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# Impact of Football Participation on Psychological Well-Being Among Primary School Children in the United Kingdom: The Mediating Role of Social Support and Belonging

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**Abstract:** Participation in organized sport has long been associated with positive developmental outcomes in childhood. In the United Kingdom, football represents the most widely practiced sport among primary school children and plays a central role in school-based and community-based physical activity programs. Despite extensive research on the physical benefits of sport participation, less consensus exists regarding the psychosocial mechanisms through which football influences children's psychological well-being. This study examines the impact of football participation on psychological well-being among primary school children in the United Kingdom, with particular attention to the mediating roles of perceived social support and sense of belonging. Drawing upon Self-Determination Theory and Social Identity Theory, the study proposes and tests a mediation model in which football participation predicts enhanced psychological well-being indirectly through increased peer support, adult support, and school-related belonging. A cross-sectional survey design was employed with a sample of 624 children aged 8-11 years from state primary schools across England and Wales. Standardized instruments were used to assess frequency of football participation, perceived social support, sense of belonging, and psychological well-being. Structural equation modeling revealed that football participation was positively associated with psychological well-being, and this relationship was partially mediated by both perceived social support and sense of belonging. The findings highlight the social-relational mechanisms underpinning sport-related mental health benefits and underscore the importance of fostering inclusive, supportive football environments in primary education. Implications for educational policy, youth sport programming, and future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** football participation, psychological well-being, primary school children, social support, belonging, mediation, United Kingdom

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## 1. Introduction

Childhood psychological well-being has emerged as a critical public health and educational priority in the United Kingdom. Increasing concerns regarding anxiety, low mood, social isolation, and reduced resilience among primary school children have prompted policymakers, educators, and researchers to seek protective factors that promote positive mental health. Among these factors, participation in organized sport has been widely recognized as a potentially powerful contributor to holistic development [1].

Football, as the most popular sport in the United Kingdom, occupies a unique position within school curricula and community life. From structured physical education

lessons to after-school clubs and grassroots leagues, football provides regular opportunities for physical activity, teamwork, and social interaction. While the physiological benefits of football-such as improved cardiovascular fitness and motor skills-are well established, the psychological pathways through which football participation influences mental well-being require further investigation [2].

Existing literature suggests that sport participation may enhance psychological well-being by fostering social integration, competence, and identity formation. However, empirical studies often treat sport participation as a direct predictor of mental health outcomes without systematically examining underlying mediating mechanisms. In primary school settings, where peer relationships and classroom belonging are central to children's development, social support and belonging may function as key explanatory variables linking football engagement to psychological well-being [3].

This study addresses this gap by examining whether perceived social support and sense of belonging mediate the relationship between football participation and psychological well-being among primary school children in the United Kingdom. By focusing on mediating mechanisms, the study contributes to a more precise understanding of how sport-based interventions may promote mental health in educational contexts.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Psychological Well-Being in Primary School Children

Psychological well-being in childhood encompasses emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions of functioning. It includes positive affect, life satisfaction, self-esteem, resilience, and the absence of internalizing and externalizing difficulties. Contemporary conceptualizations often draw from positive psychology, emphasizing strengths and flourishing rather than solely the absence of pathology.

Primary school years (ages 5-11 in the UK system) represent a developmental stage characterized by expanding peer networks, increased academic demands, and growing self-awareness. Experiences during this period have long-term implications for mental health trajectories. Therefore, identifying protective environmental factors that support well-being is essential.

In addition, psychological well-being during primary school is closely associated with children's ability to regulate emotions, form secure interpersonal relationships, and adapt to academic challenges. Children who exhibit higher levels of well-being tend to demonstrate stronger engagement in learning, greater persistence when facing difficulties, and more positive social interactions. Conversely, poor psychological well-being in early childhood has been linked to increased risk of emotional disorders, social withdrawal, and academic underachievement in later developmental stages. Educational environments that promote emotional safety, peer acceptance, and supportive adult relationships are therefore critical in shaping long-term psychological outcomes. Understanding the determinants of well-being at this stage provides an important foundation for early preventive interventions and holistic educational practice.

