals shall focus on creating a supportive environment where participants can express themselves freely without fear of judgement. They shall encourage positive reinforcement and balanced competitiveness.

Quote from an Italian respondent, age 18: *"An environment where nobody judges you, where you only give constructive criticism and support each other psychologically."*

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: cooperating with relevant mental health experts You can train staff members in mental health first aid, enabling them to recognize signs of mental distress and respond appropriately to support young participants. A safe environment with some friends is what the youth reported as having a significant impact on them (and in our point of view, their mental health).

- **Physical Safety:** Sports professionals, youth workers and educators shall ensure that the physical spaces are safe and well-maintained. They could provide appropriate safety equipment and enforce safety protocols - in a common sense way. They shall ensure that coaches are trained in safety procedures and first aid.

Quote from a German respondent, age 15: *"It should always be tidy to a certain extent, there should be no tripping hazards and it should be well padded."*

- **Supportive Community:** Sports professionals, youth workers and educators shall build a community where participants feel secure and valued. They shall encourage friendships and good company to enhance the overall sense of safety and enjoyment in physical activities.

Quote from a German respondent, age 18: *"That you are not judged negatively if you can't do something & that you can laugh together. It's not about the place, it's more about the people."*

Quote from a Portuguese respondent, age 15: *"For me, a safe environment is where people won't judge me by my body, they won't make fun if i make mistakes, they would support everyone and be happy with everyone's success."*

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: You can create safe spaces and support groups - for example - LGBTQ+ youth within sports clubs, and ensure all activities are inclusive and welcoming to everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

3.4. Meaning

Quote from a German respondent, age 14: *"So in terms of gymnastics, I would say, especially if you're learning something new or generally achieving something."*

- **Personal Goals:** Sports professionals shall encourage young sports people to set **personal goals** that give them a sense of purpose. Whether it's improving their performance, mastering a new skill, or achieving a fitness goal, these objectives can provide a deeper sense of meaning.

Quote from an Italian respondent, age 19: *"During weight training, what makes me happy is the idea of improving my physique and the activity itself, which helps me disconnect from everyday problems. The sport I practise as a pastime makes me feel happy because I enjoy it and, thanks to it, I spend time with my friends."*

Quote from a German respondent, age 15: *"Always after sport, when I have successfully achieved something that I had always set out to do beforehand."*

Tip from the HOORAY team: try to tailor the support and guidance for setting up the personal growth to the individuals age and circumstances.

- **Reflection:** Sports professionals shall allow time for reflection on young people's experiences and accomplishments in sports, helping them recognize the positive impact of their participation on their well-being and personal growth.

Tip from the HOORAY team: You could empower young participants to create video testimonies that express their views on mental health, fun, and inclusivity in sports, amplifying their voices and reaching a wider audience.

3.5. Accomplishment

9, Fostering Success and Achievement

Quote from a Portuguese respondent, age 15 : *"It's achieving a goal or seeing progress in my work."*

- **Recognition and Reward:** Sports professionals shall establish systems to recognize and reward individual and team achievements. Celebrating wins and personal milestones can motivate participants, particularly in success-oriented cultures.

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: You could use technology to enhance the experience, such as apps for tracking progress, virtual training sessions, or online communities where participants can connect and share their experiences. Avoid overstimulation but use common sense to see how much digitalisation makes sense and a difference for your group.

- **Skill Development:** Sports professionals shall provide opportunities for continuous skill development through structured training programs. They shall highlight progress and improvement to keep participants engaged and motivated.

Practical tip from the HOORAY team: You can offer virtual training sessions or workshops, allowing participants to improve their skills at their own pace, and accommodating those who may not be able to attend in-person sessions.

4. Food for Thought - Conclusion

Through the survey we have found that the majority of the teenagers engaging in sports or physical activity on a regular basis (more than once a week) enjoy what they do and find the community (and friends they make) important to them. Having trust between them and their coach or instructor is crucial though what "trust" is can differ from person to person. The instructors and the community (or team) surrounding plays an important role in the teenagers mental health, next to the actual physical movements or sport played. A well functioning community helps the young people to stay healthy both in body and mind.

This guide focused on providing recommendations or tips by identifying trends in the collected data. The aim was to give tips suitable for many thus they are general in nature. Furthermore, it was decided by the consortium that this guide should be as concise as possible for the purpose of having the target audience actually engaging with the material. We would however wholeheartedly welcome anyone reading this material to do further comparisons within the data, for example, between the genders, between team or individual sport practitioners or the different age groups (e.g. a 13 year old is in a different development stage and period in life compared to a 19 year old thus may have different view on topics). The aforementioned points were not the focus of this guide but perhaps future projects or research building on the HOORAY outputs could investigate these aspects as well.

In our study "what works?", we have concluded that physical activity particularly when practised in social and supportive environments, offers significant mental health benefits for adolescents, especially in combating depression. Future studies and also interventions should focus on making physical activity more accessible, varied, and enjoyable, ensuring a balance between intensity and frequency to maximise its mental health benefits.

By implementing these recommendations, sports clubs, youth organisations and educational institutions can create a more positive, supportive, and effective environment for their participants, promoting physical, mental and emotional well-being. We believe a holistic approach can benefit not only participants of recreational physical activities of sports but also competitive sport participants - if adapted in a suitable way. The relationship between physical activity or sports and mental health is nuanced, thus many variables can be at play when you look at the mental health of an individual. However, overall, moving your body and doing so with the right support, among peers without malicious intent definitely affects a person's mental health in a positive sense.

The HOORAY project team is open to discuss any aspects of our recommendations or talk about your particular situation. Reach out on the project's contact details if needed.

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