

## The boy behind the bravado

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The Boy Behind The Bravado: Player Advanced Safety and Support in a Professional  
Football Academy Setting

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### Abstract

In elite youth sport, the demands of high sporting performance, and the unpredictable and multifaceted changes during adolescence can significantly impact young athletes' well-being. The City Player Advanced Safety and Support (City PASS) framework incorporates team psychological formulation to identify concerns about players (well-being, behavioural and performance) and shares key information to develop a collective understanding of these concerns. This new knowledge is then used to develop action plans to manage these concerns. A common thread that emerged from City PASS panel reviews during the first six months concerned adolescent players displaying challenging behaviours. These challenging player behaviours were often considered to be fronts of "bravado" that obscured the true underlying issues faced by the young person. Consequently, an intervention around equipping staff to recognise and manage the "Boy Behind the Bravado" or the boy before the elite performer through improved perspective-taking was introduced to illustrate how insights gained from City PASS can be used to enhance player safety and support within a professional football academy setting.

*Keywords:* soccer, psychological formulation, adolescence, talent development, well-being.

### The Boy Behind The Bravado: Player Advanced Safety and Support in a Professional Football Academy Setting

Participation in professional football academy programmes not only coincides with the formative years of a player's football development, but also occurs during the transitional period of adolescence where young players experience significant biological, cognitive and psychosocial change. For instance, adolescence is a period characterised by physical growth spurts (e.g., Philippaerts et al., 2005), and when higher inclinations for reward-seeking coincide with developing capacities for self-control (Steinberg, 2010). Adolescence, therefore, can be an exciting time for young players to develop into better players, to learn to make independent decisions, and to forge their own unique identities. However, if not managed effectively, the complex combination of high performance expectations and developmental changes can contribute towards the emergence of psychological problems – often expressed through displays of challenging behaviour across multiple contexts (Carr, 2006; Hill, McNamara, & Collins, 2015; Hill, McNamara, Collins, & Rodgers, 2016).

For boys in particular, the psychosocial pressure for them to conform to masculine norms, during a time when they are just learning to understand and manage increasingly complex emotions, can lead to confusion about their self-identity and consequently fluctuations in their behaviour (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Kindlon & Thompson, 1999; Oransky & Marecek, 2009; Pollack, 1998). Projections of bravado are references to traditional masculine norms exemplified by self-containment, toughness and separation as demonstrations of strength, which consequently suppress and/or conceal the healthy expression of vulnerability (Pollack, 1998). Challenging behaviour (e.g., aggression, or engaging in risky behaviours) exhibited by adolescent players in the professional football academy environment, therefore, might be interpreted as external projections of bravado employed to mask the true underlying concerns that these players are faced with (e.g., having

an inferiority complex, fear of not meeting others' expectations). Further, the professional football academy setting may actually exacerbate the display of challenging behaviours since high performance expectations can lead to greater efforts towards impression management (Leary, 1992). Thus, in order for young players to thrive in the professional football academy setting, it is essential that proactive measures are in place to effectively detect and manage concerns about players and challenging behaviours. To this end, we introduce City Player Advanced Safety and Support (City PASS), which is a framework that facilitates more coordinated efforts towards identifying and making sense of concerns about players or challenging behaviours, and developing effective action plans to manage these concerns or challenging behaviours. We also describe a case study intervention titled "The Boy Behind the Bravado" to illustrate how we have taken advantage of the insights gained from City PASS to more effectively support and safeguard adolescent players' mental well-being.

### **Coordinating player safety and support expertise through City PASS**

The availability of effective support mechanisms for elite young players in professional football academies is crucial when working with players faced with complex and challenging issues (Richardson, Gilbourne, & Littlewood, 2004). Historically, player safety and support roles in some professional football academies have been ad-hoc (Nesti, 2010) or merged (e.g., one member of staff as Head of Education and Welfare; Richardson et al., 2004). There also seemed to be a lack of emphasis on players' psychological development in professional football academies, relative to performance aspects such as technical and physical development (Cook, Crust, Littlewood, Nesti, & Allen-Collinson, 2014). However, when coaches from various football academies did communicate with players about their psychological development, they generally focused on more performance-related aspects such as mental toughness, and less so on mental well-being (Mills, Butt, Maynard, & Harwood, 2014). These observations, although not consistently observed across all

professional academies, point towards the need for improved support mechanisms in professional football academies. Fortunately, The Premier League's Elite Player Performance Plan (2011) has recommended the creation of more specialised roles in the areas of welfare, education, safeguarding and psychology, which has in turn encouraged contemporary professional football academies to place greater emphasis on player mental well-being. However, in order to effectively utilise this wide array of player safety and support expertise to support adolescent players facing challenging concerns, a deliberate and coordinated approach towards player safety and support is necessary. Consequently, the City PASS framework (Figure 1) was developed.

