



# Developing Service Quality of Childhood Football in Finland

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### **Abstract**

Finland is significantly behind the other Nordic countries such as Norway and Denmark in the youth and adult phases of football, despite the similar demographics and geography. Swedish and Danish teams as a collective, and players as individuals are already ahead of Finnish players in the youth phase in terms of level. Professional adult players from other Nordic countries have significantly higher combined player market values than Finnish players. Attrition from football in the youth phase of football is high in Finland. This background information should raise questions on what is being done in the childhood phase of Finnish football.

Examining the quality of service Finnish football clubs offer children was examined to understand how the service can be developed in order to develop better players and to keep more participants in the sport in the future. Understanding the various stakeholders and identifying their motives and expectations was important when considering how to give concrete suggestions on how to improve the quality of the service in the future.

The study was conducted by utilizing mixed methods. The primary qualitative data was collected by interviewing experts of the childhood phase of football from the Finnish FA, FIFA and Soccer Services Barcelona Ekkono Method on their experiences and observations of service quality factors of childhood football training sessions in Finland. The secondary data was acquired from the Finnish FA's larger study on Finnish training session quality with the data gathered from Observation Forms that provided insights on what needs to be improved in the training sessions of childhood football in Finland.

The main findings of the study were that there are several factors that can be improved in childhood football training sessions in Finland. The coaching behaviors, the number of touches of the football, the time that the children are active, and the children's engagement in the training sessions were all evaluated to be at a relatively low level. The low quality of these factors were shown with the quantitative data of the Observation Forms and then complemented with qualitative data from interviews and backed up with a theoretical framework. Using the main findings of the study, concrete suggestions for service development were made for Finnish football clubs to improve the service quality of their childhood football training sessions.

### **Keywords**

childhood football, service development, service quality, coaching, training sessions -

## Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>3</b>
1.1	Research Objectives .....	5
<b>2</b>	<b>Theoretical Background .....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1	Understanding Childhood Football as a Service .....	6
2.2	Expectations and Motives of the Stakeholders .....	11
2.2.1	Governing Body of Finnish Football.....	11
2.2.2	Football Club .....	12
2.2.3	Parents and Family .....	14
2.2.4	Children.....	15
2.3	Childhood Football Training Sessions .....	20
2.3.1	Training Session Structure .....	20
2.3.2	Coaching.....	23
<b>3</b>	<b>Research Design .....</b>	<b>30</b>
3.1	Research Methods .....	30
3.2	Data Collection and Analysis .....	31
3.2.1	Qualitative Data .....	31
3.2.2	Quantitative Data .....	33
3.3	Validity and Reliability of the Data.....	35
3.4	Research Ethics.....	36
<b>4</b>	<b>Findings.....</b>	<b>36</b>
4.1	Interview Findings .....	37
4.2	Finnish FA Observation Form Results .....	46
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusions and Discussion.....</b>	<b>51</b>
5.1	Summary of the Main Results .....	52
5.2	Development Suggestions for Finnish Football Clubs.....	55
5.3	Validity and Ethics of the Study .....	58
5.4	Suggestions for Further Research .....	59
	<b>References .....</b>	<b>61</b>
	<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>66</b>
	Appendix 1. Interview Guide.....	66

**Figures**

Figure 1. The conceptual service quality measurement model (Shi et al., 2022). .....	8
Figure 2. National average in Finland and standard deviation. ....	46
Figure 3. Effect of coach behaviors on children trying their best. ....	47
Figure 4. Comparing above and below average coaching behaviors .....	48
Figure 5. Effect of the amount of football touches to how are the children try. ....	49
Figure 6. Effect of the amount of football touches on activity level. ....	50
Figure 7. Volunteers vs. Full-time coaches. ....	51
Figure 8. Childhood football training session framework. ....	56

## 1 Introduction

Children sample a wide range of different sports and activities during childhood ages seven to eleven, also known as sampling years (Cote, 1999). Visek et al. (2020) have stated that positive experiences in sports in early childhood are among the most crucial needs of growing athletes. Children's participation in sports is an integral part of their physical activity which can be supported by fostering the sport experiences in terms of efficacy, skill-building opportunities, and sense of belonging (Shi et al., 2022). In Finland, during the sampling years, the number of participants in football has increased from ages 7-11 at an average rate of 8% for the past decade (Palloliitto, n.d.). However, attrition from organized youth sport is alarmingly high (Visek, et al., 2015) with participation numbers in Finnish youth football dropping from the ages of 11 to 14 at an average rate of 11% for the past decade (Palloliitto, n.d.). This means that after the initial interest and increase of participation numbers in the childhood phases of football, drop-out numbers in youth football in Finland increase evidently.

Results from matches in annual youth international tournaments show that the best Finnish teams and players are significantly behind those from Sweden and Denmark already at the age of 12, especially on the boys' side (Palloliitto, 2025). The best Finnish teams annually qualify to play against teams from Denmark, Sweden, and Ireland in the Huuhkaja and Helmaripolku International events organized by Eerikkilä Sports & Outdoor Resort for the age groups Under-12, -13, and -14. The match statistics from the boys' 2023 and 2024 tournaments show that the teams from abroad have made more high intensity runs, taken twice as many shots, scored twice as many goals, and won twice as many games against the Finnish teams (Palloliitto, 2025). This data gathered from a total of 150 games proposes a clear argument that the Finnish youth boys' teams are significantly behind the teams from other Nordic countries in these tournaments. Furthermore, these events organize physical tests to measure individual player attributes with and without the ball, which show that many more of the male players from the teams from other Nordic countries reach the highest level in these tests compared to Finnish players (Palloliitto, 2025).

Not only are the other Nordic players superior in the youth phase, but this dominance also continues into the adult phase. The combined market value of male Finnish football players was 30,8 million euros in 2024, whereas Norway's player market value was 335,45 M€ and Denmark's 327,10 M€, despite these countries having relatively similar geographic locations and populations

(Transfermarkt, 2025). On the women's side, currently there are only eight Finnish national team players in the top five leagues, while Norway with 17 and Denmark with 22 players have significantly more players in the world's top five leagues (Transfermarkt, 2025).

It is common for most sport studies scholars to emphasize the study of professional athletes and sport organizations; however, there is a lack of sport studies on children and sport (Messner & Musto, 2014; Haugaasen et al., 2014; Erikstad et al., 2018). Especially, as individual player development is a dynamic process including various aspects, the studies should address player development from the childhood stage (Haugaasen et al., 2014; Erikstad et al., 2018). Messner & Musto (2014) have observed that teenagers tend to receive more studies from sport sociologists than younger athletes and have largely ignored kids as the active participants that they are. This lack of study and interest of childhood sports is peculiar, as the childhood years are the years in which sports are participated by a particular age group the most and will supply the demographic buoyancy for the future of sports, as its mass will form the future athletes, referees, sports writers, commentators, coaches, fans, and consumers (Messner & Musto, 2014). Furthermore, in addition to the lack of research of childhood sports, there is also lack of research that assesses specifically how youth players perceive the quality of service they receive from sports clubs (Shi et. al, 2022).

Hence, there is a need for more studies about childhood football in Finland, and specifically research on the quality of service that Finnish football clubs provide to the children. The Finnish children of today will become the future national team players in Finland and will play a factor in whether or not the Finnish Football Association (FA) will succeed in their ambitious vision to increase the combined market value of men's Finnish footballers from the current 30 million euros to 150 million euros by 2030 (Palloliitto, 2024 a). Moreover, their aspiration is to have the top ten Finnish female footballers playing 40% of the minutes in clubs of the top five leagues. To place this into perspective, 17-year-old Finnish football player, Matias Siltanen, has a current market value of 800 thousand euros (Transfermarkt, 2025). The players who are currently eleven years old, will be 17 years old in 2030 when the Finnish FA's objective is to be achieved. Therefore, the current childhood phase of football in Finland needs to be examined to understand where improvements can be made so that Finnish football clubs could produce even better players with higher market values in the future, and more and more players would participate and remain in the sport.

## 1.1 Research Objectives

Given the previously mentioned insights showing how Finnish youth and adult football is behind other Nordic countries in terms of player quality and market value, the focus should be shifted towards examining how the players are being developed in the childhood phase in Finland. Childhood football training sessions is a service, offered by Finnish football clubs, that should be developed with the consideration of how to sustain participation rates in the sport and how to develop better players. Therefore, this thesis aims to understand the important factors in childhood football training sessions by answering the following research questions:

**RQ1:** Which aspects of service quality in childhood football could be improved by football clubs in Finland to keep more participants in the sport?

**RQ2:** What are the factors of childhood football training sessions that need to be improved to enhance player development in Finland?

By answering these research questions, this thesis suggests improving the service quality to offer better sporting experiences in childhood football training sessions, and thus, fostering the development of Finnish football players and maximizing the participation rates in the sport. This study is conducted in partnership with the Finnish FA by utilizing the data collected in the FA's larger study in 2022-2024. Based on the insights of the study, concrete suggestions will be made for Finnish clubs to consider when developing their services in childhood football. This thesis focuses solely on how these clubs could develop the football training sessions, excluding the consideration of various other events and administrative aspects related to the service of childhood football.

This thesis is structured into five main chapters. The present chapter is an introduction to the thesis, where the motivation for the study and the research questions are described. The second chapter explores the theoretical background of the key topics of the study by reviewing childhood football as a service, recognizing the expectations of different stakeholders towards childhood football, and identifying the main attributes of high-quality training sessions and coaching. The research design and methodological choices are explained in the third chapter in addition to the evaluation of the validity of the data. The fourth chapter presents and analyzes the collected qualitative data of the interviews and the quantitative data acquired from the Finnish Football

Association's Observation Form surveys. Finally, in the last chapter the results, research ethics, and validity are discussed alongside the suggestions for further research.

## **2 Theoretical Background**

### **2.1 Understanding Childhood Football as a Service**

This chapter reviews childhood football as a service that football clubs offer. When forming an understanding of childhood football as a service, the concept of service must be defined first. Services can be defined as solutions to customer problems that are "intangible activities" that usually, but not always, involve the interactions between the customer and service employees and/or the actual goods or resources and/or the systems of the service provider (Grönroos, 2007). According to Berry (1980), services are not possessed but consumed. Furthermore, services can be defined as the processes of doing something for someone that is valued (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). Services are "service offerings provided for and/or co-created with customers"; meaning that there is an interface with a customer through technology or interpersonal interactions (Bitner, et al., 2008). Football training service is a long-term process where players should participate for enough time to be able to comprehensively evaluate their perceptions of service quality in the following aspects: the service encounter which includes "service environment and service delivery process, as well as the service program and outcome" (Shi et. al, 2022).

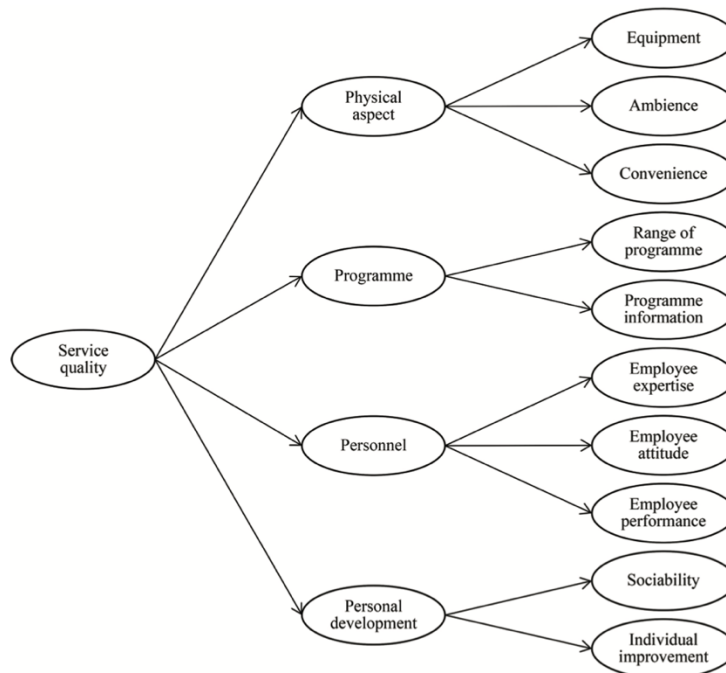
Edvardsson and Olsson (1996) view three types of service development: the development of (1) service concept, (2) service system, or (3) system process, and the quality of these three types can be considered as "the most important means of competition and is a prerequisite for satisfied customers and profitability". The service concept refers to the needs of the customer and how the service content plans to satisfy these needs, while the service process is related to the "chain of activities" that need to function in order for the service to be produced (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996). Moreover, the service system considers the needed resources that are available for the service process to be able to produce the service concept. According to Kamali et al. (2021), the role of customers in a service business is crucial as they can also take part in the value creation process.

Følstad and Kvale (2018) argue that using the lens of the customer to see services in the way the people do is key in enhancing the service process. This is because the “ultimate judge of the service is the customer”; therefore, customer orientation should be the main focal point when considering starting service development (Edvardsson & Olsson, 1996). Outcome quality of a service is the perceived quality that is formed by the participants acting as cocreators of the service by interacting during the various encounters that pertain to the service; these interactions affect the customer’s “social, physical and mental changes which are less controlled by the service providers” (Kasale et al., 2018). A challenge that many firms and organizations face when offering services is to develop a deeper understanding of how the customers experienced and evaluated the service process (Bitner, et al., 2008). The customer experience is widely known to be a key competitive advantage in the service sector; therefore, customer journey mapping is a method that can be used to visualize and provide valuable insights of understanding the service provision as the customers experience it (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). The organizations that “approach customer experience management with a clear vision of the design and development process are more likely to achieve improved customer and organizational outcomes” (Bitner, et al., 2008). Service experience can be defined as “the cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions associated with a specific service event” (Bitner, et al., 2008). On the other hand, while placing the customer and their needs, wishes, and requirements in the center of the service development, it is important to also not be governed in all means by the customer and to follow these requests slavishly (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996).

In service development, customer behavior affects the service experience; this makes the experience unique as each customer behaves and performs his own tasks, making them either assets or disruptive factors for the service process. (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996). Thus, it is important to remember that different target groups may have different customer journeys (Følstad & Kvale, 2018). As the customers create and produce value to the service process, they make the service customer-unique or customer-specific, which means that the service providers need to “create the best prerequisites for a good customer outcome” even though they cannot control the entire process in which the service is produced (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996).

When it comes to service development in Finnish childhood football, it is important to define what is meant by quality and service quality. The whole chain of customer relations must be organized

as each activity is important for ensuring the right service quality (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996). Individual improvements from the physical, mental and ability perspective after the service consumption process are all key to assess the service quality outcome (Shi et al., 2022). Moreover, effectively designing and managing the customer experience requires considering how to holistically meet or exceed customer expectations; these considerations evoke perceptions of service quality and value, resulting in the customer's loyalty and future preference towards the service (Bitner, et al., 2008). Quality can be defined as the “the totality of features and characteristics of a product that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs”; furthermore, service quality refers to the concept of how “the service should correspond to the customers’ expectations and satisfy their needs and requirements” (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996). Specifically pertaining to youth football training as a service, these individual improvements include changes in physical fitness, the progress in technical skill, and psychological well-being (Shi et al., 2022). Therefore, “the customer must never be forgotten in service development if we have the ambition of building the right quality into services from the start” (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996). Shi et al. (2022) have emphasized that the service quality of football training industry comprises physical aspects, program, personnel, and personal development. In turn, these aspects of service quality can be addressed by various factors, as illustrated in the Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** The conceptual service quality measurement model (Shi et al., 2022).

