December 2025

MINDFIT Project:
Giving light to the taboo issue of Mental Health in youth sports

MINDFIT is a new project funded by the CERV programme (Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values), running for 24 months from May 2025 to April 2027. Titled '***Empowering Minds: Enhancing Children's Mental Fitness'***, the project aims to address the unique challenges faced by children and in particular young athletes, in this critical area. Its goal is to provide recommendations for policies that safeguard the mental health and resilience of children, protecting and promoting their rights.

Why is this project important?

This project is driven by a deep understanding of the significance of mental health in the holistic development of children athletes and the recognition of the necessity for early interventions to nurture mental fitness from a young age. The project recognizes that the challenges faced by young athletes are distinct and multifaceted. These challenges can include the pressure to perform at a high level, manage academic commitments, and cope with high expectations, all while navigating the unique stressors of a competitive sports environment. A major part of this project is the exchange of good practices on mental health to support young athletes. Within this project, we will consult experts such as trainers and psychologists, and we will try to form a strong network to support these young athletes and their support systems (parents and guardians).

Both the young athletes and their support systems will be trained through a series of sessions and training materials. This project is valuable because its activities will "give light" on the taboo issue of kids in sports and their mental health. For many years, this was an issue not very well recognized. As a result, many kid-athletes were suffering due to the pressure to succeed, to become better, to win, and to balance their sports activity with everyday life. This was and still is a big challenge for them.

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MINDFIT

MINDFIT is coming to give light, to increase awareness, and to speak about these issues through a series of podcasts and other communication activities.

The MINDFIT project will develop an **interactive mobile application** that helps young athletes, aged 8 to 18, practice mental fitness techniques and track their well-being through gamified exercises. Alongside this digital tool, the project will release **specialized educational materials and psychosocial screening protocols** to assist coaches, educators, and families in identifying and supporting children's mental health needs. Additionally, the initiative will launch the **"MINDFIT Talks" podcast series** to engage the wider community and publish policy recommendations and local action plans to guide public authorities in establishing supportive sports environments.

A strong partnership demands strong leaders. The project involves strong leaders in their fields who are going to play a huge role in promoting, implementing, and raising awareness on these issues:

1. ***CYENS Centre of Excellence (Cyprus)*** is the project coordinator, providing expert psychological knowledge and support for the training material.
2. ***GDA Sports (Cyprus)*** is working directly with kids and young athletes, and is very sensitive to mental health issues.
3. ***INQUIRIUM (Cyprus)*** is a research organisation active in the sports and education sector.
4. ***Symplexis (Greece)*** is an NGO dedicated to promoting social cohesion, social rights, and equal opportunities for all, while actively supporting children and youth development.
5. ***University of Thessaly (Greece)*** is providing the project with necessary academic knowledge and research on sports and mental health.
6. ***CESIE ETS (Italy***) is an NGO that promotes educational innovation, human rights, and inclusion.
7. The ***Regional Government of Thessaly (RoT)*** is a public authority participating, interested in giving equal access to knowledge for all children.

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CYENS CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE · GDA SPORTS 2021 · inQUIRIUM · symplexis · UNIVERSITY OF THESSALY · cesie the world is only one creature · ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΗ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΑΤΙΑ ΠΕΡΙΦΕΡΕΙΑ ΘΕΣΣΑΛΙΑΣ

MINDFIT

Current activities: listening to the community

Our journey began on the 22 of July 2025, when all partners gathered in Nicosia, Cyprus, for our first meeting hosted by the project coordinator, CYENS. Since then, we have moved straight into the most critical phase: listening. We believe that to build the right tools, we first need to hear directly from the people who need them. Currently, all partners are organising focus groups with young athletes aged 8-18 and their parents or guardians.

In **Cyprus,** the sessions were led by INQUIRIUM, CYENS, and GDA Sports. They sat down with 104 participants in total, 64 young athletes (from football and gymnastics) and 40 parents. The discussions were eye-opening. They revealed that while young athletes have a good intuitive understanding of what 'mental fitness' means, their actual well-being is heavily influenced by the environment around them, specifically coaching styles and parental behavior on the sidelines. The call to action from these groups was loud and clear: they need practical support, not just theory. Both parents and athletes specifically asked for digital tools, like interactive apps and short videos, to help them navigate emotional regulation and handle the fear of failure.

In **Palermo, Italy**, our partner CESIE ETS took a creative approach with 30 participants (13 children and 17 adults). Using interactive activities like a 'Traffic light' system to map stress and 'Islands of well-being' to explore emotions, they managed to break through the silence. These sessions highlighted a significant gap: there is a huge need for tools to talk about emotions in environments where mental health is still often seen as a private or taboo subject. The results were encouraging. Adults appreciated learning new strategies to regulate their own stress, while the children showed high levels of engagement and awareness through play.

In **Greece,** the University of Thessaly, with Symplexis assistance, organized one focus group with 11 adult stakeholders—mainly parents and coaches—and four focus groups with 21 children in total, young athletes involved in basketball and volleyball. The sessions explored children's and young athletes' experiences with mental well-being in sports, as well as the perspectives of key supporters. Children expressed a strong love for their sport, enjoying teamwork and skill development, but also reported feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and self-doubt, especially before games or when making mistakes themselves. Adults highlighted pressures from school, social interactions, and competitive sports, emphasizing the need for balanced expectations, empathy, and emotional support.

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Across age groups, both children and adults recognized the importance of stable, supportive relationships, open communication, and practical strategies to manage emotions. While some participants were hesitant about digital tools, others suggested interactive apps, mood trackers, or short educational and empowering videos to help young athletes cope with stress, failure, and peer pressure. The findings underline the importance of accessible, engaging, and practical resources tailored to children's and adolescents' needs, laying a foundation for developing educational materials and tools in the MINDFIT project.

We also took our mission to the public stage in October. Inquirium and GDA Sports participated in the Information & Networking Day for the CERV programme. Organised in Limassol by the Organisation for European Programmes & Cultural Relations (OEPCR) in collaboration with Lemesos 2030, the event gave us a platform to present MINDFIT and our commitment to enhancing the resilience and well-being of children in sports.

For more information, please visit: https://mind-fit.co/

Find us on social media: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn

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