### **Detecting player concerns**

The first phase of the City PASS framework involves a mechanism for staff to raise concerns about players. These concerns can emerge from a variety of contexts such as football performance (e.g., dips in performance, injuries), school (e.g., adjusting to changes in school environment, poor relationships with pupils or school staff), family (e.g., responses to parents getting divorced, family bereavement), or other general welfare or safety issues (e.g., homesickness, eating concerns). Typically, the information specific to the concerns raised would include who was involved, when and how frequently the concern was observed, and what has been tried to address this concern (Bickley, Rogers, Bell, & Thombs, 2016; Jackman, 2013). In order to effectively detect concerns about players across a breadth of contexts, it is necessary for the first phase of City PASS to have the following features: 1) be sensitive to manifestations of concerns about players across contexts by including and educating a broad range of staff who interact with players on a regular basis, 2) enable staff to raise candidly concerns about players by making the process informal and confidential (e.g., it is unnecessary for staff to follow any prescribed "chain of command" when reporting concerns about players), 3) maintain open communication channels with external player

support networks by encouraging staff to develop good relationships with stakeholders like parents, guardians and teachers. These features will ensure that concerns about players and challenging player behaviours can be identified across an extensive range of contexts and situations both within and beyond the academy environment, by well-informed staff and members of players' external support network.

### **Risk appraisal**

In the initial stage of City PASS, the relevant member of staff will assess the concerns raised to ascertain the level of and immediacy of risk the player is to himself/herself, to others, or from others. This will enable staff to react swiftly should high-risk situations require urgent attention. Cases that do not require immediate response will have their risk appraised collectively by the City PASS panel, which involves all panel members and when necessary, the external clinical psychologist. The type of response taken is dependent on the level of risk defined by the relevant staff member. These levels of risks are categorised in descending order:

- 1) High risk (immediate response). These are cases where there is immediate danger to the player or others and immediate action is required (e.g., taking a player to hospital, calling emergency services). Note that all academy staff are made aware of what to do in High Risk (immediate response) situations. An emergency panel will convene promptly following immediate response to review the case and plan required support. Future follow-up and evaluation of these high-risk cases will be reviewed at the next City PASS panel review session.
- 2) High risk (expedited response). These are cases where there is imminent risk to the player or others (e.g., maladaptive behaviours, ill health and/or mental well-being, or expulsion from school). An emergency panel will convene to conduct an expedited risk appraisal, psychological formulation and action plan to manage this risk. The

panel will begin by sharing all relevant information related to the risk amongst panel members and, where appropriate, with key staff outside of the panel on a “need to know” basis. This information will then be organised through the team formulation process to develop the action plan. The specialist knowledge and experience of the Head of Safeguarding is often crucial in action planning and execution; while advice from the external clinical psychologist is sought should these cases involve elements that require clinical input or intervention.

- 3) Ongoing concern (requires more information). In these cases, players are frequently deemed to have concerns relating to either football or school, but further information is required in order to gain further insight to the concern itself or the context around which the concern was uncovered (e.g., adapting to new environment). Further information can be sought through the established channels for reporting concerns, usually by speaking to relevant stakeholders. Additionally, referral to similar past concerns can also be made to get a better sense of the gravity of risk involved.
- 4) No risk. No risk is identified for these concerns either because there is no inherent risk, or an appropriate response has been rendered before the concern was raised to address it, and no further action is required. All concerns that are deemed as no risk will still be appropriately recorded and monitored by staff in a “watchful waiting” manner.

All concerns that are being appraised will be recorded and monitored. In particular, every concern about players that is appraised as “High Risk” or “Ongoing Concern”, as a default, will be risk-appraised again at the following City PASS panel review session, with case notes updated and new shared understanding and action plans, if required, established.

### **The team**



City PASS was developed and successfully launched by the Performance Psychology Department in the academy and has been operational for the last three years. During this time, two performance psychologists and an external clinical psychologist have been heavily involved in City PASS in various capacities. Besides the psychologists, other key staff who take part in City PASS as panel members have overlapping responsibilities relating to player safety and support, but also perform their primary roles across a varied range of contexts within the academy. From a City PASS perspective, having staff who work across various operations within the academy encourages greater sensitivity towards identifying concerns about players across a broader range of contexts. The breadth of specialist knowledge areas and experience across these members of staff (Table 1) also provide unique perspectives to City PASS panel review sessions. These unique perspectives and experiences contribute to more thorough understanding of concerns about players and challenging player behaviours, which facilitates more carefully considered planned action to address these challenging player issues. Having staff who share a wide range of knowledge and experience on City PASS also allows for more informed ethical considerations on decisions such as sharing player information. Making ethical decisions around the sharing of sensitive information can often be challenging for staff; this can result in information being shared or withheld (with the best intentions) in an unhelpful manner. Although professional codes of conduct and data protection regulations within the club help to guide staff on the ethical considerations relating to sensitive player information, there are invariably times when staff require additional support when ethics is involved in decision-making. There are also times when information on concerns about players are simultaneously held by various staff/stakeholders but are not being shared/corroborated with one another. Thus, City PASS panel members help academy staff in general to make better decisions on ethics either by supporting individual staff in their own decision-making, or by taking on the responsibility of decision-making in a collective

manner. City PASS is of high priority to the panel members who convene on a monthly basis for a three- to four- hour session.