Recurrent service quality problems are usually the result of poor design (Bitner, et al., 2008). A customer-oriented service provider's actions are guided by the insight they have of the customer's assessment criteria (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996). Therefore, it is important to explore how the customers experience the service because the service quality is realized by how the customer interprets it. Moreover, "a well-designed service that is pleasing to experience" can provide the firm with essential ways of differentiating themselves from competitors (Bitner, et al., 2008). Quality is a multi-dimensional concept, as the service should meet the needs and expectations of the customers, staff and owners, and it is vital to build in the right quality when developing services by balancing the needs of various stakeholders, despite these demands being partly contradictory (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996). Service blueprinting, similarly to the customer journey method, is a customer-focused, extremely useful way to improve the service by visually considering the "points of customer contact and the physical evidence associated with their services from their customers' perspective" (Bitner, et al., 2008). To successfully be able to describe the service process characteristics will help in determining the quality of the service; it is crucial that managers and customers know in concrete terms what the service involves and understand their respective roles in its delivery or co-creation (Bitner, et al., 2008).

Customer satisfaction in childhood football becomes concretely visible by the changing amounts of participants in both newcomers and dropouts. The most common time for dropout of the sport happens during the specializing years, 12-15, which are usually the ages when an athlete commits to one or two sports (Noonan et al., 2016). Reasons for picking one activity over the others can be a positive experience with a coach, encouragement from friends or siblings, and enjoyment and/or success of the activity (Cote, 1999). Teenagers tend to drop out of activities because they felt like they never had the chance to enjoy using their talent (Cote, 1999). As mentioned before, the enjoyment, excitement and pleasure all increase future motivation participation; consequently, when these three are not achieved in childhood football, there are several reasons for children dropping out of the sport. Equally, "negative movement experiences can lead children to become progressively disaffected from physical activities" and the most regularly reported reason among youth for dropping out of sport is that "it is no longer fun" (Vissek et al., 2015). Reasons for the lack of fun can include "lack of playing time, too little success, loss of motivation, dislike of the coach, overemphasis on competition and performance, and hard physical training" (Cote and Hay, 2002). Other activities have been recorded as another major reason for dropping out of organized sport (Cote and Hay, 2002). For example, screen time acts as a barrier to sports participation; children

have reported higher levels of physical activity when parents have restricted screen-time (Noonan et al., 2016).

When considering childhood football as a service, various stakeholders must be identified. Firstly, services are consumed by the customer, and thus, training sessions and games are provided for the children, who are considered valued customers. On the other hand, the paying customers are the parents or caretakers of the children. According to Hauser et al. (2022), parents can support the children's sport by behavioral, informational, emotional and financial ways, these can create an optimal atmosphere for learning, foster an athletic lifestyle, and facilitate the opportunity to have a sports hobby. Another stakeholder in childhood football, operating as the service provider, are the coaches, who manage and organize the interactions and processes (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996). The coaches interact with the children on the pitch as they coach training sessions, games, and tournaments, which can be considered the "dynamic interactions between service employees and customers" during the encounter process of the service (Shi et al., 2022). The amount that the coaches interact with the parents varies but is not to be considered a vital part of this study as the focus will be on the training sessions as the service being provided. The personnel, such as the coaches, have a "direct influence on customer's perception toward the service providers as most types of service involve interactions" (Shi et al., 2022).

The administration of a football club as a stakeholder in childhood football plays a crucial role despite not necessarily directly interacting with the customers. Football clubs provide resources, goods, and systems that are a part of the service (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996). Resources can be considered the coaching, facilities/fields, times to train, injury assessment and physiotherapy, and the right to represent the club (Shi et al., 2022). The goods provided can include the training kits, game uniforms, cones, footballs used in the trainings. The systems that are provided are the insurances, FA registrations, billing services, office services, and player's physical testing (Shi et al., 2022). Some of these resources, goods and systems are included in the monthly or yearly fees, and some are charged as extra, but their purchasing is organized by the club. Moreover, the football club should set the guidelines, values, and coaching philosophy that the coaches adhere to when providing coaching in the games and trainings. Additionally, the clubs can provide informal coaching education and mentoring for coaches. The last stakeholder involved in childhood football is the governing body of Finnish football, the Finnish FA. The Finnish FA provides formal league systems

and rules for childhood football, funding for clubs based on their evaluation criteria, as well as formal coaching education licenses with the material for lower-level courses provided by the FA and educators organized by the clubs, and higher-level coaching courses provided entirely by the FA. In summary, the five stakeholders of childhood football are the children, parents, coaches, administration of the football club and the governing national football association.

## **2.2 Expectations and Motives of the Stakeholders**

After exploring the definitions of service, service development, and service quality and identifying the stakeholders involved in the service of childhood football, the expectations and motives of the customers need to be recognized (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996). Expectation pertains more towards the interaction between object, which is the customer or in this case the child, and the subject, which is the service and in this case is the training session provided by the coach (Edvarsson & Olsson, 1996). This interaction constantly changes over time as the customer's wishes change and the object changes; thus, they are dialectically related; coaches need to adapt to the dynamic needs of the athletes and the constantly changing and evolving contextual demands (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024).

### **2.2.1 Governing Body of Finnish Football**

The governing body of Finnish football is the Finnish Football Association (FA). Their utmost motive is to make Finland a successful football nation and a promoter of wellbeing (Palloliitto, 2024a). This includes four objectives: (1) football to be the most popular sport in Finland, (2) to have national teams' success in final tournaments, (3) to promote players to international elite level, and (4) keeping everyone involved. These ambitious goals can be achieved by setting demanding expectations towards Finnish football clubs. Especially, one part of the Finnish FA's strategy to reach these set goals is to improve childhood football (Palloliitto, 2024a).

The Finnish FA offered 1,42 million euros as financial support to 31 Finnish football clubs for the period of 2025-2026 (Palloliitto, 2024b). The financial support is to be integrated into improving the coaching standards and player development, all the way from the childhood phase to the oldest youth phase of the club. The fund is paid in three categories: The three biggest Finnish football clubs belong in the first category, receiving 100K euros yearly; eight clubs belong to the second

category, receiving 65K euros yearly; and the last category includes 20 clubs, annually receiving 30K euros (Palloliitto, 2024b). There are several criteria that must be met in order to receive the funding suggesting that coercive pressure may form the organizational structures towards adopting best practices (Kasale et al., 2018). These best practices form the factors that make organizations reliant on external resources, for example funding.

There are also various criteria that the Finnish FA has placed that relate directly with the development of childhood football as a service in Finland. There are three criteria that pertain solely with quantity. Firstly, 70 coaches in the club must pass the first formal Finnish FA coach education course called the “Football Coaching Start Course” (FVS) yearly, and there must yearly be 60 more coach education certificates achieved which can be from the next formal Finnish FA course called “Age-Specific Coach Course” (IKV), UEFA Goalkeeper D, UEFA Goalkeeper C, or UEFA C coaching courses. All in all, every club must have 130 new coaching badges achieved in the calendar year of 2025 in order to adhere to the criteria (Palloliitto, 2024b). Secondly, clubs must organize six informal coach education events in the club, three for the childhood phase and three for the youth phase. Thirdly, during the calendar year the club administration must fill in a total of 250 Finnish FA training observation forms that evaluate the quality of the club’s training sessions. The Finnish Football Association (Finnish FA) introduced Observation forms (Havainnointilomake) as a tool for football clubs to evaluate training sessions and has asked club directors, directors of coaching, sport directors, and coaching educators in Finnish football clubs to report their observations to the Finnish Football Association’s database. In addition to the criteria that pertain solely with quantity, there are two criteria that relate to the quality of the service (Palloliitto, 2024b). On these Observation Forms, clubs must score an average of 8/10 in both the players’ activity level in the training session as well as having an average of 8/10 on the coach’s ability to inspire and excite the children in the training session. It is important to analyze the current state of Finnish football clubs using these quality-related criteria from previous years to understand how much development must be done in clubs in these specific areas in the future.

### **2.2.2 Football Club**

Cote & Hancock (2014) suggest that there are three primary goals for junior youth sport programs: the elite-development goal, the public health goal, and the educative goal. Another way to consider the essential components for quality sport program assessment are: good programs, good

people and good places (Shi et al., 2022). The primary goals of a youth sport program translate into the outcomes of youth sport which are known to be the 3Ps: performance, participation, and personal development (Cote & Hancock, 2014). The challenge that youth football clubs have is to develop a structure that both meet the needs of children and serve these various outcomes of youth sport; some have even argued in the past that all outcomes of youth sport are not achievable within a single program (Cote & Hancock, 2014). However, there has been evidence to show that outcomes of the 3Ps are not necessarily incompatible, and that it is not necessary in most sports to develop elite-level athletes at the ages of 6-12 by identifying and selecting the children early and putting them through “rigorous training programs with the long-term aim of developing elite athletes” (Cote & Hancock, 2014). Football clubs that provide various types of programs covering different age groups, levels, and time slots with current program information and up-to-date content and methods tend to be perceived as better service quality by participants (Shi et al., 2022). Adults reaching the elite sport level brings certain financial and social rewards, which has shifted the view of youth sport programs towards institutionalism, elitism, and early specialization, such as solely focusing on the aspect of developing skills, which does not always coincide with the child’s reason to participate in sports in the first place which is primarily to have fun and be with friends (Cote & Hancock, 2014).

When a child is “given the opportunity to participate in a sport and enjoys it, most likely the child will choose to pursue that sport” and later on, “if the enjoyment and opportunity remain, the child will continue participation” (Cote & Hay, 2002). When considering the environment and basic structure, Finnish football clubs should take the perspective and focus of providing opportunities for all children to participate in organized sports and enjoy it, even though their ultimate goal of the program could be to produce elite athletes towards being a professional, for example in the first team of the club (Cote & Hancock, 2014). Thus, diversity instead of specialization during childhood has a positive effect on future elite performance as well as the goal of long-term participation in the sport, regardless of the level (Cote & Hancock, 2014). The club must provide the appropriate structure, that provides an opportunity for everyone to belong in a physically and psychologically safe environment that supports positive social norms (Fraser-Thomas, 2005). The football clubs should assume an inclusive mindset as instead of selection policies based on the performance of the child, while the environment should promote the socializing aspect of sport and sampling other sports (Cote & Gilbert, 2009).

The personal development and social aspect of the children's needs should be considered by a football club offering the service of youth football: a place where athletes can learn goal setting, perseverance, and various lessons for other life settings (Cote & Hancock, 2014). Youth sport participation has been linked to positive outcomes such as life skills development and mental health improvement (Shi et al., 2022). However, similarly to the idea where clubs are only focused on developing the child's skills while not considering the fun aspect, clubs who would have a sole focus on personal development assets, would risk the undermining of the skills and knowledge that pertain to the specific sport which is important in sport participation and a part of the child's motivation to play the sport (Cote & Hancock, 2014). There is growing evidence that youth sport programs for children can be "designed to focus on all three outcomes and be successful in developing skilled performance, maintaining participation rates and enhancing personal development" (Cote & Hancock, 2014).

### **2.2.3 Parents and Family**

Parents are among the strongest influences on children's physical activity (Noonan et al., 2016). The family environment can be an incredibly powerful influence in the child's sport settings and parents reportedly see themselves as consumers of enduring involvement in their children's sport participation (Noonan et al., 2016). Thus, parents have long-term interest in the athletic programs they have financially invested in for their children to play and compete. Cote (1999) argues that during the childhood phase, parents are responsible for initially getting their children interested in sport. The family plays a big role as a socializing agent into sport, and studies on sport socialization show the importance of parental influence especially on the children's early involvement in a sport (Cote & Hay, 2002).

The primary motivator for children participating in organized sports is fun; therefore, families with young children must emphasize fun if they want to ensure their child's and the family's transition to the next stage of development in sports (Cote, 1999). Studies show that there is a positive correlation between parental support and how much enthusiasm and enjoyment the child has in the sport (Cote, 1999). According to Noonan et al. (2016), evaluative feedback, e

specially verbal encouragement from parents has been understood to have particular importance in a child's sense of competence, and consequently their enjoyment and participation in sports.

Studies also show a correlation between committed athletes and parents' willingness to be present at games, tournaments, and training sessions (Cote, 1999). Interestingly however, children viewed parents' presence at games as a less important determiner of fun in sports than the parents thought that their presence would be in determining the fun children experience in sports; furthermore, parents reported positive reinforcement and compliments as a more important as a determiner for fun, than the children themselves reported (Visek et al., 2015). A difference in fun determiners was seen when parents undermined the importance of competing and working hard; children placed more importance in these determiners than their parents when evaluating fun factors of sports (Visek et al., 2015). While acknowledging the importance and influence of competing on children's perceptions of fun, families should foster skill development and minimize competitive stress, especially focusing solely on winning (Cote, 1999). Studies show how the expectations of parents can be felt as pressure and thus interfere with how the child participates in sports (Cote, 1999).

Parental time constraints that cause children's inability to attend were also shown to be a significant reason for not participating in sports (Noonan et al., 2016). In the childhood phase, or sampling years, the parents usually take on a leadership role, which then transforms into a follower/supporter role in later years if the child continues playing the sport (Noonan et al., 2016). The role of the entire family in a child's sport involvement is a complex phenomenon because of the huge differences in the family context; for example, a child's participation in sports can be affected by whether an older or younger siblings participates in sports or not, as well as their opinions have been shown to affect the child's decision to continue playing or not (Cote, 1999). An important point for this study is that within the same family all children appeared to receive the same support during their childhood years from their parents (Cote, 1999). All in all, studies show that parents and families do have a significant influence on their child's participation in sport.

#### **2.2.4 Children**

The expectations of the children, who are the consumers of the service, must be considered with a holistic approach to understand the whole child and through the eyes of child, not the eyes of parents or a researcher (Noonan, 2016). Children enjoy activities and exercises that they are good at, thus showing the influence that self-efficacy and perceived competence has on the participation and level of enjoyment of sports; children have an approach to expect success in the tasks in the

sport, which leads to higher perseverance and enjoyment, compared to children with low self-perceptions (Noonan et al., 2016). Moreover, Visek et al. (2015) state that children in sports have reported that they want to improve their skills and learn new skills. The organization or club where the child starts playing football as a child must consider the various aspects that are essential to be in place for a child to have positive movement experiences, that have been the key variable for sustaining children's participation in physical activities (Visek et al, 2015). The social exchange theory argues that children in organized sports try to maximize positive experiences and minimize negative ones (Cote & Hays, 2002). It is important to consider how to reach these positive experiences in football, and what the negatives ones are that eventually cause attrition from organized sports. The following theories explain some of the integral factors related to the expectations of children in childhood football.

