



OKKO FAMILY CODE

Scientific Evidence of Its Effectiveness

Field: Sports Psychology · Education · Sociology

Sources: 30+ peer-reviewed scientific studies

Context: Youth football · Ages 6–18

Section 1

The problem the family code seeks to solve

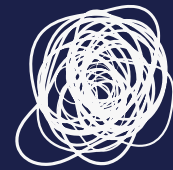
Before analysing the effectiveness of the OKKO Family Code, it is essential to understand the scale of the problem it seeks to address: parental pressure in youth sport and its damaging effects on child development.



70% of young people drop out of organised sport before secondary school.



Mental health problems in young athletes vs. the general population.



Competitive anxiety increases directly with perceived parental pressure.

The George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health has reported that nearly 70% of young athletes drop out of organised sport before secondary school, with parental pressure identified as one of the determining factors.

The research is clear: parental pressure negatively predicts the satisfaction of basic psychological needs. Children who perceive greater pressure from their parents experience more stress, less enjoyment and lower motivation.

“Parents may believe that expressing disappointment in a child’s poor performance will motivate them to improve. However, from the child’s perspective, even well-intentioned parental pressure can be counterproductive and contribute to reduced enjoyment and motivation.”

The Importance of Parents' Behavior in their Children's Enjoyment and Amotivation in Sports (PMC)

A 2025 study involving 420 adolescent tennis players identified a dual mechanism: parental pressure acts both as a direct external stressor and as a psychological burden that erodes perceived competence. This second effect is the main pathway connecting parental pressure with pre-competitive anxiety.

Section 2

Attachment theory: The OKKO gesture as a “Secure Base”

The strongest theoretical framework for explaining why the Family Code works is Attachment Theory, developed by John Bowlby (1969) and expanded by Mary Ainsworth. Its central concept—the secure base—is the cornerstone of the OKKO Code.

The OKKO gesture—one thumb up and one thumb down at the same time—acts as a symbolic activator of the secure base in a sporting context. Before the match, the child connects with their attachment figure—their mother or father—and explicitly renews the emotional agreement: “Your love for me does not depend on my performance.”

Why does this matter neurologically?

Research by Ainsworth and others confirms that parental sensitivity is a critical factor in helping a child develop a secure base. Neurological research shows that secure attachment acts as a protective factor against anxiety in healthy children. Children with insecure attachment show a heightened attentional bias towards threats, which directly interferes with sporting performance. Cortisol studies also confirm that secure-attachment priming can regulate stress hormone levels, reproducing some of the functions of a secure base even under pressure.

BOWLBY 1969 / AINSWORTH 1978

Exploration without fear

Securely attached children take more positive risks and show greater resilience after failure. The OKKO gesture activates this state before every match.

GROH ET AL., 2017

Self-esteem and emotional regulation

Securely attached children grow up with greater self-esteem and better emotional regulation—qualities that transfer directly to sporting performance.

PMC8967255

Secure-base scripts

“Secure-base scripts”—cognitive patterns based on consistent care—are the building blocks of more complex mental representations of oneself and others.

In practical terms, the OKKO ritual repeatedly builds and activates this secure-base script before every competition. Over time, the gesture alone—even without words—triggers the neurophysiological state associated with attachment security.

Section 3

Self-determination theory: unlocking intrinsic motivation

Self-Determination Theory—Ryan and Deci, 2000—states that human beings need to satisfy three basic psychological needs in order to thrive: autonomy, competence and relatedness.



Autonomy. The child initiates the Code

The player is the one who initiates the OKKO gesture. This act of agency makes the child an active participant in their own emotional environment, satisfying their need for control and self-determination.

Self-Determination Theory shows that turning intrinsically motivating activities into work—through external rewards or pressure—destroys motivation. The Code does the opposite: it reinforces the idea that playing is valuable in itself.



Competence. Permission to make mistakes

By ensuring that parental love is not dependent on the result, the Code removes the fear of failure as a threat to self-esteem.

The child can try, take risks and fail without feeling that they have lost value in their parents' eyes.

This satisfies the need for competence by separating it from the result and connecting it to the process.



Relatedness. Unconditional connection as fuel

A 2023 systematic review published in *Frontiers in Psychology* on the role of parents in youth athletes' motivation concluded that positive parental behaviours—perceived support, praise and understanding—are strongly associated with intrinsic motivation.

"When parents respect their children's perspectives, encourage autonomous choices and promote intrinsic motivation, young athletes also develop greater autonomous motivation outside sport."

— Ryan and Deci, 2000; PMC12999551

Section 4

The psychology of ritual: why the gesture is the message

One of the most powerful—and often least analysed—aspects of the Family Code is its form: it is a gesture, not a conversation.

The science of pre-competition rituals explains why this is not accidental.