### **Team formulation and action planning**

City PASS relies on “Elephant Spotting” or team formulation to make sense of concerns about players (Bickley et al., 2016). Team formulation is essentially a team-based approach to case formulation that involves the capacity to reduce, organise and synthesise complex information about a person – in particular, contradictions or inconsistencies in behaviour, emotion, and thoughts (Rich, 2011). It is also considered good practice to embed theory in to psychological formulation as it forges both the inductive (information specific to the person displaying challenging behaviour) and deductive processes (relevant psychological theory) to create well-informed hypotheses on the causes, precipitants, and maintaining influences of a person’s psychological, interpersonal, or behavioural problems (Butler, 1998; Division of Clinical Psychology, 2010). Thus, taking a team formulation approach would allow us to capture concerns about players across a wide range of contexts and draws on the formulation team’s extensive range of expertise and perspectives to develop a shared understanding of the concerns presented.

Bickley et al.’s (2016) four “P”s of Predisposing, Precipitating, Perpetuating and Protective factors offer a practical guide for the organisation of information shared. Specifically, it helps the panel members to develop their understanding of the concern or challenging behaviour raised (Predisposing or Historical), why is this concern or challenging behaviour surfacing now (Precipitating or Triggers), why has this concern or challenging behaviour continued to persist (Perpetuating or Maintaining), and what are the elements within the current situation we can work with to address the concern or challenging behaviour (Protective). The four “P”s model is aligned to theoretical models commonly used to understand psychological problems or difficulties (e.g., Cognitive Behavioural Theory,

Behavioural Theory, etc.) and has been applied within the frameworks of practice in child and adolescent clinical psychology (Carr, 2006) – a population that is of primary interest in City PASS. Additionally, psychological theories that shed light on adolescent psychological development have been actively incorporated in the team formulation process in order to offer more targeted perspectives on adolescent-specific psychological problems or difficulties. For instance, Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1982) was initially introduced by the external clinical psychologist via a continuing professional development workshop that was very well-attended by academy staff, and has continued to inform the approach taken by the panel members in their team formulation. Attachment Theory focuses on the histories of caregiver relationships and its impact on current states of mind regarding relationships (Bowlby, 1982), and has offered effective guidance on hypothesising how a player's upbringing and historical family dynamics might explain current concerns or challenging behaviour. Recent scholarship on adolescent attachment has called for the need to also focus on current attachment relationships (Allen & Tan, 2016), which has been valuable to the City PASS panel review process in projecting future behaviour and its potential impact on players' long-term development. Additionally, Carr (2006) provides an extensive variety of factors that are organised into frameworks (similar to the four "P"s) to explain adolescents' psychological problems or difficulties, and these have been referenced during panel reviews.

When action is required, a member of the City PASS panel will be assigned as case manager to oversee and execute a plan of action. Depending on the shared understanding reached, each case can be addressed through either a clinical referral or action plan. In the clinical referral, the case will be shared with the external clinical psychologist for clinical assessment and possible clinical intervention. For non-clinical cases, the case manager will develop and execute an action plan that is targeted at addressing the areas identified by the panel. It could include tasks like speaking to identified people (e.g., coaches, parents, etc.) to

gather more precise case information for an extended psychological formulation, and developing interventions that can range from identifying and/or developing support networks, to working directly with any targeted individual(s). In the following section, we describe an intervention that we have implemented, termed “The Boy Behind the Bravado”.

### **Case Study Intervention – “The Boy Behind the Bravado”**

Although City PASS is developed as a safety and support framework for all players in the academy (i.e., from Under - 9s to Under – 23s), this particular intervention focused on working with male players in the adolescent age group (i.e., around 14 – 16 years old), in response to the prevalence of concerns raised on City PASS that relate to this age group. One of the common threads that emerged from the City PASS panel reviews in the first six months was that academy staff and teachers found adolescent players’ behaviours to be challenging, and consequently difficult to comprehend and manage. Specifically, staff found it difficult to reconcile the paradox of young players being in a very privileged position to develop their talent, but yet were seemingly squandering/sabotaging their own progress by engaging in challenging behaviours. Through the City PASS panel reviews, it was hypothesised that staff, in their single-minded focus towards helping young players realise their talent in football, might have unintentionally overlooked some of the underlying concerns and/or reasons for challenging player behaviours. Overlooking the underlying concerns and reasons for challenging player behaviour can sometimes lead to unnecessary preconceived assumptions or premature “labeling” of players that could be cognitively biased. In order to avoid the academy becoming an over-evaluative environment, it was crucial that the action plan targeted staff members’ approach to challenging player behaviour – one that is characterised by curiosity rather than judgment.