### **Fun Integration Theory (FIT)**

To reach these positive movement experiences, fun has been identified as the primary reason for participating in sports teams (Visek et al, 2015). Fun is regularly stated across all cultures, ages, and genders as the most influential intrinsic motivator to participate in sports (Crane & Temple, 2015). From a grounded theory approach, the FUN MAPS method provides evidence-based blueprints for the fun integration theory (FIT), which is considered to be the only stakeholder-derived (children, parents, coaches) and "fully conceptualized theoretical framework" to understand specifically what constitutes fun in youth sport and the best ways to promote such fun sport experiences (Visek et al., 2015). Indeed, this is a crucial science and practice development because fun is the single largest predictor of sport commitment and sustained participation in childhood and through adolescence (Visek et al., 2015). Cote and Hays (2002) state that fun and excitement should be the experience that is mainly emphasized in the first years of organized sports, and studies have confirmed that "fun" is the primary reason for participation in sports teams (Visek et al., 2015). However, fun is a concept that needs to be understood specifically in the childhood phase of football for football clubs to be able to offer the service in a way that children continue playing the sport for as long as possible.

In a study to identify what athletes between the ages 9-16 considered as "fun" in sports, there were three factors that stood out as the most important factors for fun in sports; these factors were formed from 81 various determiners (Visek et al., 2015). These first three factors of fun were

the same and in the same order for players on both elite/competitive teams and the recreational teams, and when comparing fun factors for boys and girls (Vissek et al., 2020). Firstly, the most important factor to have fun in sports was “trying hard”, secondly “positive team dynamics” and thirdly “positive coaching” (Vissek et al., 2015). The fourth factor to determine fun was the first differing one, with elite/competitive players considering learning and improving as the next most important fun factor in sports, while recreational players considered friendships as the fourth most important (Vissek et al., 2020). The top 10 determiners for defining fun youth sports were: trying your best, working hard, training and activity, playing well as a team, getting/staying in shape, playing well in matches, getting along with teammates, a coach who respects players, game-time in matches, and lastly self-confidence (Vissek et al., 2015). Several of these determiners explain why “trying hard” was formed as the most important fun factor; additionally, a few determiners that were significant in defining “trying hard” as the most important fun factor were: competing, being successful in an action, and goal setting and achieving goals (Vissek et al., 2015). In addition to the Fun Integration Theory, there are other theories that add to the understanding on the motivation of children to pursue organized sports.

### **Competence Motivation Theory**

As mentioned before, being successful in a certain action in sports is considered as a determiner of fun in sports. Children are thought to have an inherent aspiration to show competence in sport and consequently master skills in the sport (Cote & Hays, 2002). Children expressed a sense of enjoyment towards activities that they are good at, thus showing the influence that self-efficacy and perceived competence has on the participation and level of enjoyment of sports (Noonan et al., 2016). High self-perceptions increase the motivation to participate in physical activities, and it changes the children’s approach to expect success in the tasks in the sport, which leads to higher perseverance and enjoyment, compared to children with low self-perceptions (Noonan et al., 2016). Moreover, children and youth also report that they participate in sport because they want to improve their skills and learn new skills (Vissek et al, 2015). Thus, with the base theory of having fun in the sport, children also consider learning and improving as important motives for sport participation (Vissek et al, 2015).

### **Achievement Goal Orientation Theory**

Cote and Hay (2002) state that the achievement goal orientation theory considers that children are thought to be motivated by ability or the task at hand, which is consistent with the idea that broader research shows that the challenge and excitement of competing and opportunities to test their skills are important intrinsic motivators. Moreover, in a season-long examination of children aged seven and above playing sport, fun was a positive mood state related to personal achievement and children's perceptions that their skills were matched against realistic challenges (Wankel & Sefton, 1989). Furthermore, the competitive and vigorous nature of organized physical activities was shown in studies to be appealing and enjoyable as the children felt that it brought more engagement and benefits to physical health (Noonan et al., 2016). Thus, the task or challenge ahead motivates the children to work towards the goal and more importantly try hard, which the stakeholders of sport also considered a top motive in sport participation (Noonan et al., 2016). In comparison, extrinsic factors such as "achievement status, winning, pleasing coaches or others" are generally less important motivations for why children and youth participate in sports (Crane & Temple, 2015). Furthermore, in the fun determiners, winning was only the 40<sup>th</sup> determiner out of a total of 81 determiners of fun in sports; however, competing was 13<sup>th</sup> (Visek et al., 2015).

### **Self-determination Theory (SDT)**

Studies show that when the children feel that that the sport is enjoyable, there are autonomous forms of motivation, such as intrinsic motivation (Noonan et al., 2016). Therefore, the self-determination theory (SDT) has been widely utilized in the sport context as a motivational framework for studying sport-related phenomena (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). The self-determination theory has shown that "autonomy-supportive interpersonal and social contexts" satisfy three fundamental human needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness as these contexts promote self-determined motivation, well-being, and healthy development (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). When these factors are fulfilled and in balance, the child can feel intrinsic motivation towards the sport.

### **Social Theory**

Another factor that contributes to the fun in sport is the social aspect; sport can be a "tremendous vehicle" for an athlete to develop connection with others (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). Sociability relates to the service customer's gains from social interaction (Kasale et al., 2018). This can include being with and making new friends and being part of a team, which have been showed as important motivating factors but are also an important reason why children and youth consider sport to be fun

(Whitehead & Biddle, 2008). Furthermore, for youth football participants specifically, sociability also included teamwork spirit and the respect between coaches and teammates (Kasale et al., 2018). Positive team dynamics was the second most important fun factor in youth sports, with determiners that affected this factor were: playing well as a team, supporting teammates, good sportsmanship, receiving support from teammates and when teammates help (Visek et al., 2018). Peer support is a key influence on children's physical activity; the presence of friends and the co-participation in the activity brings more enjoyment and meaning to sports (Noonan et al., 2016). An effecting environment in sports supports the basic need of every child and athlete to belong to a social group where the members support each other mutually (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). In addition to enjoyment, the presence of friends brought more intensity and motivation to the physical activity (Noonan et al., 2016). However, friendships as a fun factor was only the ninth for elite/competitive players, while it was the fourth most important factor to determine fun for recreational athletes (Visek et al., 2018). Moreover, being a good sport was considered one of the top dimensions of fun (Noonan et al., 2016).

### **Sport Commitment Model**

The Sport Commitment Model explains motives for participating or dropping out of a sport (Cote & Hays, 2002). There are five constructs in the model. The first one explains the positive effect of enjoyment and pleasure from sport participation in commitment levels (Cote & Hays, 2002). The second construct which has a negative effect on commitment are the competitors of the service, which can be considered other activities as mentioned previously (Cote & Hays, 2002). Thirdly, a positive effect on sport commitment are the personal resources invested in sports, such as time, effort, and money (Cote & Hays, 2002). The fourth construct considers the social pressures and influences on sport participation, which are considered in this context as positive (Cote & Hays, 2002). Lastly, the fifth concept is the opportunity of involvement from sports, such as improving skills, being with friends, and staying fit (Cote & Hay, 2002).

The various theories mentioned give several factors to consider on what motivates children in organized sports and what they expect to experience in the sport. Synthesizing and summarizing these various perspectives and theories gives a clear idea on the important factors of childhood football. First of all, it is evident that fun is key for children in sports; however, understanding that fun for all genders and levels of players comes from training sessions where there is an

opportunity to try hard, be active in practice, compete, have sensations of success from learning new skills, and to be in a positive team environment with plenty of peer support, led by a positive and respectful coach.

## **2.3 Childhood Football Training Sessions**

### **2.3.1 Training Session Structure**

For many clubs and the majority of the adults involved in youth sport, there needs to be a change of mindset from traditional views to placing efforts on engineering a youth sport structure that places the elements of sport that children value as the central point (Cote & Hancock, 2014).

Youth sport programs are often adult-driven where the children's voices are barely heard (Visek et al., 2018). An official coaching education course's description for reaching top marks in training preparation was "digital, well-organized plan, adapted to/relevant for the context and specified learning goals" (McCarthy et al., 2022). When planning training sessions, youth coaches have mentioned that they struggle with the need to better understand the philosophy of fun, how to use the training time more effectively, plan more effective drills and innovative games, and engage more of the kids for the majority of the time, thus avoiding so-called dead time (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). A good place to start planning training sessions is for coaches to set clear intentions on the aims of the training session and to not try to achieve too much in one session (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). While having an intention and plan for a training session, it is also important that the training session has flexible practice structures (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). This flexible structure then allows there to be space for the children's autonomy as the children should feel a locus of control over the rules and conditions of the sport, for example making decisions about practice drills or the type of training they do (Cote & Hay, 2002).

Flexible practice structures also allow for nonlinearity (Cote & Hancock, 2014). To create better players, the children must learn new football skills; this is best done by organizing a mastery-oriented motivational climate (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). In this motivational climate, safe opportunities for athletes to have fun must be provided so the children can engage playfully in less organized games. In such an environment, the coach should teach and assess the development of fundamental movements by focusing primarily on the child first (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). Furthermore, an important part of learning about football in the childhood phase is done by allowing the children to

play all positions on the field, and not locking their playing position to being defenders or attackers as children (Cote & Hancock, 2014).

While it is the most important that in the sampling years the children experience fun and excitement through sport, it is vital that the coaches have an idea of what types of exercises can be done in training (Cote & Hay, 2002). In the sampling years the most important objective in any sport is developing the fundamental motor skills such as running, jumping, and throwing (Cote & Hay, 2002). "Coaching is an art", requiring the ability to be decisive in when and where to utilize a specific approaches to be successful in reaching the learning needs of their athletes (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). Skilled coaches often combine and integrate both a traditional approach and a contemporary, constraints-led approach (CLA) when designing training sessions (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024).

The traditional approach is prescriptive and involves more direct instruction and repetitions of specific movement techniques, with not much movement variability (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). This traditional approach has faced recent criticism, as it can be argued that it prevents athletes from developing their own individualized functional movement solutions; furthermore, these isolated skill drills can be thought to limit or restrict the transfer of athlete behaviors from training to competition, as the game-like situation is always more complex (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). The theories that are for the more traditional approach are for example the Schema theory and Fitt's and Posner's model of stage of learning, that present the idea of learning being a linear process, whereby these essential motor skills are learned through repetitive skill-based drills in the early stages of learning with prescriptive instructions reducing movement variability; while, the instructions become less prescriptive and the movement varies more in the later stages (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024).

The contemporary approach, or CLA approach, suggests that the development of a skilled action is a process of mutually influencing interactions between the individual, environment, and task-constraints (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). This approach presents the theory of considering movement skills to be adapted as a result of these interacting constraints, rather than the traditional approach where an internal movement representation is thought to be acquired with an isolated drill (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). Theories that are for the contemporary coaching approach are Todorov's Optimal Feedback theory and Anderson's Adaptive Control of Thought theory, that show the

nonlinearity of behavior and the need for varied learning experiences to be accounted for (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024).

Elite coaches have acknowledged the nonlinearity of learning and have applied contemporary practices while effectively also using elements of traditional coaching (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). For example, using a closed, focused skill drill to teach a specific motor skill, and then coaching the same skill with traditional direct instruction in a contemporary open, game-based practice to combine both approaches (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). Skilled coaches integrate the traditional and CLA methods even within one practice session; after a learner has acquired the basic idea of the skill, he should practice the skill in game-like situations as much as possible (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). The game-like situations prepare the athlete to use the skill in the many possible different situations that the game will eventually present; thus, solely coaching in a closed skill exercise without opponents or variables will not prepare the athlete for adaptive behaviors (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). Therefore, it is advised that coaches consider the reason why they choose to implement a specific approach, and to evaluate whether the chosen approach will result in the desired consequences by meeting the demands of the athlete in that situation (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). This evaluation makes the coach to consider the balance of quality and quantity, where an isolated skill-drill increases the number of repetitions of the skill being practiced but could mean lower quality or less cognitive demand than game-based exercises (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). However, it is important to remember that in childhood football, whether it is a game-based exercise or skill-based drill, it is always possible to make them into games or competitions where children can have fun (Cote and Hay, 2002).

Regardless of using a contemporary or traditional approach in coaching various parts of the session, it is important that the individual player's characteristics are at the center of the training session, when considering how to implement movement variability (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). Each player must be viewed as an individual athlete because each of them can respond differently to the various stimuli that they go through in the learning process (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). The "one-size-fits-all" thought-process for coaching has been criticized, as all athletes learn differently; thus, sessions need to be planned where learners can explore alternative movement patterns that satisfy their individual constraints (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). The various approaches' strengths and weaknesses need to be considered when applying them to the given context; evaluating the

approach from various factors, including most importantly that the approach is tailored to the individual athlete and the targeted learning outcomes of the training session (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). The coach needs to comprehend which approach best suits an athlete's developmental phase and learning requirements, while considering and understanding that the approach might only work for some the players in the team (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024). Sport programs should have flexibility to meet the wide range of needs and desires of the different children (Cote & Hay, 2002).

### **2.3.2 Coaching**

Coaches play a huge role in the children's experience of the sport and their self-perceptions by providing the intangible direct interactions with the child and thus coaches influence the broader motivational climate of the sport context (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). Furthermore, for the paying customers, which are usually the parents, the coaches are the personnel that are most visible representatives of the parents' investment because they have the responsibility to teach sport-specific instruction according with the objectives of the sports program (Visek et al., 2018). There are high levels of interaction between the coach and player; thus, the coach's manner of communication and overall attitude is influential in the player's evaluation of the service's staff quality (Shi et al., 2022). Therefore, coaches play a key role in the development of young athletes and influence the holistic quality of their sporting experiences; thus, it is important to understand what the most important factors are for high quality coaching in the childhood phase of football (Visek et al., 2018).

The first and arguably most important factor when considering youth sports and facilitating the organization's opportunity to be successful is the recruitment of volunteers; especially in Finland, without volunteer coaches' youth sports programs would not exist (Cohen et al., 2020). In Finland, there are 99 000 volunteers in football, while there are only 846 full-time employees in the sport, of which 215 are coaches, 330 are sports directors or directors of coaching and the rest in other roles (Palloliitto, 2024a). Kim and Bang (2012) list seven different approaches when considering improving recruitment efforts of volunteers in non-profit sport organizations:

- Providing a clear message that emphasizes local service involvement
- Emphasizing the opportunity to show and develop skilled leadership

- Arranging informative sessions for potential volunteers
- Contacting corporations for sponsors and students for potential volunteers
- Asking local past champions and successful individuals to operate as a spokesperson
- Showing the opportunity of making new friendships and ensuring flexibility in volunteering
- Highlighting the benefits of volunteering

These seven considerations are all important when trying to improve the efforts of recruiting volunteers into the organization. The locality is an important message to convey as it touches the people who hold locality and service to the community as an important value (Kim, 2018). The concept of external tradition motivation can be applicable to parents volunteering in sports events that can be linked to family traditions (Kim, 2018). Leadership positions and having the opportunity to excel in a leadership role can move someone towards wanting to volunteer (Kim, 2018). Informative sessions can be decisive factors to persuade volunteers as they learn more about the topic, they feel more assured and interested to help (Kim, 2018). There are several high school and college students looking to volunteer in sports organizations as part of their schooling such as a work study or orientation assignment (Kim, 2018). Corporations are also eager to sponsor and help local youth sports organizations (Kim, 2018). There are several local heroes that communities look up to that can speak for the behalf of non-profit organizations and serve in social media campaigns; for example, former or current professional athletes who have played in the youth teams in the past are excellent candidates to thank former volunteers and recruit new ones (Kim, 2018). The feeling of a flexible work environment as a volunteer is important when recruiting new volunteers, especially if it is an environment that provides the possibility to form new friendships (Kim, 2018). Lastly, there are several benefits of volunteering that are important to highlight when trying to recruit new volunteers (Kim, 2018).