Rituals and anxiety reduction

Research by Norton and Gino (2014), replicated by several research teams, shows that rituals—formalised sequences of actions performed before a performance activity—improve performance by reducing anxiety and activating motivational and regulatory states.

Rituals work by improving concentration, creating physical readiness and increasing confidence. The OKKO gesture meets all the defining criteria of an effective ritual: it has a fixed and recognisable sequence, it takes place at a specific moment—before the match—it involves two people, strengthening its social meaning, and it carries rich, shared symbolism.

Non-verbal communication as a privileged language

When parents' non-verbal signals contradict their verbal messages, children have difficulty recognising emotions, negatively affecting their self-perception. The OKKO gesture removes this ambiguity: non-verbal communication becomes the main message and leaves no room for contradiction

The neuroscience of a shared ritual

A ritual performed simultaneously by two people—the child on the pitch and the parent in the stands—activates the mirror-neuron system and creates interpersonal synchronisation.

This kind of behavioural coordination has documented effects on belonging, trust and affiliation.

OKKO is not simply a mental agreement: it is a physical act of emotional co-regulation.

Section 5

Growth mindset: mistakes as teachers

The central message of the OKKO gesture—"I love you the same in the OK and in the KO, in the goal and in the mistake"—is a direct application of Carol Dweck's Growth Mindset theory (Stanford, 2006).

Fixed Mindset vs. Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2006)

Children with a fixed mindset believe that their abilities are innate and unchangeable: making a mistake proves that they are "not good enough." Children with a growth mindset see mistakes as information and as part of the learning process. Dweck showed that children with a growth mindset consistently outperform those with a fixed mindset.

The Family Code is an active growth-mindset intervention within the family sporting environment. By ensuring that parental love applies equally to mistakes and successes, it removes the performance pressure that creates a fixed mindset ("If I fail, I have no value").

Research by Dweck and her colleagues shows that focusing children on the process that leads to learning—effort and trying new strategies—can foster a growth mindset and its benefits. The OKKO gesture communicates exactly this: the process of playing—with its victories and mistakes—is what matters, not the result.

"Research shows that when students have a growth mindset, they are more likely to challenge themselves, believe they can achieve more and become more resilient and creative problem-solvers."

—Stanford Teaching Commons, citando Dweck, 2006

Section 6

Moral development and empathy: when OKKO extends onto the pitch

One of the most sophisticated aspects of the Family Code is that the OKKO gesture does not end with the exchange between the child and their family. It extends across the entire match environment: teammates, opponents, the referee and the coach. This is a textbook moral-development intervention.

Empathy as the foundation of prosocial behaviour

The review by Shields and Bredemeier, published in *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, states: “Empathy is a crucial element in prosocial behaviour and moral decision-making. If young people are not encouraged to develop empathetic responses, they may fail to recognise situations involving moral conflict.”

Applying the OKKO gesture to an opponent who plays fairly, a referee who makes a mistake or a teammate who fails is a structured perspective-taking exercise—the central cognitive and emotional skill involved in moral development. This is not a speech about values. It is a repeated, embodied practice that builds the habit of empathy through action.

**PMC9180162
SYSTEMATIC REVIEW**

**Sport and prosocial
behaviour**

Sporting activities can improve prosocial behaviour in children and adolescents, with documented improvements of 15–30% in structured programmes.