Due to the expertise in developmental and psychological challenges in relation to youth sport being most relevant to the intended aims of the action plan, the Head of

Performance Psychology (Academy) was assigned as case manager to develop and execute this intervention with the support of the external clinical psychologist. The intervention was developed around the idea of perspective-taking. Perspective-taking is the active cognitive process of imagining the world from another's vantage point or imagining oneself in another's shoes to understand their visual viewpoint, thoughts, motivations, intentions, and/or emotions (Ku, Wang, & Galinsky, 2015); and is linked to numerous positive interpersonal outcomes such as reduced prejudice and stereotyping by the perspective-taker (e.g., Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), increased psychological closeness (i.e., seeing the self in others; Davis, Conklin, Smith, & Luce 1996), better interaction quality (i.e., eye contact, smiling, leaning in; Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson, & Galinsky, 2011), and increased helping behaviour (Batson, Chang, Orr, & Rowland, 2002). We followed three philosophical guiding principles when developing "The Boy Behind the Bravado" intervention around perspective-taking:

1. Children/Adolescents are not 'mini-adults'.
2. All behaviour makes sense, to someone, at some level.
3. Behaviour and context cannot be separated.

"Children/Adolescents are not mini-adults" emphasises that although their physical appearance or performance might sometimes suggest otherwise, adolescents are still developing across many areas (Bailey, Collins, Ford, MacNamara, Toms, & Pearce, 2010). The brain, for instance, continues to undergo significant development during adolescence, which often gets overlooked. "All behaviour makes sense, to someone, at some level" emphasises that human beings are inherently biased when it comes to making sense of behaviours. For instance, actor-observer bias posits that human beings attribute their own behaviour to situational causes and others' behaviour to person causes (e.g., I skipped gym because I was busy with work, but he skipped gym because he is lazy; Malle, 2006). Thus, it is important to consider multiple perspectives in order to understand behaviour. "Behaviour

and context cannot be separated” emphasises the significance of context in governing behaviours. Social phenomena like conformity to authority (Milgram, 1963) and social norms (Asch, 1956) are classic examples that demonstrate the influence of context on behaviour. Thus, to understand behaviour, it is important to first understand the context.

These three guiding principles helped us to frame perspective-taking by focusing on the developmental experiences players go through during adolescence, the predisposing factors or reasons that make sense of challenging player behaviour, especially from a player’s perspective (e.g., player’s relationship with parents during infancy), the unique context of being a young player in a professional football academy, and challenging any preconceived and/or popular notions on challenging player behaviour. Additionally, an organisational extension of these intended outcomes of perspective-taking is to develop a more approachable and supportive culture within the professional football academy where players and staff can speak openly about their challenges within and outside football, and how these challenges impact on their mental health. A series of workshops were developed across each of the guiding principles that targeted perspective-taking in various ways. Conducted by an academy performance psychologist, these workshops were interactive, involved small groups of staff who work with adolescent players (i.e., 14 – 16 years old), typically lasted two to three hours, and took place throughout each season.

### **Guiding principle 1: Children/Adolescents are not mini-adults**

Guided by the principle “Children/Adolescents are not mini-adults”, we aimed to develop staff perspective-taking by helping them view adolescence as a key development stage for all human beings that is often fraught with complexities and challenges that need to be navigated. This was achieved in two parts. The first part was focused on understanding adolescent brain development, and its influence on cognitive, social and emotional aspects of development. Delivered through workshops, this part gave staff a basic understanding about

the processes of brain development from childhood to adolescence, the significant structural and hormonal changes the brain is likely to undergo during adolescence, and how these changes impact cognitive and emotional development. Adolescence marks the beginning of more complex cognitive processes such as advanced reasoning ability, decision-making, problem-solving, making plans and perspective-taking. Additionally, emotional changes could include greater awareness of self and other emotions, increased use of complex strategies to regulate emotions, and greater awareness around mutual disclosure of emotions in impression management, forming and maintaining relationships (Carr, 2006). These cognitive and emotional developments can often be challenging to adolescents and can potentially explain some of the challenging behaviour displayed by players. Further, unlike physical development, these cognitive and emotional developments are usually not superficially obvious to others and thus can be easily overlooked, and/or misinterpreted as players being problematic. Overall, this first part was intended to encourage staff perspective-taking by appreciating the complexity of adolescent brain development, and its impact on cognitive and emotional factors that could predispose adolescent players to displaying challenging behaviours.