The benefits of volunteering in non-profit sports organizations can be understood better when categorizing the motivations or the incentives of volunteers to join. The incentives can be listed as purposive, solidary, and material incentives (Kim & Bang, 2012). These approaches can also be used when trying to motivate volunteers to join or become more committed. The purposive incentives touch upon the idea of contributing and doing good for the community (Kim & Bang, 2012). The motivation to do something useful for the society, especially for the good of the kids is identified as the most powerful volunteer motivation (Kim & Bang, 2012). Solidary incentives take the

perspective of motivating volunteers through the social and networking opportunities that open through volunteering (Kim & Bang, 2012). Volunteering can be seen as a chance to make friends, socialize, meet new people, and thus make new connections (Kim & Bang, 2012). Lastly, there can be volunteers can be motivated by materialistic gains that the organization can provide in return for volunteering. For some, tangible benefits work as incentive to be a volunteer; however, this was seen as the least important motivation for volunteering (Kim & Bang, 2012).

### **Coach Education**

There has been a growing concern about the quality of coaching; thus, attention has been directed towards structures and systems for the professional development of sports coaches (McCarthy et al., 2022). One of the key mechanisms are the coach education programs, which are large-scale programs that typically require periods of mandatory attendance, exposure to a teaching curriculum, objectives to reach learning outcomes, and result in an official certification (McCarthy et al., 2022). Formal education, adequate organizational control, performance standards, and certifications for volunteer coaches, would diminish various issues including low quality coaching or the high variability of the volunteers' coaching and performance (Kim & Bang, 2012). Volunteers often lack the adequate knowledge and skills regarding communication, risk management and other coaching practices (Kim & Bang, 2012). Sport coaching stakeholders increasingly value coach education programs and hold them as important (McCarthy et al., 2022). Unfortunately, despite positive results related to coaching education programs and the availability of these programs, most coaches do not receive formal training (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). The reason for the lack of formal coaching education can be the society's common thought that "anyone can coach" and that the only reason for selecting the coaches is based on having their own child in the team or just assuming the role "if no one else was available" (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). When assuming the role of a youth coach, they are often faced with issues that they are not prepared to handle, such as providing the appropriate coaching practices to develop the athlete.

However, alarmingly some studies show that for some coaches obtaining formal education licenses has been seen as the end point of development, solely something to aspire to in their own right; thus, driving the wrong developmental behaviors in the coaching population (McCarthy & Roberts, 2023). Therefore, in addition to the formal courses the coaches receive from the organization, mentoring is also an important factor, as coaches have stated their lack of mentoring in the

first coaching experiences (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). The first coaching course can give the volunteer a decent amount of information in theory; however, as Wiersma and Sherma's article states "it has to be an ongoing kind of thing" as opposed to a one-time coaching course after which you are left on your own (Wiersma & Sherma, 2005). Most often when these mentoring opportunities to learn are not offered properly by the organization, negative outcomes usually reflect the lack of training in sports coaching and child psychology (Cohen et al., 2020). Furthermore, studies show that by providing learning and development opportunities for volunteers, it can help with volunteer retention; perceived investment in development, support and recognition has shown volunteer satisfaction and improved the chances for the volunteer's intention to stay (Piatk & Carman, 2023).

### **Coach Personality Attributes**

Understanding the abilities and skills the childhood coach should have is important when trying to improve childhood football as a service in Finland. Firstly, the coach's main task in the childhood phase of football is to provide training sessions where children can enjoy and have fun; evidence shows that the coaching climate which is created by the quality of specific coach behaviors and how youth perceive these behaviors influence the players' level of enjoyment, goal involvement, achievement motivation, and self-perceptions (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). This means that coaches should exhibit coaching styles and leader behaviors that match athlete preferences as it can lead to greater player satisfaction (Feltz et al., 1999). A highly ranked (14/81) determiner of fun in organized youth sports was a coach who is a positive role model for the athletes (Vissek et al., 2015). A commonly accepted idea is that a coach's success can be determined by a coach's behaviors, dispositions, education, and experiences while also evaluating the change in the athletes' performance or personal attribute outcomes which are suitable for the given context (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). When trying to understand what high-quality childhood coaching is, the components of professional knowledge, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, personality attributes and the coaching effectiveness and efficacy will be explored in terms of the context of the childhood phase of football.

### **Coach Knowledge**

Extensive knowledge of the sport is considered to be a major characteristic for those who become expert coaches (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). A coach's professional knowledge includes so-called

declarative knowledge (knowing) about sport sciences, sport-specific knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and procedural knowledge (doing) about the steps and activities of how to complete a task or job (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). A coach's knowledge about the sport was considered to be the 11<sup>th</sup> most important determiner out of 81 in determining fun in youth sports (Visek et al., 2015). Coaching education, clinics and workshops mainly focus on providing coaches with this professional knowledge; however, professional knowledge on its own is not enough to be an effective coach (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). Furthermore, this almost exclusive focus on the sport-specific knowledge in traditional coaching courses has been suggested to be the reason why coaches from various countries, sports, and levels of competition have started to devalue formal coach education (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). For example, it can also be considered professional knowledge to have an understanding of what constitutes as fun for young athletes in the sport; coaches undermined the importance of working hard as a determiner of having fun for children in sports and over placed the importance of playing sports with friends as a more important determiner than the children themselves felt as a fun factor (Visek et al., 2018). Furthermore, joking around with friends and a coach who is funny and easy-going were all thought by coaches as important fun determiners, while the young athletes all rated these factors as less important than the coaches (Visek et al., 2018).

Although it is considered to be a major component of coaching to be able to teach sport-specific knowledge, coaching expertise also requires the ability to create and maintain relationships with others (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). A coach who respects athletes was the 8<sup>th</sup> most important determiner of fun in sports out of a total of 81 various determiners (Visek et al., 2018). Studies show that coaches experience difficulty with how to communicate with children, specifically going down to their level in terms of speaking with the words and terminology that kids can understand (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). Furthermore, coaches have felt that coach education clinics and courses do not teach enough interpersonal skills and the psychology part that pertains to coaching children (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005). Coaches need to understand how to coach age-specific and level-specific content related to the children's' different developmental levels; coaching 7-year-olds is completely different than coaching 11-year-olds, despite both ages still considered to be in the childhood phase (Wiersma & Sherman, 2005).

One interpersonal approach in which a coach can interact with athletes that has proven to influence their motivation, physical activity, and psychological well-being is autonomy-supportive coaching (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). Autonomy-supportive coaching includes actions such as: giving the athletes choices, reasoning for tasks and limits, opportunities to show initiative and act independently, and non-controlling feedback on their competence (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). Furthermore, autonomy-supportive coaching avoids controlling statements, behaviors that promote athlete's ego-involvement, criticisms, and tangible rewards for tasks (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). These autonomy-supportive coach behaviors show higher levels of need satisfaction in athletes, and praise that focuses on autonomy promotes motivation, sense of self and well-being (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). Moreover, praise that focuses on the process of the action instead of the athlete as a whole generates mastery, as opposed to helpless motivational responses and contingent self-worth in children (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). Coaches who gave positive feedback for the effort, attitude and behavior fulfilled the children's basic psychological need to feel competent more effectively than praise about the performance outcome (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2009). Servant leadership, a relatively new approach to coaching, has shown to have a description of coaching qualities that have positively affected the way athletes rate their coaches; trust, inclusion, service and humility are some of the main qualities that servant leaders demonstrate (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). In a formal coaching education course, when assessing competences and success of coach's training session, some of the criteria description for the passion of coaches who scored excellent were: "Anticipates, shows engagement, and demonstrates enthusiasm", while the criteria description for excellency in fun and motivation were: "The training lives! Shining coach with challenging training methods. As a result, the players are very enthusiastic" (McCarthy et al., 2022).

The third form of knowledge that is considered important for coach expertise is intrapersonal knowledge, which refers to the understanding of oneself and the ability to reflect and introspect (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). A way to translate experience into knowledge and skills is by reflection and the mindset of looking being critical of the training sessions they provide, and by being brave to recognize where they might have gone wrong in their own coaching (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). While understanding the importance of the previously mentioned extensive sport-specific knowledge and interpersonal knowledge to maximize athletes' outcomes, it also requires the "constant introspection, review, and revision" of one's own work (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). Reflection has been identified as a key tool for elevating standards of practice (McCarthy & Roberts, 2023). This capability for critical reflection can be developed if there is a task brief and success criteria to follow, as

they guide coaches for opportunities to develop (McCarthy & Roberts, 2023). Furthermore, the reflection should be integrated within authentic practice environments, which will reveal real coaching issues and surprising moments to reflect on afterwards (McCarthy & Roberts, 2023).

### **Coaching Efficacy and Effectiveness**

The definition of coach efficacy is “the extent to which coaches believe they have the capacity to affect the learning and performance of their athletes” (Feltz et al., 1999). The Coaching Efficacy Scale explains four dimensions of coaching: game strategy, motivation, teaching technique, and character building (Feltz et al., 1999). Coaching efficacy has effects on player satisfaction (Feltz et al., 1999). Coaches in sports are teachers, and thus they provide instructions and feedback to impact the learning and performance of their athletes (Feltz et al., 1999). High efficacy coaches have reported to show more effective coaching behaviors in terms of praise and encouragement than those coaches with lower efficacy (Feltz et al., 1999). These behaviors consist of positive reinforcement to a desirable performance, positive reinforcement with an addition to technical instruction, and spontaneous encouragements both following a mistake and not following a mistake (Feltz et al., 1999). Coaches are also occasionally encouraged to withhold correction despite a movement of the athlete being sub-optimal, as it can benefit overall learning (Lindsay & Spittle, 2024).

Cote and Gilbert propose the definition of coaching effectiveness to be: “The consistent application of integrated professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge to improve the athlete’s competence, confidence, connection, and character in specific coaching contexts” (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). Furthermore, effective coaching in terms of athletes’ outcomes in the performance context are the results in either successful performances (which can be measured by wins/losses, individual player development, or success at national/international level), or by positive psychological responses on the part of the athletes such as: high perceived ability, high self-esteem, intrinsic motivational orientation, or high level of sport enjoyment and satisfaction (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). The performance environment can only be handled by some children; thus, the definition of effective coaching in the performance context does propose a mismatch between the developmental needs of the children and the coaching behaviors in the performance context could lead to more dropouts, injuries, and shorter careers than with a competent participation context coach for children (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). However, in the sampling years or the childhood phase, the sense of enjoyment and satisfaction by the children has been stated to be the most significant

factor in organized sport, thus it can be said that the latter part of the definition of effective coaching which relates to the psychological responses of children is valid even in the participation context (Cote & Gilbert, 2009).

### **3 Research Design**

This research is a study of service quality of childhood football in Finnish football clubs. The following chapter provides the theory behind the research design, an explanation of the methodological choices for data collection and data analysis, an evaluation of the validity and reliability of the data, and an insight of the research ethics concerning the study.

#### **3.1 Research Methods**

The chosen method for this study was a mixed method research design. More specifically, a sequential exploratory mixed method was used with the qualitative data being collected first in the form of structured interviews, and then the quantitative data being followed in the form of secondary data (Saunders, 2019). This method of data collection was chosen to bring complementarity, as the use of mixed methods supports elaborating, combining, clarifying and confirming diverse meanings and findings (Saunders, 2019). Therefore, the study was approached from the perspective of inductive reasoning, which was then supported by quantitative data (Saunders, 2019).

According to Saunders (2019), the qualitative research method is used when questions of *how* and *why* are being examined. This gives the analysis an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and is an optimal way to review the individual experiences related to the topic. This study had a combined approach; it was evaluative and exploratory with the use of structured interviews to assess the effectiveness of the service and examine various factors of childhood football training sessions in Finland (Saunders, 2019). The interviews posed open questions to clarify the understanding of an issue, problem or phenomenon of which the precise nature is unsure of.

The quantitative research method is used for investigating numerical values; answering the questions of *how many* or *how often* (Saunders, 2019). The secondary quantitative data that was gathered from 2550 official Finnish FA Observation Forms submitted by various clubs in Finland during

the time period 9.3.2022-12.11.2024, these were internally analyzed and shared with the full-time Developers of Coaching Competence (Valmennusosaamisen Kehittäjä (VOK) who were involved in the development of the Observation Forms through Finnish FA workshops. There were 1575 forms submitted for training sessions in the childhood phase (5-11) and 975 forms for the youth phase (12-15).

## **3.2 Data Collection and Analysis**

This study applied a sequential exploratory approach when gathering the primary data; qualitative data was collected from structured interviews, which was then complemented with secondary data acquired from quantitative data of the Observation Form in the form of surveys (Saunders, 2019). The qualitative data was collected first during the summer and fall of 2024, and the quantitative data from a larger FA's study was acquired in December 2024.

### **3.2.1 Qualitative Data**

The qualitative data collection was conducted by interviewing experts on the subject: Eddie Munnely, Pol Deulonder Biarge, Santeri Suvala, Markus Paananen, and Jani Tulehmo, based on their experiences in Finnish childhood football and coaching in Finland. Combined, these five experts of coaching have reportedly observed over a thousand childhood football training sessions in Finland. The interview processes were conducted online in Teams meetings. All interviews were conducted separately, except Suvala and Tulehmo were interviewed together in a group interview. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes to one hour. The interview structure was exploratory and thus relatively unstructured and flexible. The interview structure relied mostly on the quality of the contributions of the interviewees, as they steered the interview in various directions due to new insights that occurred (Saunders, 2019). Appendix 1 shows an overview of the main questions that were presented to the interviewees that guided the interview.

The first interviewee, Eddie Munnely, is a British talent coach from FIFA, who was assigned to spend six months in Finland in 2024 evaluating training sessions and supporting coaches in the sessions as a part of FIFA's new program The FIFA Talent Development Scheme. Finland was chosen to be one of seven countries who received a foreign talent coach from FIFA to develop domestic

coaching and thus develop the most talented players in Finland. According to Munnelly, he observed over 200 training sessions while being in Finland.

The second interviewee, Pol Deulonder Biarge, is a Spanish coach and coach educator who has played a major part in bringing Ekkono Method to Finland. Ekkono Method is a methodology created by Soccer Services Barcelona (SSB), which has cooperated with Eerikkilä Sport & Outdoor Resort for several years. SSB's Ekkono Method is specialized in teaching football game understanding to players and coaches. Biarge has been working as a coach and supporting coaches from all over Finland with the Ekkono Method in Finland for almost nine years in Eerikkilä. Biarge says that he has approximately observed over 600 training sessions during his time in Finland and over 200 in the past few years.