**PMC7432034
MORAL CLIMATE AND BEHAVIOUR**

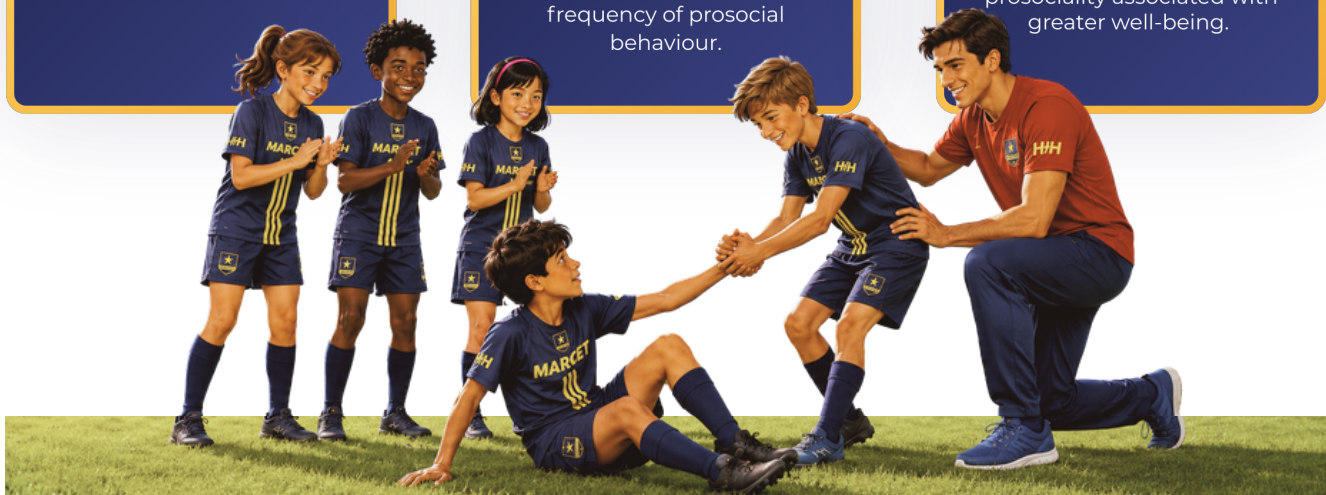
**Sport and prosocial
behaviour**

Research demonstrates the importance of the perceived moral climate, which is associated with a lower incidence of adolescent misconduct and a higher frequency of prosocial behaviour.

**FRONTIERS IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2021
Modelo TPSR**

**Sport and prosocial
behaviour**

Interventions that teach personal and social responsibility through sport produce significant improvements in prosocial behaviour, with high levels of prosociality associated with greater well-being.



Section 7

The sociology of cultural change: the mechanics of OKKO contagion

The Family Code does not aim only to transform one family. It aims to change the culture of youth football. Is this realistic? The sociology of cultural change offers a clear answer: yes. The chosen mechanism—change spreading from within through voluntary contagion—is precisely the most effective one.

Social contagion and collective norms

Research by Centola and Macy (2007) distinguishes between “simple contagion,” where one exposure is enough, and “complex contagion,” where individuals need reinforcement from several social connections before adopting a cultural practice. Adoption of the OKKO gesture works as complex contagion: one family sees another family using it, discusses it and practises it. Repetition and social reinforcement support genuine adoption.

Social Cognitive Theory: Bandura applied to OKKO

Social learning occurs mainly through observation. When a child sees their family performing the OKKO gesture, and when that child then uses it with teammates, the modelling mechanism described by Bandura is activated. People learn by observing others and model their behaviour on what they have seen. The visibility of the gesture—performed publicly in the stadium—is essential to its viral effect.

Why “from within” is more effective than “from above”

The Family Code is neither a rule nor a punishment. It is a voluntary agreement that spreads through inspiration. Miller and Prentice (2016, Annual Review of Psychology) show that lasting changes in norms occur when people internalise new beliefs as their own, rather than obeying them because of external pressure. The OKKO diffusion model—one family living it and sharing it with another—is exactly the internalisation mechanism that science identifies as the most powerful way to achieve sustainable cultural change.

“What spreads between individuals through social networks is not beliefs or behaviours themselves, but perceptions about which beliefs or behaviours are compatible with one another.”

Goldberg and Stein, Stanford / American Sociological Review, 2018

Section 8

The psychology of the Code: why it is so difficult to break

The OKKO Family Code is not a code of conduct or a set of regulations. It is an agreement between two people who love each other. That changes everything, because psychology shows that commitments made within a deep emotional relationship activate mechanisms of resistance to change that are far more powerful than any external rule.

Four mechanisms work in layers:

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Public commitment and consistency (Cialdini / Kiesler)

Psychologist Charles Kiesler established that commitment “binds the individual to behavioural acts,” making their attitudes more resistant to change, especially when the commitment is public. Robert Cialdini identified four characteristics that make a commitment particularly powerful: it is active, public, costly and freely chosen. The OKKO gesture fulfils all four. The parent performs a physical action in front of their child and other parents, commits to not reacting badly and is not forced to participate. Once the gesture has been made, the pressure to behave consistently with it becomes automatic and unconscious.

The Code redefines the parent’s identity

Beyond behaviour, the OKKO gesture is a declaration of identity: “I am the parent who made that gesture.” Identity is one of the most powerful anchors of human behaviour. Research on commitment and consistency confirms that people are more likely to take ownership of a behaviour when they have chosen it without external pressure. The action becomes part of how they see themselves. When a parent acts against the Code, they are not simply breaking a rule: they are betraying the person they said they were. That is much harder to ignore than a punishment imposed by the club.

Cognitive dissonance as an internal alarm

When a parent has performed the OKKO gesture and then shouts from the stands, their brain detects a contradiction between who they declared themselves to be and how they are behaving. This activates cognitive dissonance: the discomfort caused by inconsistency between attitudes and behaviour. According to Bandura, when people commit a transgression that violates their own standards, they experience negative feelings resulting from that dissonance. Dissonance does not remain passive: it drives people towards resolution. Because the commitment has already been made publicly, rationalisation becomes more difficult and repair becomes the most likely response.