The second part built on the renewed awareness of developmental changes during adolescence by recalling the challenges staff faced when they were younger, and the challenges they posed to others at that time. To bring this to life, a series of perspective-taking workshops titled “This is me” was organised. In one such workshop, staff were asked to bring along photographs of their adolescent selves, which were referred to in conjunction with the following prompting questions to engage staff in recalling the difficulties they faced when they were younger (i.e., “What did I find challenging when I was an adolescent?”), and to take the perspective of others who viewed them as challenging adolescents at that time (i.e., “What challenges did I present to others when I was an adolescent?”). Being suspended

from school, engaging in risky behaviour, challenging relationships with parents, demonstrating a dislike for school and/or football, and feeling misunderstood were some of the concerns and challenging behaviour experienced by staff when they were adolescents – which were similar and relatable to the concerns and challenging player behaviours observed in the academy. These perspective-taking exercises referencing their younger selves allowed staff to easily draw on examples of concerns and challenging behaviours, tested their current views of concerns about players and challenging behaviour by relating it to their experiences when they were younger, and in doing so fostered increased psychological closeness with adolescent players and their current developmental experiences.

In a subsequent workshop, staff were asked to divert their perspective-taking away from their younger selves and towards the players in the academy. This switch in perspective-taking was achieved by engaging staff in group discussions that were guided by the following questions, “What pushes our adolescent players’ buttons?”, “What is a challenge for our adolescent players that was not a challenge for us when we were adolescents?”, and “What challenging behaviours do our adolescent players present us with?”. From the staff’s perspective, some examples of the challenges our adolescent players have presented us with include: 1) Problems with attitude or motivation, 2) Failure to engage with academy rules or standards, 3) Poor discipline, respect, or manners, 4) Being a disruptive influence on others, 5) Being demanding and presenting high levels of need to staff, 6) Being withdrawn socially, sulking, or moody, and 7) Poor communication and/or “splitting” the staff group.

Identifying the aforementioned challenging player behaviours within their groups enabled staff to reflect and share how these player behaviours have impacted them and their practice. The process of staff sharing allowed them to realise that their reactions were not only similar, but more specifically, that there was a common propensity for staff reactions to be emotionally-driven (e.g., anxiety, frustration, confusion, etc.). Relying primarily on



emotional information can often lead to inherent biases in decision making that are based on previous experiences (e.g., Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2002), which has likely led to either reactive or withdrawal/avoidance responses from staff. Further, the impact of how staff have interpreted and responded to these challenging player behaviours could have more systemic implications for the academy, possibly contributing to: inconsistent management of players, communication breakdowns among staff and with players, increased conflict and blame, and doing nothing or avoidance of the issue – all of which allow player issues to continue to escalate. These reflections were brought together at the end through a final prompting question, “What advice would you give your adolescent self now?”. This final question reinforced the importance of perspective-taking in helping staff view concerns about players and challenging player behaviours with curiosity rather than judgement, and the importance of establishing psychological closeness, through the pretext of “giving advice”.

**Guiding Principle 2: All behaviour makes sense, to someone, at some level**

Guided by the principle of “All behaviour makes sense, to someone, at some level”, we aimed to broaden staff perspective-taking by focusing on the complex histories that sometimes pre-exist in talented football players. Indeed, the notion that successful players have more complex histories (e.g., parental divorce) has been observed previously among elite youth Dutch players (Van Yperen, 2009). Having a better appreciation of the complex histories of some players can help staff to pre-empt future developmental challenges and proactively build support structures to help players negotiate these challenges, or explain some of the existing challenges players are currently facing and how to intervene appropriately and effectively. In one workshop, we engaged staff in discussion by referring to anecdotes of world-renowned football talents with complex histories, and some case examples of players’ complex histories from City PASS. This workshop emphasised the importance of seeing the world from the players’ perspective, because concerns about players

and challenging player behaviours they observe could be influenced by players' complex histories.

### **Guiding Principle 3: Behaviour and context cannot be separated**

Guided by the principle "Behaviour and context cannot be separated", and titled "Football, then and now", we aimed provide staff with a broader capacity for perspective-taking by raising their awareness of the demands faced by young players in the modern football world. Rather than merely presenting what the demands of modern football are, these demands were made more acute in the perspective-taking workshops by encouraging staff to contrast it with how football used to be in the years before. For example, young players now have better resources such as immaculate 4G playing surfaces, compared to the streets or muddy pitches of the past. There is also more money in youth football now than ever before with generous scholarships, endorsement deals and professional contracts available to players. Further, the advent of social media in the digital age has become a game changer in the way players present themselves to others. Young players engaging in social media are able to make their profiles more visible, which allow them to earn recognition from a wider audience. However, greater visibility of player profiles through social media could also invite unnecessary attention, criticism and social comparison that could culminate in negative experiences such as online abuse (Kavanagh & Jones, 2014). As mentioned earlier, the high performance expectations in football academy environments in general can lead to greater efforts towards impression management (Leary, 1992). This perceived necessity to project a positive self-image could unwittingly extend beyond the confines of the football academy as young players engage in what is essentially self-presentation to a much wider audience on social media.