Santeri Suvala, Markus Paananen, and Jani Tulehmo are all employees of the Finnish Football Association and have all been working on the project "Children Immersed in the Game" (in Finnish: "Pelille heittäytyvät lapset"). The project that aimed to improve childhood football coaching in Finland. The two-year strategy officially kicked off in the end of 2021 and beginning of 2022 and was a part of a larger strategy of the Finnish FA. The main objective of the project was to figure out what is the most important factor to be improved in Finnish childhood football. After extensive interviews and workshops led by the Finnish FA, some of the most important factors of childhood football were narrowed down to 20, and the result was to name this project "Children immersed in the Game", which was a slogan that wanted to be seen as more of a goal or state of will. The project's aim was to place the children in the center of focus and to figure out to make the children be engaged in the game of football. The broad term game was considered to be all the children's football matches and training sessions that were organized by the clubs, and the focus was to understand how to create an environment where the children can fully immerse themselves in football and consequently fall in love with the sport with a lasting effect on their lives. The result of these workshops led to selecting the most important areas that childhood coaches needed to improve and to focus on fixing these few key areas by as many clubs as possible. The fundamental skills that the project highlighted to be focused on in the childhood phase of coaching were organizing and planning, giving feedback, connecting with children, being animated, and controlling to group. Suvala, Paananen and Tulehmo had a difficult time putting a number on the number of

training sessions they have observed in total, but a rough approximate was that each of them observed at least 100 training sessions in the last few years.

### **3.2.2 Quantitative Data**

The Finnish FA collected and stored a wide variety and large volume of data in a larger study to support their coach education programs, which includes raw data and both unpublished and published summaries. The data that was used in this study as secondary data was used to form various linkages to the qualitative data to enable answering the research questions and objectives of the study (Saunders, 2019). The majority of the secondary data was structured data, which was organized by the Finnish FA into a format that was fairly easy to process, in an Excel spreadsheet. The access to this raw data and particular documents were granted by the Finnish FA to the coach educators of the FA and for the use of this study. This research project was a national comparison of the entire Finnish childhood football, and required data from a large number of football clubs to answer the research questions with concrete numerical data. The data can be referred to as big data, where the data sets were massive in volume, complex in variety, often comprising both structured and unstructured data (Saunders, 2019). The Finnish FA's training Observation Form uses systematic observation, which is a highly structured method of collecting quantitative data by observing a given phenomenon; in this method, one or more trained observers record the target behaviors using a predefined coding system to minimize bias (Cornell, 2024).

The childhood (5-11 year-olds) Finnish FA training Observation Form consists of five areas of quantitative data for the trained observer to record based on the training session. This data can be considered as survey secondary data, which is existing data originally collected using a survey strategy, usually questionnaires, for some other purpose. The data was collected through continuous and regular surveys that were repeated over a two-year period; they provide a useful resource with which to compare or set in context research findings with the primary qualitative data from the interviews (Saunders, 2019). Survey secondary data such as the data provided by the Finnish FA for this study, was presented in sufficient detail to provide the main data set from which the research questions can be answered and the objectives for this study can be met. When considering Finnish childhood football in terms of national variations, it was seen to be the only way to obtain such broad data (Saunders, 2019).

This survey secondary data was collected through SurveyPal, which then collects the data into a larger database operated by the Finnish FA. The first page of the survey asks for general information of the training session being observed: the football club's name, age group, gender of the players, the name of the coach being evaluated, the name of the team being evaluated, and whether the coach being evaluated is a full-time coach or a volunteer. The questionnaire uses a mixed method approach, with the observer of the training session asked to give a quantitative numerical evaluation of a specific topic that is then followed up with a free comment section where a description of the numerical evaluation is written. There are five sections of the survey for the observer to evaluate and write an evaluation on.

(1) First of all, the observer of the training session rates the coaching behaviors on a scale from 1-10 on the coach's ability to excite and inspire (in Finnish: "innostaa"). The descriptions of what to consider when evaluating the coach in this category are the following: the coach's interaction with the players is active and supportive, the feedback supports learning by correcting and reinforcing, the coach acknowledges all the children in the training, the coach's verbal and non-verbal communication is motivating and age-specific, and the coach can adapt his behavior to the needs of various situations.

(2) Secondly, the observer clocks how much of the time are the players active in the training session and evaluates it as a percentage of the total time. In other words, how much of the training time are the kids actively moving sports specifically. This section the unnecessary waiting time that children might face in a training session during exercises or in transitions from an exercise to another. The exercises facilitate everyone movement and activity. (3) Thirdly, a numerical evaluation is made by the observer on the number of touches that each child has of the football. The numerical evaluation is from 1-10, with every value amounting to 100 touches of the ball. Thus, the evaluation is from zero to 1,000 touches of the football. The training session should enable the children to be active with the football. The observer should count the average football touches that a player has during the training session. This is usually done in a way that the observer chooses one player to focus on in the various exercises of the training and counts the amount of football touches the player has in that exercise to form an average that every player approximately had in that same exercise.

(4) Fourthly, the observer evaluates (from 1-10) the children's behaviors on how engaged and immersed they are in the game. Trying hard is placed as an important factor in this evaluation with descriptions including: the children are brave in all phases of the game, the children challenge for the ball and actively try to steal the ball from the opponent, the children are active on ball and off the ball according to their age-specific development, the ability to go forward with the ball is especially focused on, the children do not give up in any situation, and the children are actively listening in the moments when the coach is teaching. (5) Lastly, the observer evaluates how well the objective that was set by specific football club was achieved in the training session. In other words, the clubs set out predetermined objectives that they want the observers to evaluate in the training sessions. In this study, this fifth part of the survey will not be considered, as the objective and evaluation topic is different in each club in Finland.

### **3.3 Validity and Reliability of the Data**

To ensure the validity and quality of the data collected through the interviews, it was essential to choose interviewees with extensive experience from childhood football. It was important to diversify the qualitative data by interviewing multiple interviewees. To ensure relevancy to the current times of childhood football in Finland, together these interviewees have observed over one thousand childhood football training sessions in Finland and several hundred in the past few years. To alleviate possible bias, interviewees were not representatives of any Finnish football clubs, the subjects of the study. Interviewing Suvala, Tulehmo and Paananen, who were members of the Finnish FA's work group aiming to specifically improve childhood football in Finland, brought extensive knowledge and expertise to the study. However, it is noteworthy that these three interviews were held in the native language of the interviewer and the interviewees and thus the responses may pose differences in translations and interpretations. Therefore, only the interviews that were held in English, were directly quoted in the results. To give an international perspective to the study and to minimize bias of solely interviewing Finnish people of childhood football, Biarge from Spain and Munnelly from UK were also interviewed. Despite being from abroad, both interviewees had gained valuable experience in Finnish childhood football to ensure validity in their insights.

There are some factors to point out concerning the validity of the secondary data of the Observation Forms. The Observation Forms introduced in 2022 is a relatively new tool to evaluate training

sessions has required orientation on how to measure the various factors that the form considers. For example, the subjectivity when evaluating coach behaviors as well as the children's engagement, are two factors that needed relative expertise. In 2023 and 2024 there have been several workshops by the Finnish FA where these factors have been specified on how to quantify each factor. The subjectivity of the form, and the variability of the knowledge and expertise of the people evaluating training sessions must be mentioned and acknowledged when considering the validity of the secondary data. Furthermore, it must be mentioned that the majority of the evaluations were done by members of the same football club. This poses the evident possibility of bias; however, in 2022-2024, there were no criteria set by the Finnish FA on how well clubs must do in the various factors in order to receive financial support from the FA. This reduces the bias, as the Observation Forms should therefore have been conducted solely on the motive of improving the quality of the training sessions, as there were no other evident motives to give better results than the person evaluating actually considered.

### **3.4 Research Ethics**

During all the stages of the research process, it was ensured that this thesis follows the Ethical Principles of JAMK (2024). When it comes to an ethical way of conducting research, it was important to communicate clearly about the aims of the study to all the participants involved in the data collection. The interviewees and the data-analyst responsible for the Observation Forms data in the Finnish FA were informed about the purpose and the topic of the thesis and their participation in the process was discussed early in advance. Moreover, all the statements from interviews and the results from the quantitative data were confirmed with and approved by the participants afterwards. This ensured that throughout the data collection process, there was a consensus about the aims, expectations, and outcomes of the study with all the participants. Furthermore, the participants were treated equally and respectfully throughout the process, and it was guaranteed that their responses and statements would be handled and processed accurately and carefully.

## **4 Findings**

This chapter presents the results of the study. As the aim of the thesis was to examine which aspects of service quality could be improved in childhood football clubs in Finland to keep more

participants in the sport, and what are the factors of childhood football training sessions that need to be improved to enhance player development in Finland, the study utilized mixed research methods. The first subchapter focuses on the findings of the qualitative interviews with the experts, dividing the main attributes into five main themes. The second subchapter presents and analyses the results of the quantitative data, which were acquired through the Finnish Football Association's Observation Forms.

## 4.1 Interview Findings

### Activity level

Munnelly calculated an average of 46% ball rolling time of all of the trainings that he observed during his time in Finland. According to Munnelly, if players are “*doing*” something football-related for less than half of time, then they are not active enough, nor are they getting enough touches of the football. Therefore, it is important to understand what is happening during the 54% of the time in training sessions when the ball is not rolling. For example, he suggested that it could be the time it takes to transition from one exercise to the other, coaching interventions, and water breaks. Munnelly emphasizes:

*“The training set-up should be catered that there is no wastage, so transitions from each exercise are efficient, then there is no time for players to switch off. Time on the field is precious.”*

*(Munnelly)*

Paananen agrees and says that too often he has seen training sessions in Finland where these moments where the players switch off result in the coach losing the control of the entire group, mainly due to the coach not having a clear plan and organization of what is happening next. Biarge agrees with this point of wasting time as he feels that Finnish children in general tend to lose the attention quicker in training than for example, Spanish children. He says that it can be because Finnish children are used to there being periods in training where nothing happens, and for many years they have been allowed to switch off by going into their own bubble or by talking to friends. Biarge says this is evident to be seen in the children's reactions when the coach does call for the Finnish children's attention after switching off; the reaction is usually surprised and sometimes even annoyed for being bothered. Furthermore, Munnelly states that

*“In Finland it is very rigid and organized to play for two minutes and rest for one; during the one-minute rest the players start talking to each other, they switch off and just wait. For children there does not have to be such strict time constraints in the way you would manage physical periodization in a senior first team environment.” (Munnelly)*

The same idea of time wastage applies for water breaks, as Munnelly states that they take too long in Finland and could be done in a way for example:

*“The one who can be the first one to take a drink and have twenty touches on the ball gets 10 points.” (Munnelly)*

### **Coaching Behaviors**

When asked how Biarge would evaluate Finnish coaches (from 1-10) on their coaching behavior of being animated and exciting the children to play football: Biarge answered that a volunteer coach in Finland is on average a 3/10, while a full-time coach is a 6/10. Despite these relatively low scores, Biarge feels that coaches have improved in this area in the last nine years that he has been in Finland, as coaches were even more passive when Biarge first arrived in Finland, but he still acknowledges that there is still a lot to be done in improving the coaching behaviors of Finnish coaches. Paananen feels that the most useful tool to excite the children in football sessions is with non-verbal communication, the use of arms and the coach's body language; by really being alive in the session. Despite emphasizing the importance of the quality and amount of verbal feedback, Tulehmo calls attention to the point that the non-verbal communication and body language cannot contradict what is being said. Furthermore, Biarge feels that the children receive most of their information from the coach's non-verbal communication; if the coach is very passive and static with his body language, usually what he is saying verbally will not transfer as well to the kids being excited.

*“I feel that there is a big difference between the animation from coaches who work with players who are under thirteen-year-olds in the UK compared to Finnish coaches. In the U.K, the coaches are more animated with the big high fives, getting down to their level, more demonstration of skills, and more movement of the arms”. (Munnelly)*

For example, in the UK, Munnelly says that it is common to see when a child scores a goal in training that the coach runs on the pitch to give the children a high five, with *“so much positive encouragement”*. Biarge believes that volunteer coaches in Finland lack more on the non-verbal rather than the verbal part of the coaching behavior that should make the children excited about football. According to Biarge, the elements that are most lacking from the non-verbal behaviors are the lack of body language and facial expressions. Munnelly continues with point that

*“Even though the culture in Finland can be different, if you want the children to lose themselves in the session, then the coach equally must lose himself in the session. It is the attitude and mindset that it is the coach’s job to become something else for the benefit of the players”*. (Munnelly)

Munnelly emphasizes that the coaches should be demanding high standards, competitiveness, and intensity, so that the players understand what is demanded of them to improve and that there is a certain amount of pressure to put them into that right emotional state and learning zone, which did not happen as consistently as much. Biarge adds that

*“The coaches in the childhood phase in Finland need to adapt to the mentality that by their enthusiasm they can be more demanding in the training culture, and in the certain requirements that suit the age of the children. Biarge feels like the initial excitement of Finnish children coming to football training can be similar to the children in Spain; however, the excitement drops quicker in the training sessions than in Spain.”* (Biarge)

Biarge says that in Spain, the coaches often need to try calm the children down, rather than to excite them more. Furthermore, in general, Biarge says that in the years towards adolescence the excitement for football drops more and quicker in Finland than in Spain. Thus, this can be considered to be in line with one of the key arguments of the study, that due to the initial excitement and intrinsic motivation for football being higher in Spain, it means that coaches in Finland have an even bigger task to excite Finnish players, than the Spanish coaches do in Spain. This drop of excitement can happen for several reasons, but one can certainly be related to Munnelly’s observations that Finnish teams spend 33% of their training time on warming up, mostly without the ball.

## **Verbal Communication**

Tulehmo states that the most important thing for coaches is to create a motivational environment that supports and inspires children's learning by giving specific, frequent, high-quality verbal feedback for an individual player. Suvala agrees that feedback is the most important factor but emphasizes the importance of considering the amount of verbal communication that is used; sometimes it can excite the children more to say less in order to ensure that there is not too much verbal feedback, which can sometimes be a negative factor in immersing the children in the sport (Suvala, 2025). Munnelly says that coaches can give players the instructions for an exercise, and even though the players do not figure it out at first, they should be given time to figure it out themselves. When the game has gone on for enough time at a high intensity, coaches can then stop the session, give them a coaching tip on what to think about and then continue the game, meaning that the short coaching intervention is the time they can rest. Munnelly states that coaches should create

*“High levels of challenge for the players while having high levels of support, which does not mean you have to be screaming and shouting all the time: a coach can take the group together and quietly get the excitement levels the rise.” (Munnelly)*

Tulehmo agrees by saying that coaches do not have to be “Duracell bunnies” running around and shouting all the time; it is possible to be calm and still excite the kids to play football by being positive and by creating a safe environment. Suvala says that

*“Finnish coaches should have more dimensions and variability in their coaching behaviors, meaning that if there are times when a certain behavior of the children needs to be changed or fortified, then those moments should require lifting the level of intensity in the coaching to make a strong enough impact”. (Suvala)*

However, Suvala reminds that it is important for the coach to be themselves, and that children detect if a coach is faking it. Tulehmo also emphasizes the importance of showing significance in the coaching moment, that coaches show the children that they really mean the world to them. Biarge is concerned of the volunteer coaches not being vocal enough and emphasizes that it is important in the childhood phase that the coaches are heard and present all the time with short messages; too often in Finland the volunteer coaches are not saying anything. Biarge continued to say that

*“Most of the volunteer coaches in Finland do not know how to reach the optimal activation of the players well enough. Volunteer coaches in Finland need to start to speak enough, share emotions and be enthusiastic first, only after that can the quality of the verbal information be considered and evaluated.” (Biarge)*

Paananen is also concerned about the huge variability in the level and quality of the coaches and training sessions in Finland. Paananen believes that by internally educating coaches within football clubs, it would raise the level of all coaches and decrease the variability of the coaching level in Finland.