### 2.2. Sport Participation and Psychological Well-Being

A substantial body of research indicates that participation in organized sport is associated with higher self-esteem, lower depressive symptoms, and greater life satisfaction among children and adolescents. Mechanisms proposed include mastery experiences, goal achievement, and structured physical activity.

However, findings are not universally positive. The quality of the sporting environment-such as coaching style, team climate, and competitive pressure-moderates outcomes. Thus, participation alone does not guarantee improved well-being; rather, the social context within which sport occurs appears critical.

Football, in particular, offers frequent opportunities for cooperative goal pursuit, communication, and shared success. As a team sport, it may exert especially strong social influences compared with individual sports.

Beyond physical and skill-related benefits, sport participation also contributes to psychological development by providing structured opportunities for social learning and emotional expression. Participation in team-based activities exposes children to shared responsibilities, collective problem-solving, and interpersonal feedback, all of which contribute to the development of self-confidence and emotional competence. Regular engagement in sport may also help children establish daily routines and experience a sense of purpose, which are associated with greater psychological stability. Furthermore, sport environments often provide opportunities for recognition and achievement, reinforcing positive self-perceptions. These experiences can foster a sense of accomplishment and personal value, which are important components of overall psychological well-being in childhood [4].

### *2.3. Social Support as a Mediator*

Social support refers to the perception or experience of being cared for, valued, and assisted by others. In childhood, primary sources include peers, teachers, coaches, and family members. Perceived social support has been consistently associated with reduced psychological distress and enhanced resilience.

Within sport contexts, teammates and coaches may provide emotional encouragement, informational guidance, and tangible assistance. Participation in football may expand children's peer networks, enhance friendship quality, and strengthen relationships with supportive adults.

Mediation theory suggests that football participation may increase exposure to supportive relationships, which in turn enhance psychological well-being. Empirical research in adolescent populations supports this pathway, but fewer studies have focused specifically on primary school children.

### *2.4. Sense of Belonging*

Sense of belonging refers to feelings of acceptance, inclusion, and identification within a group or institution. In primary school settings, belonging has been linked to academic motivation, emotional stability, and prosocial behavior.

Football teams often function as salient social groups. Through shared goals, team rituals, and collective identity (e.g., wearing team kits), children may develop a stronger sense of group membership. Social Identity Theory posits that identification with valued groups contributes to self-esteem and psychological well-being.

Thus, football participation may enhance children's sense of belonging both within the team and more broadly within the school community, particularly when football activities are integrated into school culture.

### *2.5. Gaps in the Literature*

While sport participation has been linked to mental health benefits, few studies have simultaneously examined social support and belonging as mediating variables within a unified structural model. Moreover, limited research has been conducted specifically within UK primary school populations, where football holds particular cultural significance. Existing studies have often focused on adolescents or mixed age groups, which may not accurately reflect the developmental characteristics and social environments of younger children. Additionally, prior research has rarely applied advanced statistical approaches, such as structural equation modeling, to rigorously test indirect pathways.

The present study addresses these gaps by testing a mediation model in which football participation predicts psychological well-being indirectly through perceived

social support and sense of belonging, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the relational mechanisms underlying sport-related psychological benefits in primary school contexts.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1. *Self-Determination Theory*

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that psychological well-being is contingent upon satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Football participation may satisfy competence through skill development and achievement, and relatedness through team interaction. In structured football settings, children are regularly exposed to progressively challenging tasks, such as mastering ball control, tactical positioning, and coordinated passing sequences. Successful execution of these skills reinforces perceived competence, which is strongly associated with intrinsic motivation and positive affect. Moreover, match performance and constructive feedback from coaches can strengthen children's sense of efficacy, thereby supporting adaptive self-appraisals.

Autonomy is also relevant within football contexts. Although primary school programmes are typically adult-guided, children often exercise meaningful choice in decision-making during gameplay, including selecting strategies, initiating plays, and negotiating roles within the team. When coaches adopt autonomy-supportive practices—such as encouraging initiative, acknowledging perspectives, and minimizing controlling language—children are more likely to internalize participation motives. This internalization fosters sustained engagement and enhances emotional well-being.