Although these developments in the game indicate that greater attention and resources are being directed towards youth football, it is these exact developments that have likely

transformed elite youth football into an ultra-competitive arena. Specifically, the difficulty in making it to professional senior football, but even prior to that, to earn and keep one's place in a professional football academy. The challenging climate of modern youth football was echoed by some of the staff who used to play in the Premier League. They remarked that unlike their time as a young player, young players who want to play in the Premier League now not only have to be the best in their academy/club, but also have to be among the best in the world. Thus, having an awareness of players' complex histories and high performance demands in modern football to broaden staff perspective-taking can facilitate better staff understanding of the respective predisposing and perpetuating factors that explain concerns about players and challenging player behaviour.

### **Practitioner team reflections and recommendations**

#### **The importance of working as a team**

Team formulation in City PASS has fostered greater collaboration among staff in protecting the well-being of players. The exchanges within the review panel sessions have sparked the cross-cultivation of unique insights and expertise, enabling a more holistic view on the well-being of players and an appreciation of the crossover of work in this area of well-being between departments. By engaging with the City PASS process, there was unanimous agreement among staff that they have upskilled themselves to think more broadly in terms of understanding and dealing with mental well-being related issues within this adolescent, performance oriented population.

The two performance psychologists were involved during different periods of City PASS. The third author was instrumental in developing City PASS and participated in the early panel review sessions, while the second author took up a more supportive role in the early stages and became more involved in recent panel review sessions, and the development and implementation of action plans. This exposure to City PASS meant that both

performance psychologists possess experience of playing a lead and integral role within City PASS and have reviewed more than 25 cases over three years. Being knowledgeable about City PASS enabled the performance psychologists to support each other effectively by offering their views on proceedings. Specifically, it was particularly beneficial when advice, a steer on direction, or a sounding board for ideas on interventions was needed. Indeed, both performance psychologists, together with the external clinical psychologist, were able to act as “critical friends”, offering one another (and wider staff) the opportunity to “offload” any emotional responses they might experience as a consequence of working on City PASS. Additionally, having a team of staff dedicated to City PASS has indicated to staff throughout the academy that addressing concerns about players or challenging player behaviours requires a concerted effort from the wider academy, and not the responsibility of individual staff. Adopting a team approach across different groups of staff at various levels has helped to alleviate the anxiety among academy staff regarding how to deal with complex player issues that can sometimes feel unsolvable.

### **Appreciating the context and caring for adolescent players**

The requirement to excel in a high performance environment during adolescence can often lead players to become vulnerable, emotionally unpredictable and hypersensitive (Hill et al., 2015; 2016). In addition, football in general seems to perpetuate a social norm for boys to “man up” if they want to excel in the game (Parker, 2000). Consequently, the pressure to conform to group expectations and standards are likely to make players view their vulnerability and unstable emotional states as signs of “imperfections” or “weaknesses” in what is deemed a “hyper-masculine” football environment. In response, players could mask these imperfections or weaknesses by putting on a “bravado” front that is often projected through the display of risky, challenging behaviour – obscuring the true issues that need addressing in the process.

In order to move past the façade of “bravado” and get to the heart of the issues faced by adolescent players, we learned that it is important for staff to first establish trusting relationships with players. In line with the notion that “players need to know that you care, before they care about what you know” (Fifer, Henschen, Gould, & Ravizza, 2008; Ravizza, 1988), it is important for staff to show that they are sincere in wanting to understand adolescent players and the challenges they face. The utilisation of team formulation on City PASS was aimed to invoke greater sensitivity and empathy for the person experiencing concerns or exhibiting challenging behaviour when developing appropriate interventions (Safran, Muran, Samstag, & Stevens, 2002; Samstag, Muran, & Safran, 2004). Consequently, the awareness and activation of perspective-taking among staff through “The Boy Behind the Bravado” intervention seemed to have created a more empathic environment within the academy. For example, staff are having more regular interactions with players just to find out how they are doing outside football (e.g., asking players about home and family after training sessions), which has led to better relationships between staff and players. Players have also responded positively to this more caring environment, where they are now speaking more openly to staff about their concerns rather than bottling up their emotions (e.g., initiating chats with academy performance psychologist and other non-football coaching staff). These behavioural observations corroborate with theoretical conjecture that perspective-taking can enhance social bonds between people (Ku et al., 2015). Overall, applying humanistic principles such as prioritising the person before performer and placing player well-being at the core through City PASS and “The Boy Behind the Bravado” intervention can help staff uncover and manage the underlying factors that are responsible for the concerns or challenges faced by adolescent players.