Munnelly’s opinion on full-time coaches in Finland is that they tend to speak for too long periods in their coaching interventions. Moreover, Biarge thinks that the main point of improvement for the professional coaches in Finland is to give shorter messages; often the coaches want to share all their knowledge and end up talking for too long, making the children feel bored. Biarge thinks that professional Finnish coaches can also take away from the excitement of the children by sounding punitive; making the children feel bad by blaming the kids for not doing something in the way that the coach wanted. Munnelly adds:

*“No matter what the age, a lot of the interventions were around tactical concepts rather than about their body language, such as positivity after mistakes”. (Munnelly)*

Munnelly noticed that most of the coaching points in Finland were tactical; thus, he realized that coaches would always look at the session from the point of view of the collective:

*“It was always from a collective lens, rather than using the individual or smaller unit approach which is more common in the UK”. (Munnelly)*

Munnelly states that it is important to find the right balance between the three focus points of coaching: the individual, the unit and the collective approaches. Munnelly’s opinion is that too much of on one approach is a problem; however, as players get older the coach can start using more of a collective approach. Munnelly said that he never saw that a Finnish coach would look at the session and decide that they would focus on an individual, which is called *“pinning”*. Munnelly

wishes that in the future Finnish coaches would take the mindset of: *“let’s create a session and be an architect of the environment that an individual player needs”*. Munnelly feels that in the childhood and youth phases, coaches are not there to develop teams; they are there to develop players for the first team. Munnelly emphasizes that in the childhood phase, when the players are under 12, the coaching has to be more focused on the individual and the unit. He recalls that he has never seen a more organized Under 12-year-olds team in the world than in Finland, but that it is at the detriment of what they need at that age”. Munnelly states that if coaches want players to be good in 1v1 duels in six years’ time, but the youth teams always have had good shape and cover, then the individual children will not have so many duels to learn from. Thus, Munnelly says that

*“In the UK, coaches might sacrifice something, such as the balance of the team in the childhood and youth phases, for a later outcome”*. (Munnelly)

Munnelly’s point could be seen when Chelsea played in the HJK Cup, a huge, annual international tournament in Finland in the summer 2024. The Chelsea team did not have a consistent balance or shape, but the individual players were constantly put into situations where their individual skills were challenged, and they had to figure out the situations themselves.

Munnelly noticed that there were not a lot of coaching points on the social side or aspects from outside of the pitch, such as club values, nutrition, rest and other factors on what it takes to reach excellence. Munnelly feels that

*“The coach’s role is to make sure that coaches are really trying to shape a young person for excellence through coaching interventions and changing the players mentality, rather than only having the spotlight on the footballing side such as having the right supporting angles and body position on the field because the players might not be professional footballers but they are future members of our society”*. (Munnelly)

### **Training Structure & Content**

According to Paananen’s experience, training sessions in Finland should be more consistent in organizing and planning sessions where the children move a lot, are involved with the football most of the time and play a lot of games using goals. Paananen says that

*“There is huge variability in the level of how training sessions are organized and set up in Finland, some childhood training sessions are very well-organized and planned, and then there can be sessions where there is no clear plan or idea on what they are doing.” (Paananen)*

Unfortunately, it can be considered that this inconsistency of Finnish childhood football sessions that often lack the essential structural and coaching elements to be effective in engaging the children to be immersed in the game, is the reason that the average level of the Finnish players at the age of 12 is significantly behind other Nordic countries. Paananen acknowledges that there are too few top teams in Finland in a specific age group that can compete with teams from abroad, thus the problem is that the majority and mass of the Finnish childhood players are lagging behind in the age-specific development.

Tulehmo emphasizes the difficulty of evaluating exactly how important coaching behaviors are on affecting the children, because the role of the training content is also extremely important on what kind of holistic experience the child has in training. When evaluating whether coaching behaviors or training content is more important, Tulehmo states that

*“It is a systematic concept, in which the training content must support the coach’s possibility to also be immersed and passionate in the training; if the content is too complex in regards to the players’ ability, the coach cannot be fully immersed in the training because the coach is too focused on processing the training content and trying to make it suitable for the children.” (Tulehmo)*

Furthermore, Tulehmo says that he has seen several childhood football trainings in Finland where the training exercise content did not suit the age or level of the team, and thus even if the coaching behaviors might have been energetic and positive it was difficult to get energy out of the children. Moreover, Tulehmo emphasizes the skill of coaches to *“simplify complexity”*; as football is such a complex sport it is important to simplify it through training content in order for the children to be able to be more engaged. Suvala also expresses the difficulty to decide whether training content or coaching behavior is more important in exciting the children about football, as he says that

*“These two concepts (coaching content and behaviors) are intertwined because it is vital that the coach has the understanding and ability to use training contents in which the specific coach can be*

*energetic and passionate about. For example, if the players' ability is high enough for a more complex exercise, but the coach's understanding is not, then it becomes very difficult for the coach to be fully immersed in the session and behave in an enthusiastic way because the coach's energy goes more towards observing the training content." (Suvala)*

Furthermore, Suvala points out that in order to be enthusiastic and inspiring for the children, the coach must be able to understand and acknowledge their own strengths and abilities as a coach, because only then can they use the kind of training content that they feel comfortable in to direct their energy towards inspiring and exciting the children about football. Biarge views that when comparing the importance of coaching behaviors to the importance of the training structure and the content of the exercises, from the point of view of making the children more engaged about football, he feels that the importance of coaching behaviors amounts to 65% and the training structure is 35%. Thus, Biarge feels that the nonverbal and verbal communication from the coaches has a bigger effect on the children enjoying the training session than the organization and structure of the training. Biarge says that the reason for this is that

*"There is no perfect training structure, and the same training can work on one day and then not be as effective on another day; thus, it is dependent on the coach's ability to adapt to the players' moods and understand what motivates them". (Biarge)*

Paananen differentiates the ages in the childhood phase when answering the same question: 90% in favor of the importance of coaching behavior from five- to eight-year-olds, then gradually the importance of training content and organization rises to be around 40% at the age of 11, and then in the youth phase from ages 12-15 it is around 50-50. Paananen explains his reasoning for this to be that from the age of five to eight, the themes and content of the session should be so simple and easily understood for the coaches; it is more important to know how to engage the children, especially the younger they are. Moreover, Paananen emphasizes the importance of coaches maximizing the repetitions of the desired theme with the very young children and to not be too concerned if the coach does not know all the details of the topic; the game will teach the players it-self.

Paananen points out that he has often seen training sessions be organized relatively well with adequate coaching behaviors, but then the crucial element of the children having enough touches of the football missing from the training session. Another crucial element that Munnelly noticed was missing was the use of the goals; he calculated an average time of only 44% when there were goals involved in the training sessions. Munnelly commented on this aspect

*“What is the drive and intention of the game, which is also in the laws of the game: to score more goals than the opposition, so let’s practice that as much as possible”. (Munnelly)*

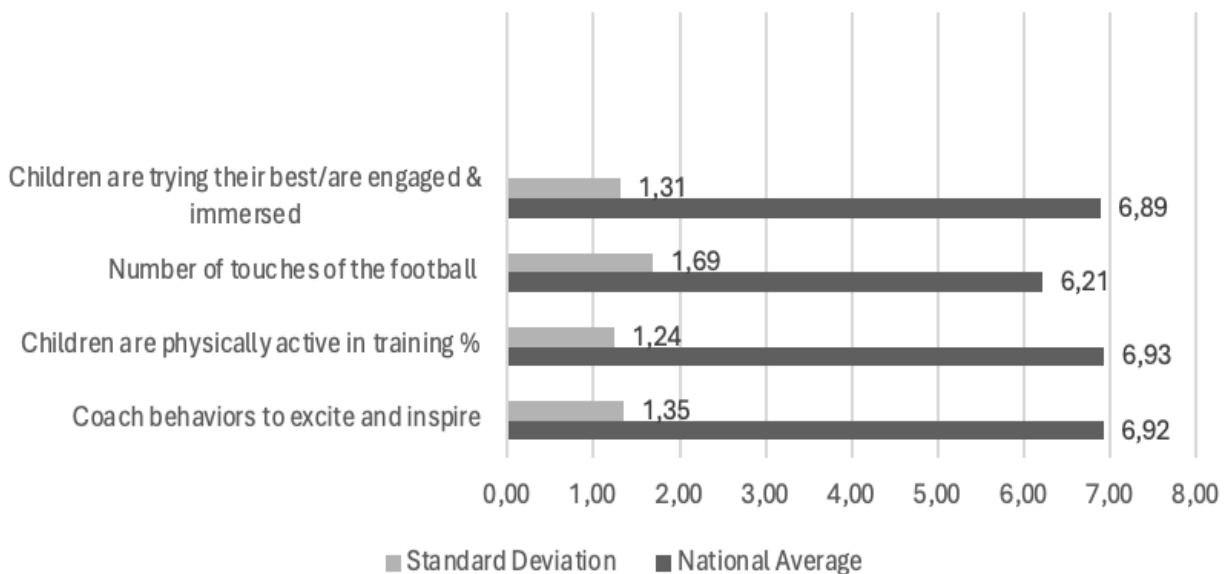
Furthermore, during Munnelly’s time in Finland, he would often ask players what the score was during a possession-based training exercise where there was a goal or objective mentioned, but 90% could not tell him the score. Munnelly then challenges the view that if there are no clear objectives or goals to be reached, then it becomes more difficult to understand what the players are motivated by. Thus, Munnelly states that Finnish coaches need to do a better job in setting the challenge and objective for the players in training. Paananen completely agrees, he feels that too often in Finland there are training sessions that completely lack an intention or set objective, and thus the intensity of the training session drops because the coach is also not entirely sure what he wants to achieve with the training. However, Munnelly believes that there needs to be parts in the training sessions that can be more free and even chaotic, so that players can express themselves and be more engaged in the game by solving problems out on the pitch.

Another factor that Munnelly also observed is that only 62% of the training time involved opposed practice, meaning that the training exercises included a defender or opposition players; in other words, some form of situation where players compete against each other. Lastly, Munnelly’s observed RPE, the rate of perceived exertion, never went above a 7 during his whole time in Finland; in other words, from a total of 200 observed training sessions. Munnelly never felt like he saw players reach the perceived exertion rate of over 7, which means that Munnelly observed that Finnish training sessions do not make players test their limits in terms of training loads and to try their absolute best. Munnelly mentioned that surely there were players in these observed training sessions that reported over 7’s in their own reported RPE; however, Munnelly feels that there is way more to be demanded from players in terms of training load that they have potentially not been exposed to but are capable of doing.

## 4.2 Finnish FA Observation Form Results

The first graph (figure 2) shows the national average in 2024 for all of the 2,500 Observation Forms that were submitted to the national database. On an average, Finnish childhood football training sessions still have a lot to improve in terms of all aspects. In terms of the coach's ability to be exciting, inspiring, and indulging to make the children be more engaged and immersed in the training sessions, as their result was 6,92/10 (Palloliitto, 2024). The value that stands out the most in this graph is the number of touches of the football being significantly lower than the others, which indicates that the training sessions do not facilitate the children to spend enough time on the ball in training. These national averages would not be adhering to the Finnish FA's new criteria that state the coaching behaviors value must be of a minimum of 8/10, and the children need to be active in the training session for 80% of the time.

2024 National Average in Finland & Standard Deviation

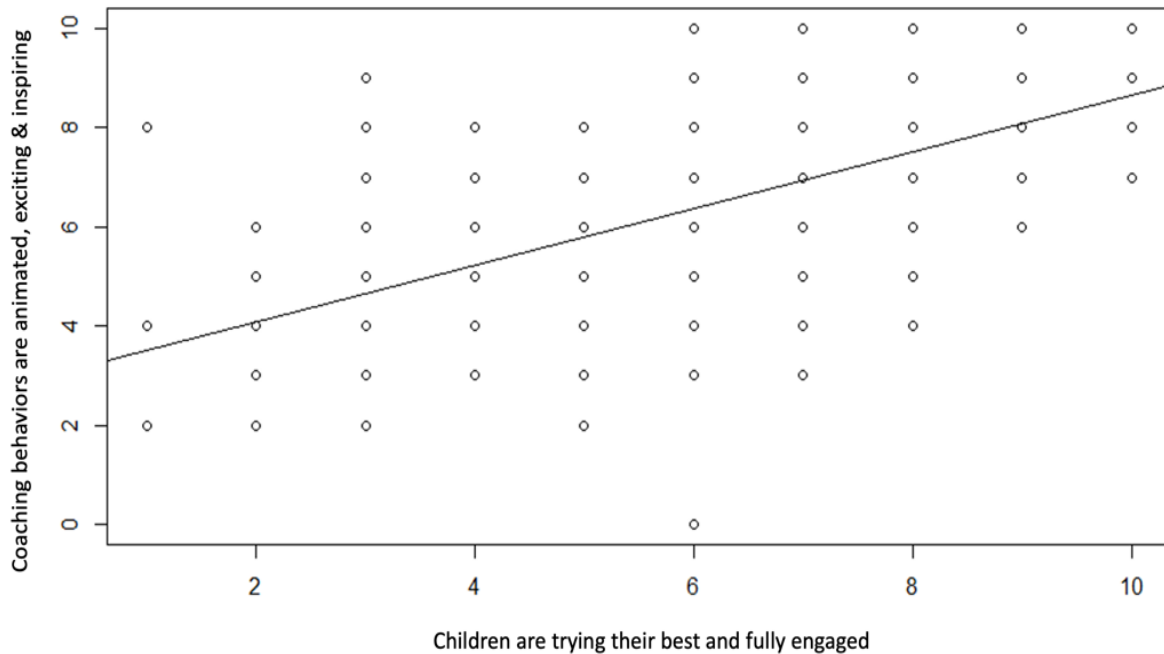


**Figure 2.** National average in Finland and standard deviation.

### Coaching Behaviors

The following graph (figure 3) shows how coaching behaviors affect the children's behavior in the training session, specifically on how immersed they are in the sport and how hard they try; the more animated the coach, the more children's engagement in the activity. The data shows that

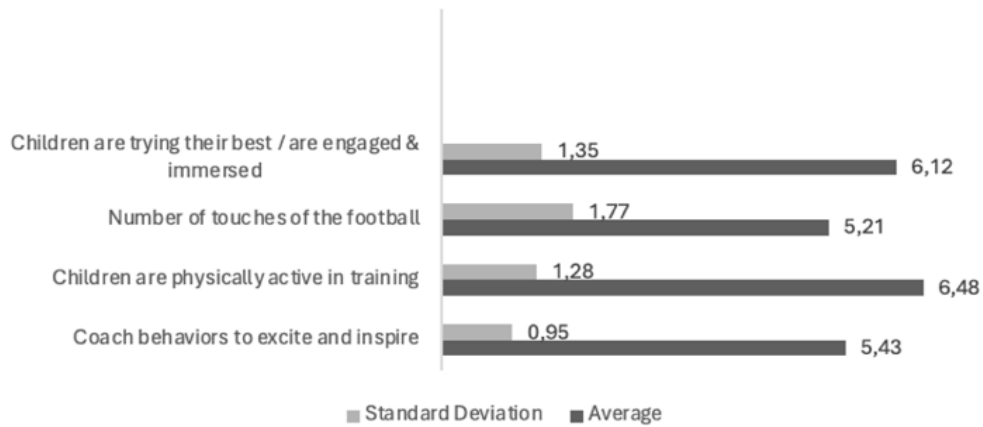
the correlation between these two variables was statistically very significant at 54%. Therefore, as the coaching behaviors are more animated and exciting, the children tend to try their best more and be more engaged in the training sessions. This data is significant in showing how important part coaching behaviors are in the service for engaging the children in the sport more fully.