Perceived social support and belonging align closely with the need for relatedness. When children experience warmth, acceptance, and group inclusion within football contexts, their relatedness needs are fulfilled, promoting well-being. Regular training sessions, shared victories and defeats, and collaborative goal pursuit cultivate reciprocal trust and emotional connection. Fulfilment of relatedness needs reduces feelings of isolation and contributes to psychological security. Within the SDT framework, satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness operates synergistically, suggesting that football environments which nurture all three dimensions are particularly conducive to sustained psychological flourishing.

#### 3.2. *Social Identity Theory*

Social Identity Theory argues that individuals derive self-concept and self-esteem from group memberships. Identification with a football team may enhance positive self-perception and collective pride. Through shared symbols such as team names, kits, and rituals, children develop a sense of "we-ness" that distinguishes in-group members from outsiders. This collective identity provides a stable social anchor during a developmental stage characterized by expanding peer comparisons and emerging self-evaluations.

A strong sense of belonging to the team may therefore mediate psychological outcomes. When children perceive their team as valued and successful, positive group distinctiveness contributes to enhanced self-esteem. Even in competitive contexts, the experience of collective effort and mutual commitment can buffer individual setbacks. For example, responsibility for match outcomes is distributed across the group, reducing self-blame and protecting emotional stability. Additionally, team identification may strengthen prosocial norms, encouraging cooperation, empathy, and mutual encouragement. These processes reinforce social cohesion and increase perceived acceptance.

Social Identity Theory also emphasizes the cognitive and affective dimensions of identification. Cognitive identification involves recognizing oneself as a team member, whereas affective identification reflects emotional attachment to the group. Both components are likely to be activated in primary school football settings, particularly

when participation is frequent and socially rewarding. Integrating SDT and Social Identity Theory provides a robust conceptual foundation for hypothesizing that football participation enhances psychological well-being through relational mechanisms. Together, these frameworks clarify how structured team experiences translate into improved self-concept, emotional security, and sustained positive mental health outcomes.

#### **4. Methodology**

##### *4.1. Research Design*

A cross-sectional quantitative design was employed. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to examine direct and indirect relationships among variables. This design was selected because it allows for the simultaneous estimation of multiple pathways within a theoretically specified mediation framework. By modeling latent constructs rather than relying solely on observed scores, SEM reduces measurement error and provides a more rigorous test of hypothesized relationships. The conceptual model specified football participation as the exogenous variable, perceived social support and sense of belonging as mediating variables, and psychological well-being as the endogenous outcome variable.

Although longitudinal designs are more suitable for establishing temporal precedence, a cross-sectional approach was considered appropriate for this exploratory stage, given the logistical constraints of multi-school data collection and the objective of testing theoretically grounded associations. The study adopted a positivist epistemological stance, emphasizing objective measurement and statistical inference. Standardized procedures were used across participating schools to ensure consistency in data collection. Researchers administered questionnaires during regular school hours in classroom settings, thereby minimizing contextual variability. The design also enabled the examination of indirect effects through mediation analysis, which aligns directly with the theoretical propositions derived from Self-Determination Theory and Social Identity Theory.

##### *4.2. Participants*

The sample consisted of 624 primary school children (52% male, 48% female) aged 8-11 years ( $M = 9.6$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ) recruited from 12 state primary schools across England and Wales. Schools represented diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, as indicated by variations in free school meal eligibility rates and regional demographic indicators. Stratified sampling procedures were applied to ensure representation from urban, suburban, and semi-rural communities. This approach enhanced the generalizability of findings within the UK primary education context.

Inclusion criteria required participants to be enrolled in Years 4 to 6 and capable of completing self-report questionnaires independently. Children with identified severe learning difficulties that would prevent comprehension of survey items were excluded to maintain data validity. The gender distribution was approximately balanced, allowing examination of patterns across boys and girls without substantial statistical bias. Although football participation is often stereotypically associated with male students, both genders reported involvement in school-based and community football activities.