### **Influencing the system to influence behaviour**

The introduction of City PASS as an interdisciplinary approach to player well-being that is led by key academy staff has created an organisational shift in the manner in which the academy approaches concerns about players and challenging player behaviours. As mentioned earlier, the team approach to City PASS has contributed to the diffusion of anxiety among staff when faced with concerns about players and challenging player behaviour. Furthermore, “The Boy Behind the Bravado” intervention has helped to activate more conscious perspective-taking among staff, creating a more empathic professional football academy environment. More active perspective-taking and recognising players’ well-being as a shared responsibility has instigated several positive changes in staff behaviour. For instance, staff are now beginning to recognise the importance of picking up on issues occurring both inside and outside football by having more regular interactions with players just to find out how they are doing outside football (e.g., asking players about home and family following training). Relatedly, in order to understand better what players might be going through in other aspects of their lives, staff are now more likely to seek and share information about players with one another. Beyond player updates, there is also a greater willingness among staff to tap on various areas of expertise located within the academy staff team (e.g., performance psychology) to understand concerns about players better. This increased mutual sharing and learning among staff is a reflection of how they genuinely want to work together to better understand the players in order to better support them. These observations suggest that an “organisational empowerment approach” of educating and disseminating psychology-related information to other members of an organisation can contribute towards positive organisational-level change on player well-being (Smith & Johnson, 1990). These changes further underline the impact of the organisational environment on well-being and performance (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009).

**Future plans**

In order to sustain and build upon the positive changes brought about by City PASS and “The Boy Behind the Bravado” intervention, further enhancements are being made to our current approach to player well-being. First, the ability for City PASS to pre-empt players’ future developmental challenges can be enhanced by boosting the sensitivity of City PASS in identifying potential mental health issues among players. This can be achieved by monitoring players’ mental well-being through self-report screening tools (e.g., Mental Health Continuum – Short Form, Keyes, 2002). Such data would provide an additional source of information that can increase the accuracy in which the City PASS panel makes sense of the cases presented, and also enable better monitoring of any improvements in mental well-being as a consequence of the interventions applied. Thus, the accumulation of data will enable us to predict potential “hotspots” where players’ mental well-being could be threatened, allowing us to efficiently allocate resources to support players.

Second, encouraging more effective sharing of player information among wider academy staff can further enhance the impact of City PASS at the organisational level. Better information sharing among academy staff encourages them to think more broadly about player issues, and avoid narrow-minded appreciation of concerns and challenging behaviours (e.g., labeling). To achieve this, we have recently initiated a process of reacquainting all academy staff with the City PASS process and reiterated how information sharing is crucial to helping them make sense of the various player issues they encounter in their work. Incorporating information about City PASS in organisational processes like staff inductions are also in the pipeline, so that new staff are knowledgeable about the steps to take when they encounter concerns about players or challenging player behaviour in their work.

Third, the success of “The Boy Behind the Bravado” intervention underscored the importance of staff development through not only raising awareness of the issues faced by adolescent players, but also how staff can work more effectively to positively impact the

experiences players have when at the academy. To build on the positive impact generated by “The Boy Behind the Bravado” intervention, a commitment towards continued staff professional development has been prioritised, with various programmes organised thus far that focused on mental health, and mutual learning/sharing with youth development experts in other sports (particularly those with similar academy/youth systems like rugby) and the performing arts, on how they work with adolescents in high performance environments during this challenging stage of their development.

### **Conclusion**

City PASS is a team psychological formulation framework that facilitates the identification, understanding and management of concerns and challenging behaviours of academy players across a variety of contexts. City PASS, and the activation of staff perspective-taking through “The Boy Behind the Bravado” intervention, highlight the importance of academy staff in: 1) understanding the concerns and challenging behaviours experienced by players across multiple contexts and the possible underlying reasons that are responsible for them; 2) taking shared responsibility and working together as a team to help adolescent players tackle their concerns and challenges; and 3) engaging in positive behaviours to create an empathic and supportive culture within the professional football academy setting where concerns about players and challenging behaviour are viewed with curiosity, rather than judgment.