**Figure 3.** Effect of coach behaviors on children trying their best.

The next graph (figure 4) shows how coach behaviors affect activity levels in training sessions as well as how engaged the children are in the activity. A coach who is above average in the ability to use coaching behaviors that are exciting and inspiring, does a much better job in engaging the players to be immersed in the game more, try harder, spend more time with the football at their feet, and physically be more active in the training sessions.

On average less exciting/inspiring/engaging coach 2024



On average more exciting/inspiring/engaging coach 2024

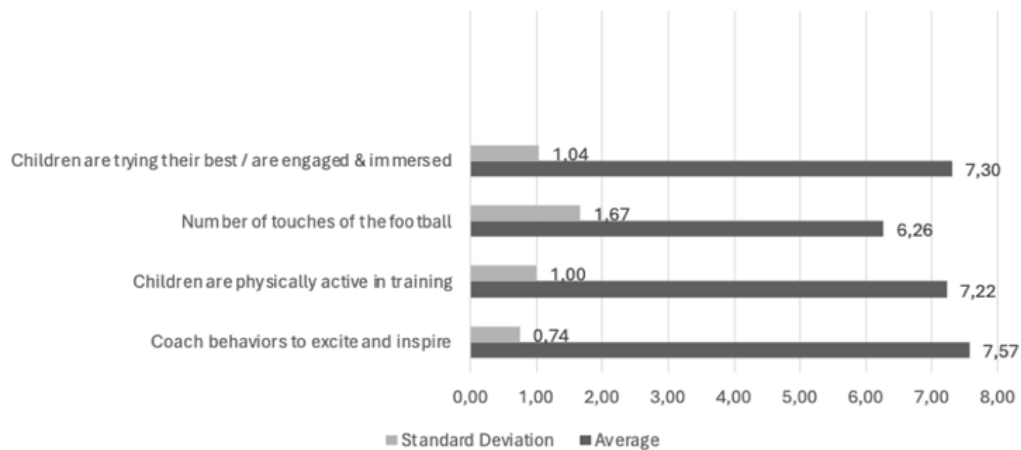
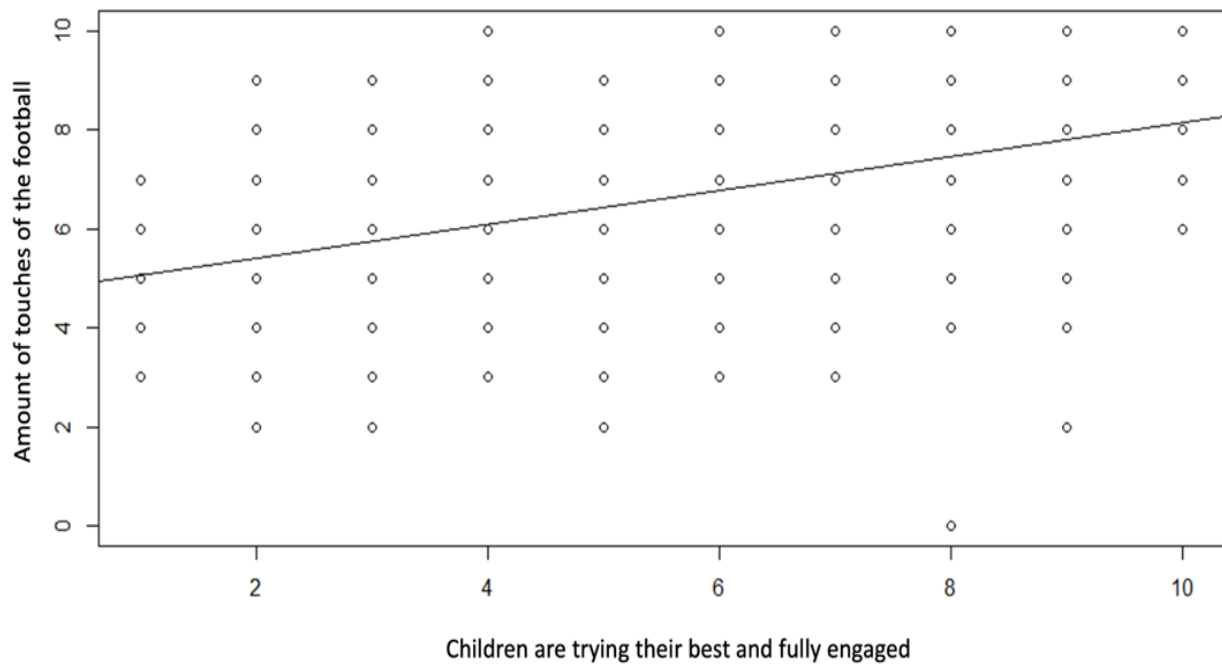


Figure 4. Comparing above and below average coaching behaviors

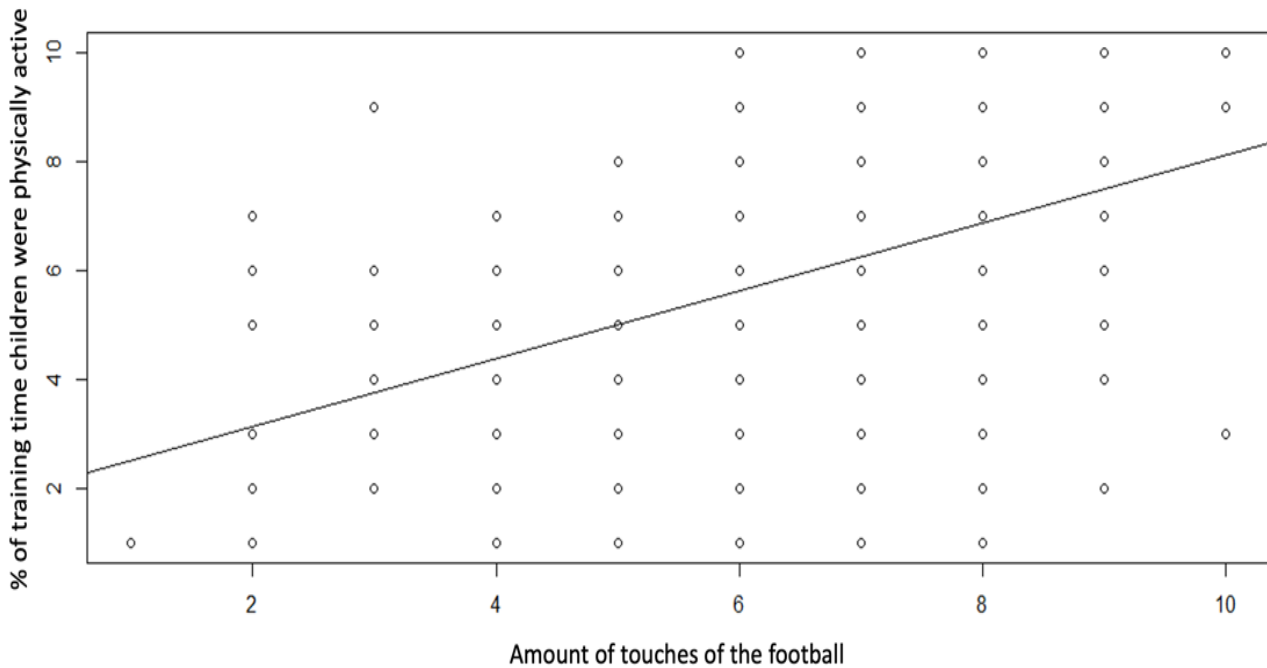
**Touches of the Football**

The following graph (figure 5) shows how the amount of football touches that the children have during a training session affects the children’s engagement in the activity and how immersed they are in the sport and how hard they try. The data shows that there is a correlation between these two variables was a statistically significant 43%. Thus, the more touches of the football the children have, the more the children will try their best and are more fully engaged in the training session.



**Figure 5.** Effect of the amount of football touches to how are the children try.

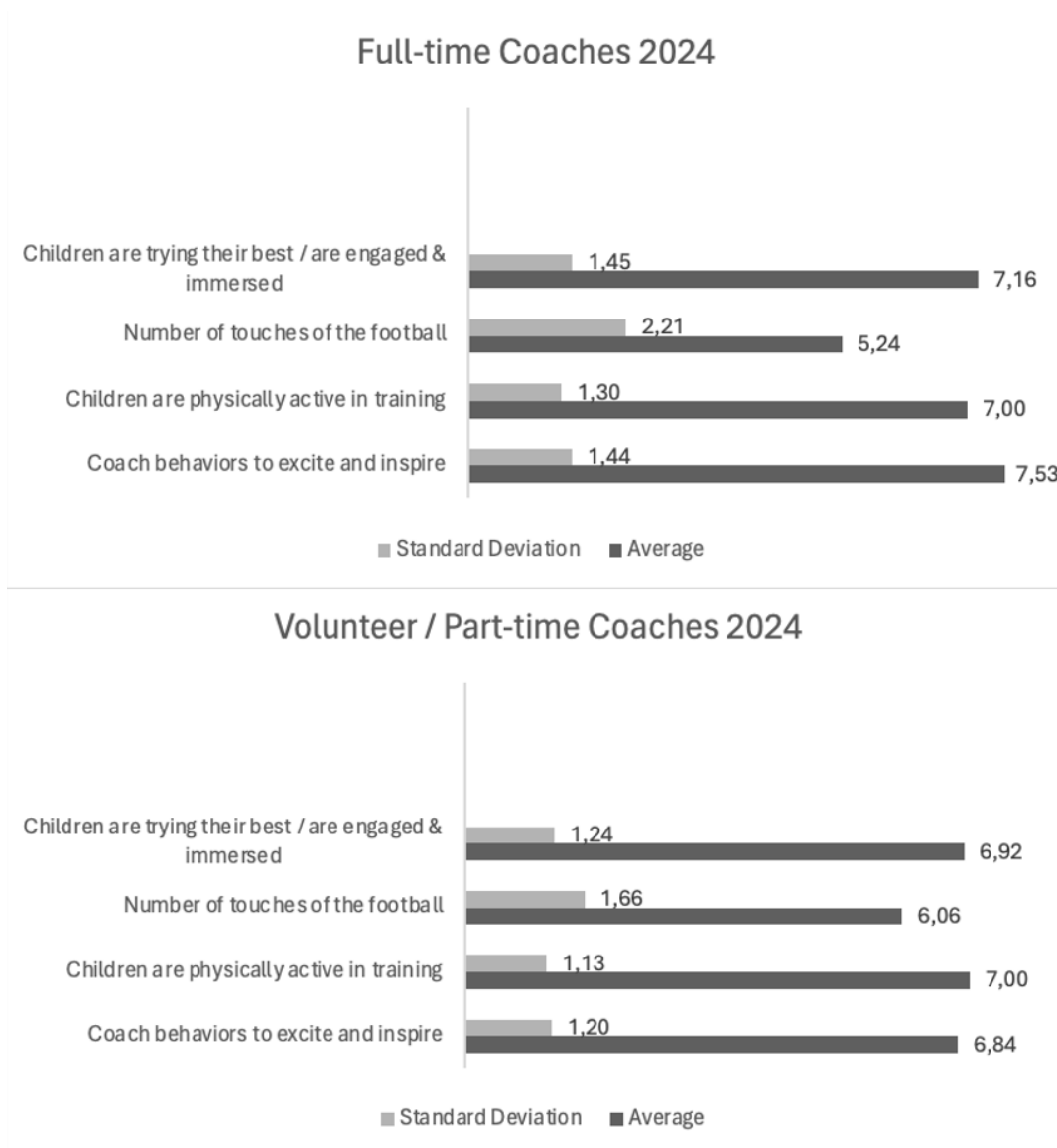
The following graph (figure 6) shows how the amount of touches the children have of the football in training affects the activity levels in training. The correlation between these two variables was a statistically significant 42%. In other words, the more touches the children have of the football, the bigger percentage of the time the children tend active. In summary, the data shows what a positive effect it has on the activity level and the effort level of the children if the children are more involved with the football.



**Figure 6.** Effect of the amount of football touches on activity level.

### Volunteers vs. Full-time Coaches

The following two graphs (figure 7) compare the training sessions of full-time coaches with the trainings of volunteer or part-time coaches in Finland. Despite the results all still being relatively low on average with values significantly under eight in all categories, a positive result in this comparison is that the volunteer coaches were able to make the children just as active as the full-time coaches did. An alarming result from these graphs shows that the children touched less of the football in a training session led by a full-time coach, compared to a training session led by a volunteer or part-time coach. Thus, it can be concluded that compared to full-time coaches, volunteer coaches are able to get the children moving and active and touching the ball relatively well. However, the differences in favor for full-time coaches are seen in the ability of the coaches to excite and inspire the children to immerse themselves in the game and fully engage in the training session. The full-time coaches are more advanced in using verbal and non-verbal coach behaviors to engage the children with the sport compared to the volunteer and part-time coaches.



**Figure 7.** Volunteers vs. Full-time coaches.

## 5 Conclusions and Discussion

As it was stated in the beginning, Finland is significantly behind the other Nordic countries in the youth and adult phases of football, with the main argument being the need for the service quality of football training sessions to be improved in the childhood phase. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis was to examine the quality of childhood football trainings as a service that Finnish football clubs offer. This helps to understand how the service can be enhanced to develop better players and to keep more participants in the sport in the future. This chapter is a conclusion to the thesis summarizing the key findings and study results, suggesting development ideas for Finnish football

clubs, reflecting the research ethics, validity, and limitations of the study, and finally, presenting further study suggestions.

## 5.1 Summary of the Main Results

The main results from the study are revised in this section. As established from the theory of service development, a service is best improved by considering the customer experience through the lens of the customer, which in this case is the child, not the paying customers which are usually the parents. In doing so, it became evident that children having fun is the top priority to strive for when offering children's sports as a service. Finding out how children determine fun in sports became vital for this study. Various theories complied with the identified determiners of fun for children in youth sports. This study aimed to examine the following research questions:

**RQ1:** Which aspects of service quality in childhood football could be improved by football clubs in Finland to keep more participants in the sport?

**RQ2:** What are the factors of childhood football training sessions that need to be improved to enhance player development in Finland?