Guilt as a driver of reconciliation

When a parent breaks the Code, the guilt they feel is not paralysing: it is reparative. Developmental psychology research shows that guilt—unlike shame—actively motivates people to repair harm and restore relationships. A study by Donohue and Tully (2019, *Developmental Psychology*), involving 97 children aged 6 to 10, confirmed the complete mechanism: guilt motivates reparative behaviour, and reparative behaviour successfully reduces guilt. A parent who breaks the Code will feel the need to approach their child, acknowledge what happened and repeat the gesture. The Code does not only create a barrier against negative behaviour. It also creates an automatic path back when that behaviour occurs.

"A commitment can change our self-image and compel us to act consistently with it. People are more likely to take ownership of a behaviour when they feel they have chosen it without external pressure."

Robert Cialdini, Influence: Science and Practice

Why the Code is radically different from a code of conduct

This explains a gap that research has documented without finding a clear way to close it: there is limited evidence that codes of conduct and behavioural expectations established by sports organisations reduce spectator misconduct. Regulations work through fear of an external punishment that is rarely enforced. The OKKO Code works through internal pressure: consistency with one's own identity, cognitive dissonance and reparative guilt. Science is clear: internal motivation produces behavioural changes that are more lasting, more generalised and more authentic than any external punishment.

CIALDINI, 1984 / KIESLER, 1971

Resistance to negative behaviour

An active, public and voluntary commitment creates internal pressure towards consistency, operating even during moments of intense emotional tension in the stands.

BANDURA / FESTINGER

Automatic internal alarm

The cognitive dissonance between the gesture and the parent's behaviour in the stands creates genuine discomfort, pushing the parent towards correction before anyone else needs to intervene.

DONOHUE & TULLY, DEV. PSYCHOLOGY 2019

A guaranteed path back

When the Code is broken, relationship-focused guilt automatically activates the reparative impulse: approach the child, acknowledge the mistake and repeat the gesture.

In summary, a parent who has performed the OKKO gesture is not simply a parent who has made a promise. Their brain has registered that gesture as part of who they are. Breaking it activates internal alarms that are difficult to silence. And when those alarms are ignored, the same psychological system that made the Code possible—relationship-focused guilt—pushes the parent back towards their child to repair the connection. The Code does not only change behaviour during the match. It changes the psychological framework through which parents judge their own behaviour.

Section 9

Summary: why the Family Code works

The multidisciplinary scientific analysis reaches one conclusion: the Marcet Family Code is not simply a well-intentioned idea. It is applied science. Each of its elements has strong empirical support across several disciplines:

ATTACHMENT THEORY (BOWLBY / AINSWORTH)

The gesture activates the secure base

The child enters the pitch with their attachment system activated in “fearless exploration” mode, rather than “threat to self-esteem” mode.

SELF-DETERMINATION (RYAN & DECI, 2000)

It unlocks intrinsic motivation

By removing pressure linked to the result, the Code satisfies the three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence and relatedness—that support lasting motivation.

PSYCHOLOGY OF RITUAL (NORTON & GINO, 2014)

The ritual reduces pre-competitive anxiety

The OKKO gesture is a formalised ritual that activates motivational and regulatory states, improves performance and reduces fear of making mistakes.

GROWTH MINDSET (DWECK, 2006)

Mistakes become part of the process

It establishes the philosophy most favourable to learning: mistakes do not define the child; effort and the process do.

MORAL DEVELOPMENT (SHIELDS & BREDEMEIER)

It builds structured empathy

Extending OKKO onto the pitch is a repeated perspective-taking exercise that develops the empathetic habits supporting prosocial behaviour.

SOCIOLOGY OF CONTAGION (GOLDBERG & STEIN, 2018)

A mechanism for sustainable cultural change

Voluntary diffusion through inspiration—not obligation—is the most effective mechanism for creating genuine and lasting change in cultural norms.

CIALDINI / KIESLER / DONOHUE & TULLY, 2019

The Code is extremely difficult to break

Four interconnected mechanisms—public commitment, identity, cognitive dissonance and reparative guilt—make breaking the Code psychologically costly and automatically activate the impulse to reconcile.



The architecture of a silent revolution

The OKKO Family Code achieves something extraordinarily difficult in the design of social interventions: it is simultaneously simple and profound. One gesture. One thumb up and one thumb down. Two seconds. And yet, within those two seconds, decades of research into attachment psychology, motivation theory, the neuroscience of ritual, learning through mistakes and the sociology of change are activated.

Science does not only validate the Code: it makes it urgent. When 70% of young people drop out of organised sport before secondary school, and when parental pressure strongly predicts competitive anxiety, burnout and loss of motivation, an intervention that counters all these effects with a gesture accessible to every family is, quite simply, a revolution. Pitch by pitch. Family by family. Country by country.



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