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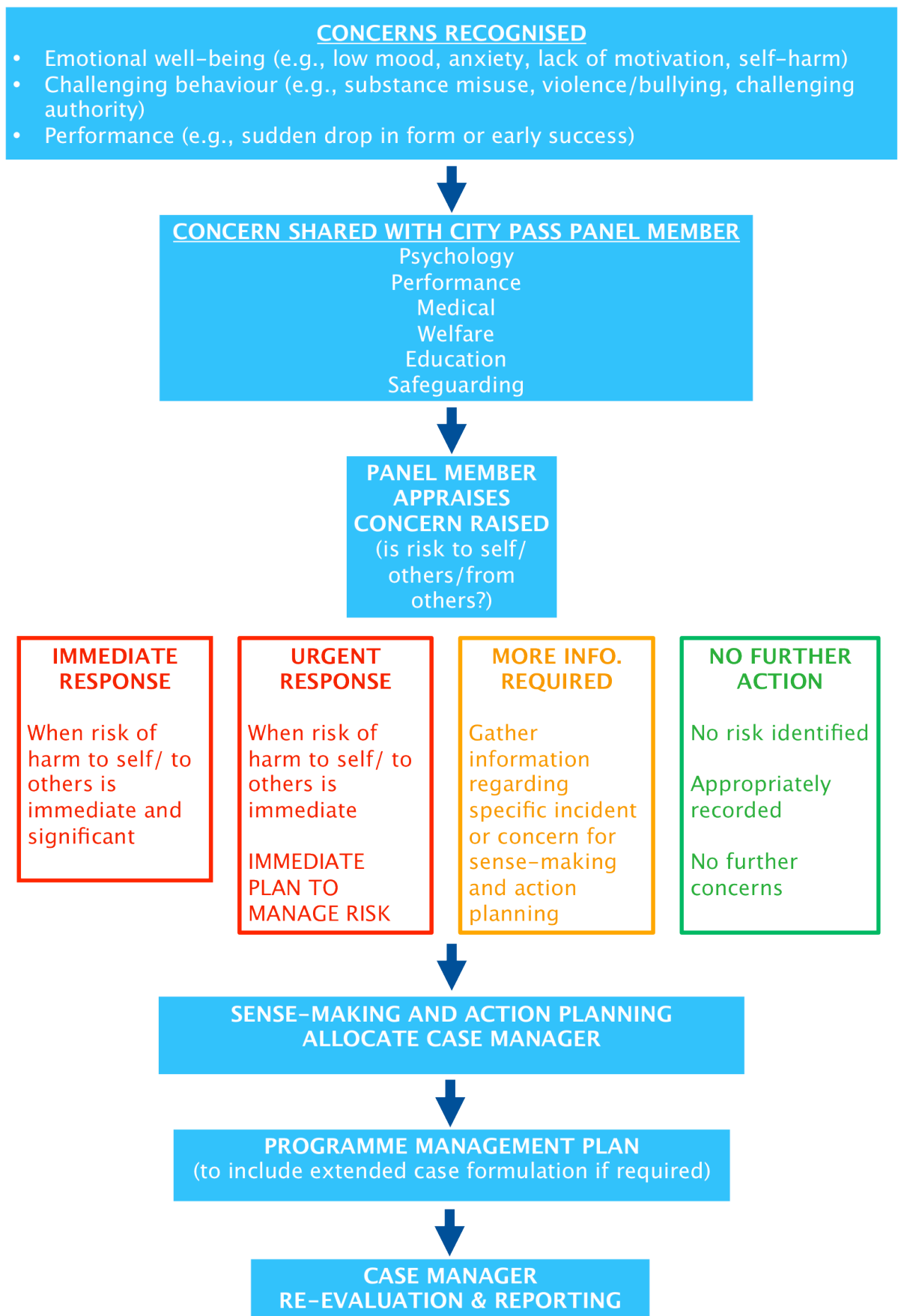


Figure 1: City PASS Framework.

Table 1: City PASS panel members and their respective areas of expertise and contribution.

| <b>Staff Member</b>                          | <b>Areas of expertise/contributions</b>   |
|--|---|
| Head of Performance Psychology (Academy)     | Perspectives on sport/performance psychology in high performance youth sport. Knowledge of players' personalities, being attuned to players' psychosocial developments, particularly their relationships with key staff (e.g., coaches) and their psychological reaction during high performance and/or stressful situations. |
| Head of Sport Science and Medicine (Academy) | Perspectives on physical and biological development of young players. Insights on sport medicine and rehabilitation (e.g., player injury history), and advice on the management of young players.   |
| Academy Doctor                               | Perspectives on medical and/or injury rehabilitation in a youth football context. Is in a unique position to observe player behaviours when players are at their most vulnerable and offer valuable insights.   |
| Head of Welfare                              | Perspectives on family dynamics, living conditions and off-pitch concerns and challenges of academy players. Also has good communication links with the Football Association (FA) on player welfare issues.   |
| Head of Education                            | Perspectives on the education system, the learning environment, players' academic progress and an awareness of player behaviours in school. The Head of Education has a teaching background and prior experience working with behaviourally challenging adolescents.  |
| Head of Safeguarding                         | Perspectives on the legal, moral and compliance obligations for organisations in the management of vulnerable populations (e.g., young people). Maintains links with the FA and local authorities (e.g., police and social services) on aspects of safeguarding.  |
| External Clinical Psychologist               | Offers clinical expertise in referrals, assessments and interventions. Acts as a "critical friend" to the performance psychologist whenever cases touch upon clinical spheres of practice.  |