To answer the first research question, there were several findings that referred to structural aspects that need to be improved by football clubs to enhance their childhood football as a service. Firstly, when considering fun determiners of childhood football that concern the service quality offered by the football clubs, key aspects were positive coaching and positive team dynamics. The quality of these two integral parts of the service must be improved and ensured by football clubs. As mentioned in the study, Finnish football clubs rely heavily on the contribution of volunteers to take care of the coaching; there are not a lot of full-time coaches in Finnish football, especially in childhood football. The coaches and the coaching are fundamental for childhood football to be successful as a service. Firstly, in terms of numbers there needs to be enough coaches in the training session, meaning that acquiring as many volunteers and full-time coaches as possible is important. Trying to reach a 1:8 coach to child ratio is ideal for childhood football; it enables the coach to have better group control and to give individual feedback for players.

For childhood football as a service to improve in Finland, the coaches in football clubs should continuously expand their knowledge and improve their abilities. It is the football club's responsibility

to educate and mentor the coaches that are available for each childhood age group to be better. In doing so, the vital aspect is for the people responsible for educating and mentoring in the football clubs to understand what the verbal and non-verbal coaching behaviors are that the coaches should be operating with daily. Coaching behaviors and other fundamental coaching skills must be taught to the coaches by offering formal and informal coaching education. The formal Finnish FA's FVS and IKV coaching courses are centered around teaching these coaching behaviors for the childhood phases age groups. Furthermore, informal coaching courses or workshops can go even more in-depth into these coaching behaviors to strengthen the coach's learning experience. Perhaps most importantly, frequent mentorship of coaches is imperative in their continuous improvement and support. An effective tool to give feedback to the coaches is by using Finnish FA's Observation Forms, which evaluate the training session considering key factors. After training sessions, going through the results of the evaluation presents the opportunity for vital mentorship for the coach from the person of the club who is evaluating the training session. The training sessions should be evaluated frequently enough using the Finnish FA Observation Forms, this will ensure the quality of the training sessions and reveal if some of the key factors of effective childhood football training sessions are missing or need to be improved. These key factors and findings will be revised in the following paragraphs.

The first part of the Observation Form relates to the coaching behaviors, which Tulehmo stated as the number one priority for a coach and the service of childhood football. From the perspective of the child, having a positive coach who respects the players was one of the top three determiners of fun in youth sports. On average in 2024, the Finnish childhood coach was evaluated as only 6.9/10 on the ability as a coach to excite, inspire and engage children with the sport. Coaching behaviors, both verbal and non-verbal, are essential to create an energetic, exciting, and safe environment for the children to be free to express themselves in the activity. The importance of coaching behaviors is shown with the positive correlation that shows how enthusiastic and inspiring coaching behaviors affect the overall activeness and engagement of the children in the sport. Being animated in the training session, getting down to the level of the children, truly interacting with them is important in engaging the children with the sport. Giving an individual player specific and personalized feedback has shown to increase their engagement in the sport; as Munnelly proposed "pinning" a specific player for a while, to make sure the child gets enough individual attention is a good way to do so.

The second part of the Observation Form evaluates the amount of time the children are physically active during the training session. The children should be moving for at least 80% of the training time, from the second they walk on the training pitch to when they walk off the pitch. On average in 2024, the children were active for only 69% of the training time, which amounts to 52 minutes of a 75-minute training session. 80% amounts to 60 minutes of a 75-minute training session; typically children's training sessions range from 60-90 minutes. Through the eyes of the child, the main determiner of fun for children was to try their best and work hard in the training sessions. The low percentage can be linked to Munnelly's key findings that showed that during his 6-month stay in Finland, he did not see any training sessions in Finland to be above the perceived training load RPE of 7; this suggests that the children are not being put under a demanding enough environment in training in terms of being physically active. Reasons for the children not being active enough in training were mainly found to be related to the lack of organization and planning. Long water breaks and slow transitions from one exercise to another reduce the active time and give the chance for children to switch off while the coach is preparing the next exercise. When children have to wait in line for their turn for too long is another common mistake that limits the active time of the children; this is also a consequence of poor planning and organizing.

The third part of the Observation Form evaluates the number of times the children touch the football during the training session. The children should ideally touch the ball 1000 times during one training session. On average in 2024, Finnish football training sessions provided 6.21 (621) touches of the football per player. This low value can be linked and explained by Munnelly's observations that show the ball rolling time of training sessions was at an average of 46%; furthermore, Paananen's observation that too often training sessions lack the amount of football touches. Data in this study showed how incorporating the ball more in training sessions made the children both more active and also more engaged and immersed in the game. Thus, it can be argued that the ball engages the children with the sport and makes them move more. Through the lens of the children, a top determiner of fun in youth sports, especially for competitive players, was to learn and master new skills. This is why Munnelly reminds that while childhood football sessions should maximize the amount of touches of the football per child, in order to learn and master new skills, the touches of the ball should be done in an intentional way and related to the needs of the game. The low amount of average touches of the football can be answered by Munnelly's key finding that 1/3 of the training session time is used for warm-ups, mostly done without the ball. In addition to long warm-ups without the ball, using extensive amounts of training time on playing larger

games with one ball and several players on the field, waiting in line for too long, not including technical/dribbling exercises into the training plan, and having several exercises for motor skills that do not include the ball are some of the common reasons for the children not touching the football enough in childhood football sessions.

The fourth part of the Observation form evaluates how well the children are engaged and immersed in the game; this can be subjectively evaluated by observing how active the children are with and without the ball, how hard they are trying, and how they brave they are in the exercises of the training session. On average in 2024, the children were engaged and tried their best in training sessions at a level of 6.89/10. This low value can also be linked and explained by Munnelly's key observation that the coaches used the actual goals in the training sessions at an average of only 44% of the training time. Scoring goals and playing games that involve goals has shown to engage the children more to try harder. Furthermore, the low engagement level can also be explained by Munnelly's observation that the average Finnish training sessions only use opposed training approximately 62% of the training time. The less opposed training exercises there are means less competing, which in turn can result in lower rates of engagement and trying hard. Furthermore, as mentioned in previous paragraphs, this study showed a positive correlation between coaching behaviors and the engagement of children in training sessions, as well as the previously mentioned football touches on the children's engagement level.

In summary, the Finnish FA's Observation Form provided important insights to the current state of Finnish childhood football. These insights were then complemented by the interviews, where experts of childhood football confirmed and explain these points further and elaborated on other issues related to childhood football as a service in Finland.

## **5.2 Development Suggestions for Finnish Football Clubs**

Concrete suggestions for service development in Finnish childhood football can be created using 1) the theory presented in this study that gives insight of the elements that children have expressed as fun in organized sports 2) the expertise of childhood coaching as a service from the qualitative data, 3) quantitative data that proves what correlates with children trying harder, moving more, and being more engaged with the sport. The following figure provides concrete development

suggestions for Finnish football clubs to provide childhood football as a service more holistically and with higher quality in the future.



**Figure 8.** Childhood football training session framework.

When going through these service development recommendations, first of all having enthusiastic and positive coaches that respect players ensures the psychological safety of the children and is one of the main determiners of fun for children in youth sports. The football club must place efforts in recruiting enough volunteers & hiring enough full-time coaches into the service to form coach to player ratios of 1:8 in training, which facilitates the possibility for individualized attention and feedback. If there are too many children in the training session compared to the amount of coaches, specific and individual verbal feedback is more difficult to give. This verbal feedback

should consider the change of tone in voice and giving a good balance of praise, teaching and challenging to enhance the child's learning process. Non-verbal coaching behaviors, such as body language, getting down to the children's level, and facial expressions should all be in line with the verbal communication and can reinforce what is being said.

For the children, trying their best and working hard was the most important determiner in having fun in organized sports. To ensure that the children work hard, it is vital that they are physically active for 80% of the training time. This can be done by quick transitions between exercises, quick water breaks, short lines in exercises, and short coach interventions. Opposed practice such as exercises where children are put into 1v1-3v3 situations with similar level players will pose realistic challenges and create a demanding environment where children can feel hard-earned feelings of success. Including objectives and physical goals into the exercises where there is a chance to score points is important in adding the element of competing into the training session. The process of competing adds to the children's feeling of working hard and trying their best; however, it is important for the coach and adults to not overemphasize the final reward of winning or trophies. Running short distances with changes of direction at full speed in every training session is important from a developmental point of view, while also providing the children the sensation of trying their best and working hard.

Learning new skills and mastering them is also a main determiner of fun for children in organized sports. Coaches should aim for the training plan to have every child touch the football 1000 times. These football touches are ideally intentional and related to the needs of the game. This number of football touches can be achieved by game-based exercises that also develop perception on the field, or closed drills that emphasize the learning of technical skills more, such as dribbling. The training sessions in childhood sports should also have exercises that focus on developing the fundamental motor skills of the children such as: jumping, turning, running, mobility in various directions.

Lastly, positive team dynamics is also one of the main determiners of fun for children in organized sports. This includes ways in which the training session can facilitate a time and place for the children to spend time with friends before and after training. For example, having the children come to training 15 minutes before the training session in a locker room where they can freely talk with

friends is important. Adding the common practice of saying hello and bye to coaches and teammates before and after practice is a good way to promote social aspects. This 15-minute time before training is also an excellent opportunity for coaches to promote important social aspects to children. Introducing and teaching important values in life, good sportsmanship, ways to be good teammates and rules to adhere to all enable a safer environment where there is no bullying. Furthermore, positive team dynamics can be achieved by the football clubs structures of inclusion, that let all children of all levels participate and be a part of the team.

An essential aspect of all of these development suggestions is the key that these are taught to coaches through formal education for coaches to learn football-specific content, informal education for coaches to learn about coaching behaviors, on-going mentoring for coaches to improve in their coach's coach behaviors and training content which can be done by frequently using the Observation Forms as a tool to evaluate the coach's training to ensure quality.

### **5.3 Validity and Ethics of the Study**

Several steps were taken to ensure the validity of the study. When analyzing quantitative research, the relationships between numerically compared variables were done using a range of statistical and graphical techniques (Saunders et al., 2019). The secondary quantitative data always show the standard deviation of the findings as well as the percentage of correlation. Survey data from large organizations such as the Finnish FA are likely to be reliable and trustworthy. For all secondary data however, a detailed assessment of the validity and reliability will involve you in an assessment of the method or methods used to collect the data (Saunders et al., 2019). To be critical with the data method collection, any individual is able to gain access to the internet survey to fill in an Observation Form for any football club in Finland. There was no code or password to access the form. Thus, the possibility of a person filling in false Observation Form data for whatever reason for any football club is a possibility that needs to be mentioned for ethical consideration of this research. However, as mentioned in the study, the criteria for certain parts of the Observation Form that were set by the Finnish FA in turn for funding, were only launched in 2025; thus, the qualitative observations submitted as results from 2022-2024 had no bias from a financial support perspective which would have motivated clubs to falsely report their results in the Observation Form as better than they were. The research data was done with the process of verifying the research data, analysis and interpretation to confirm the validity, credibility and authenticity of the

data (Saunders et al., 2019). The qualitative data was validated with member validation, where the research data was sent back to the participants to make sure of accuracy, comment of possible words or phrases they would like to change to validate it (Saunders et al., 2019). The observer bias of the research must be acknowledged and considered due to the closeness of the researcher to the situation, as the researcher has previously worked in a role of a coach educator for the Finnish FA.

In the context of research, ethics are the standards of behavior that guarantee a suitable way of conducting research that takes other parties' rights into account (Saunders et al., 2019). Adhering to certain ethical principles is essential throughout the entire research process (Saunders et al., 2019). Firstly, when acquiring experts in the field to be a part of this study, they were asked with the utmost respect and without any sense of pressure to participate. This thesis took into consideration the privacy of the interviewees by informed consent being obtained respectfully and giving them a possibility to confidentiality. When analyzing the data, this study considered integrity by promoting accuracy (Saunders et al., 2019). Secondly, the nature of the interviews allowed flexibility in terms of data collection, by creating an atmosphere that they are not pressured to provide any answers that they do not feel comfortable in doing so (Saunders et al., 2019). The findings are reported with full accuracy, and interpretations of the interview have been checked and approved carefully. Corrections were made to the data if the interviewee requested something to be changed or specified. The experts that were interviewed in the study agreed to their background information to be used in the study to provide more credibility in the data collection process. Each stage of the research was considered from an ethical perspective, also acquiring secondary data for the quantitative research of this study. The data-analyst of the Finnish Football FA granted access to use all of the data from their larger study. When using the results of this large, nation-wide data, no club names were used to provide clubs with their right to confidentiality. The secondary data used in this study was also approved by the data-analyst to make sure that all information has been presented in an accurate way.

#### **5.4 Suggestions for Further Research**

This study addressed the research gap of childhood football in Finland in terms of the development of players and keeping more participants in the sport. Despite providing an extensive insight into the fundamental factors that need to be improved in the training sessions of childhood

football in Finland, there are several other factors that could be researched in the future. The length of the training session in childhood football and its effect on children's enjoyment and engagement level should be researched through the eyes of the child; how long should childhood football sessions last? Typically training sessions range from 60 to 90 minutes; however, it would be useful for football clubs to know what the optimal total training time is in each specific age group and how that time should ideally be separated into various exercises. Furthermore, the study only referred to Munnely's observation that Finnish training sessions used goals for less than half of the time; this phenomenon could be searched with quantifiable data; how does the use of goals in childhood football training sessions affect their engagement with the sport?

Considering the development of individual players and producing elite players for the future has not yet been examined in terms of how the players should be divided into groups or teams according to their competence. This study established that there is not enough evidence to show that to produce elite-level players that the children must be separated into locked teams according to their performance before the age of 12. However, this study also established that it is important that the children must try their best and work hard in training sessions; thus, by placing children into groups according to their current level is one way to set realistic challenges with similar level players while having enough amounts of success. However, this question paves the way for further discussion about what the best way is to separate children into groups within the same training session. Children can be negatively affected by being put into a lower-level group and quickly feel low self-confidence and this could eventually lead to dropout from the sport. The pros and cons, and suggestions on how to and when to separate children into groups should be studied more. This could help Finnish football clubs have a better understanding of the risks and benefits of separating children of the same age group within the same club into teams for matches and tournaments and forming groups in training sessions.

Despite this study comparing youth player and team results, and adult player market values of other Nordic countries to Finland, this was not a comparative study on the childhood phase of football in each country. The comparison was made merely to show how Finnish football is behind other Nordic countries after the childhood phase. Thus, this could be a research topic for the future, to better understand if other Nordic countries do something significantly differently in the childhood phase of football.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Interview Guide

Q1	How many football training sessions have you observed in Finland in the last two years?
Q2 a)	What is more important in childhood football sessions to engage children in the sport: verbal communication or non-verbal coaching behaviors?
Q2 b)	Verbal communication vs. Non-verbal coaching behaviors: What percentage would you give to each when comparing their importance in engaging the children in a football session?
Q3 a)	What is more important in childhood football sessions to engage children in the sport: the training content and structure of the session or the coaching behaviors (non-verbal & verbal communication)?
Q3 b)	Training content and structure vs. Coaching behaviors: What percentage would you give to each when comparing their importance in engaging the children in a football session?
Q4	How would you compare childhood football sessions in Finland with other countries that you have observed training sessions in?
Q5	Is childhood football coaching more focused on the collective or individual player in Finland?
Q6	What are the biggest challenges or areas of improvement in childhood football training sessions in Finland?