Parental consent and child assent were obtained in accordance with ethical guidelines established by the British Educational Research Association. Information sheets clearly outlined study aims, confidentiality procedures, and voluntary participation rights. No financial incentives were provided. Data were anonymized at the point of entry, and schools received aggregated feedback reports rather than individual-level results.

##### *4.3. Measures*

**Football Participation.** Children reported frequency of participation in organized football (school clubs, community teams) on a 5-point scale ranging from "never" to "four or more times per week." Additional items assessed duration of involvement in months or years to capture sustained engagement. These indicators were combined to produce a composite index reflecting both intensity and continuity of participation. Higher scores represented more frequent and longer-term engagement in structured football activities.

**Perceived Social Support.** A child-adapted version of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support assessed support from peers and adults within football contexts. Items were simplified linguistically to ensure age-appropriate comprehension. Respondents indicated agreement on a Likert-type scale. The measure captured emotional support, encouragement, and practical assistance received from teammates, coaches, and teachers. Factor analysis confirmed a coherent latent structure consistent with theoretical expectations.

**Sense of Belonging.** A validated school belonging scale measured feelings of acceptance, inclusion, and identification with peers and the school community. Selected items were contextualized to reflect team-based experiences in addition to general school membership. This allowed the construct to encompass both classroom and football-related belongingness. Higher scores indicated stronger perceived integration within relevant social groups.

**Psychological Well-Being.** The Stirling Children's Well-Being Scale was used to assess positive emotional state, optimism, and life satisfaction. The instrument is widely employed in UK educational research and demonstrates strong psychometric properties for primary-aged populations. All scales demonstrated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha > .80$ ), indicating reliable measurement across constructs.

#### 4.4. Data Analysis

SEM analyses were conducted using maximum likelihood estimation. Prior to model testing, data were screened for missing values, normality, and outliers. Missing data were minimal and handled using full information maximum likelihood procedures to preserve statistical power. Assumptions of multivariate normality were examined through skewness and kurtosis indices, which fell within acceptable thresholds.

Mediation effects were tested using bootstrapped confidence intervals (5,000 resamples). Bootstrapping was selected because it does not assume normal distribution of indirect effects and provides more accurate estimates of mediation pathways. Indirect effects were considered statistically significant when confidence intervals did not include zero.

Model fit was evaluated using CFI, TLI, RMSEA, and SRMR indices. Acceptable model fit was defined as CFI and TLI values above .90, RMSEA below .08, and SRMR below .08. Competing alternative models were also examined to assess robustness, including models excluding mediators and models specifying full mediation. Comparative fit indices supported the hypothesized partial mediation structure. Statistical analyses were performed using established SEM software packages, and significance thresholds were set at  $p < .05$ .

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Descriptive Statistics

Football participation frequency varied, with 68% of children reporting at least weekly involvement. Specifically, 27% reported participation two to three times per week, while 18% indicated involvement four or more times weekly. Approximately 32% reported less frequent or no participation, suggesting meaningful variability suitable for statistical analysis. This distribution indicates that football represents a common but not universal activity among primary school children in the sampled schools. Such variability

is important because it allows examination of differences in psychosocial outcomes across levels of engagement rather than comparing only participants and non-participants.

Mean psychological well-being scores were above normative averages established for UK primary school populations, indicating generally positive emotional functioning within the sample. However, standard deviation values demonstrated sufficient dispersion, suggesting individual differences in well-being experiences. Similarly, perceived social support scores were moderately high, reflecting that many children reported receiving encouragement and assistance from peers and adults. Sense of belonging scores also showed positive trends, indicating that most participants felt accepted and integrated within their school environments. Skewness and kurtosis statistics for all major variables fell within acceptable ranges, confirming that assumptions of normality were satisfied. These descriptive findings provide a foundation for subsequent correlational and structural analyses by confirming that key variables exhibit appropriate variability and distributional properties [5].

### 5.2. Correlational Findings

Football participation was positively correlated with perceived social support ( $r = .42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), sense of belonging ( $r = .39$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and psychological well-being ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ). These moderate correlations suggest that children who engage more frequently in football tend to report stronger perceptions of interpersonal support and greater emotional well-being. The strength of these relationships indicates meaningful associations rather than trivial statistical connections. The positive correlation between football participation and social support suggests that participation may facilitate increased interaction with peers and supportive adults, thereby strengthening relational networks.

Perceived social support and belonging were strongly correlated ( $r = .56$ ,  $p < .001$ ), indicating substantial overlap between these constructs while still maintaining conceptual distinction. This finding aligns with theoretical expectations, as supportive interpersonal relationships often contribute directly to feelings of inclusion and acceptance. Furthermore, both social support and belonging demonstrated significant positive correlations with psychological well-being, reinforcing their relevance as potential mediating variables. Importantly, none of the correlation coefficients approached levels indicative of multicollinearity, confirming that each construct contributes uniquely to the overall model. These correlational patterns provide preliminary empirical support for the hypothesized mediation pathways and justify the use of structural equation modeling to examine indirect effects more rigorously.

### 5.3. Structural Equation Modeling

The proposed mediation model demonstrated good fit (CFI = .95, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .05), indicating that the hypothesized relationships among variables were consistent with the observed data. These fit indices meet established criteria for acceptable and strong model fit, suggesting that the conceptual framework accurately captures the structural relationships between football participation, mediating variables, and psychological well-being. Factor loadings for all latent variables were statistically significant and exceeded recommended thresholds, confirming the validity of the measurement model [6].

Football participation significantly predicted perceived social support ( $\beta = .48$ ,  $p < .001$ ), sense of belonging ( $\beta = .36$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and psychological well-being ( $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These results indicate that football engagement contributes directly to both relational experiences and emotional outcomes. When mediators were included, the direct effect of football participation on well-being decreased but remained significant, indicating partial mediation rather than full mediation. This pattern suggests that while relational

mechanisms explain a substantial portion of the association, additional factors may also contribute.

Indirect effects were statistically significant. The pathway from football participation to well-being through social support ( $\beta = .18, p < .001$ ) demonstrated the strongest mediating influence, highlighting the central role of supportive interpersonal relationships. The indirect pathway through belonging ( $\beta = .15, p < .001$ ) also contributed meaningfully, emphasizing the importance of group identification and inclusion. The total indirect effect was statistically significant, supporting the hypothesized mediation model. These findings confirm that football participation enhances psychological well-being primarily through relational processes involving increased social support and strengthened sense of belonging.

## 6. Discussion

The findings indicate that football participation is positively associated with psychological well-being among primary school children in the United Kingdom. Crucially, this relationship is partially mediated by perceived social support and sense of belonging. These results provide empirical evidence that football participation contributes to children's mental health not only through physical engagement but also through psychosocial processes. The mediation model confirms that relational experiences formed within football contexts play a significant role in shaping emotional outcomes. This aligns with contemporary developmental perspectives emphasizing that children's well-being is strongly influenced by the quality of their social environments.

Furthermore, the findings extend previous research by demonstrating that football participation supports psychological well-being within the specific cultural and educational context of UK primary schools. Football occupies a prominent role in school-based physical education and extracurricular programming, which increases opportunities for repeated social interaction and identity formation. Regular engagement allows children to establish stable peer relationships and develop familiarity with team structures, both of which contribute to emotional security. The results also reinforce the theoretical relevance of Self-Determination Theory and Social Identity Theory by confirming that relational satisfaction and group identification serve as meaningful explanatory pathways.

Importantly, the study highlights that football participation should be understood as a social experience rather than solely a physical activity. The relational benefits associated with team involvement appear to enhance children's emotional resilience and sense of psychological safety. This suggests that educational institutions can utilize football as a structured platform to promote mental health and social development simultaneously. By emphasizing supportive interaction and inclusive participation, schools may strengthen the protective effects observed in the present findings.

### 6.1. Social Support as a Mechanism

Children who engaged more frequently in football reported higher levels of peer and adult support. Football environments may foster shared experiences, cooperative problem-solving, and mutual encouragement, which enhance perceptions of being valued and supported. These interactions create opportunities for children to receive both emotional reassurance and practical guidance, which contribute to their overall sense of interpersonal security. Teammates often provide encouragement during training and matches, reinforcing positive effort and persistence. Similarly, coaches and teachers may offer constructive feedback that promotes skill development while also affirming children's abilities and potential.

Consistent with Self-Determination Theory, fulfillment of relatedness needs appears central to well-being enhancement. Supportive team climates likely buffer stress and promote positive emotional states. When children perceive that others care about their

progress and inclusion, they are more likely to experience confidence and emotional stability. Social support also facilitates adaptive coping by providing reassurance during setbacks or performance challenges. For example, children who miss scoring opportunities or make errors during matches may receive encouragement from teammates, reducing negative self-evaluation.

In addition, repeated exposure to supportive interactions may strengthen children's expectations of positive social relationships beyond the football context. This generalized perception of support can enhance overall psychological functioning and resilience. Over time, these experiences may contribute to the development of trust, empathy, and social competence. The strong mediating effect observed in the present study suggests that football serves as an effective context for fostering meaningful social connections that directly contribute to improved psychological well-being.

### *6.2. Belonging and Social Identity*

The mediating role of belonging underscores the importance of group identification in shaping children's psychological outcomes. Through team membership, children develop collective identity and social integration. Participation in football provides structured opportunities for children to perceive themselves as part of a cohesive group working toward shared objectives. This group affiliation enhances feelings of inclusion and reduces the likelihood of social isolation. Children who feel accepted within a team environment are more likely to develop positive emotional states and stable self-perceptions.

Feeling part of a valued group enhances self-worth and optimism. Social Identity Theory suggests that identification with meaningful groups contributes to positive self-concept by linking individual identity with collective success and recognition. When football teams experience progress or achievement, children may internalize these positive outcomes as reflections of their own value. This process strengthens confidence and reinforces emotional well-being. In addition, shared team rituals, uniforms, and cooperative tasks further reinforce group cohesion and emotional attachment.

In UK school culture, football often carries symbolic significance, which may amplify identity-related benefits. Football teams frequently represent schools in inter-school competitions, which enhances their visibility and prestige. As a result, children who participate in football may experience a stronger sense of pride and institutional belonging. This sense of identification extends beyond the team itself and contributes to broader school integration. The mediating role of belonging observed in this study highlights the importance of social inclusion as a key psychological pathway linking football participation to mental health outcomes.

### *6.3. Partial Mediation*

The persistence of a direct effect suggests additional mechanisms, such as physical fitness improvements or perceived competence, may also contribute to psychological well-being. Physical activity is known to influence neurological and physiological processes, including the regulation of stress hormones and the release of endorphins, which promote positive mood states. Regular football participation may therefore produce emotional benefits through both biological and psychosocial pathways. These physiological effects complement the relational benefits identified in the mediation model.

Perceived competence represents another important explanatory factor. As children develop football skills and experience improvement, they may develop stronger beliefs in their abilities. This sense of competence contributes to increased self-confidence and motivation, which are closely linked to psychological well-being. Achievement experiences, such as successfully completing passes or contributing to team success, reinforce positive self-evaluation. These mastery experiences may influence well-being independently of social factors.

Additionally, football participation provides structured routines and goal-oriented activity, which contribute to emotional regulation and behavioral stability. Participation in regular training sessions may enhance discipline, focus, and persistence. These psychological attributes support adaptive functioning in academic and social contexts. The presence of partial mediation indicates that football participation influences psychological well-being through multiple pathways simultaneously. Social support and belonging represent central mechanisms, but they operate alongside additional developmental processes that collectively enhance children's emotional health and overall psychological functioning.

## 7. Educational and Policy Implications

**Inclusive Football Programs:** Schools should ensure equitable access regardless of gender, ability, or socioeconomic status. This includes providing sufficient equipment, adapting activities to accommodate different skill levels, and creating participation pathways for children who may lack prior experience. Schools should also actively encourage participation among underrepresented groups, particularly girls and children from disadvantaged backgrounds, to ensure that psychosocial benefits are distributed fairly. Inclusive programme design can help prevent marginalization and promote a sense of belonging for all students.

**Supportive Coaching Training:** Coaches should emphasize encouragement, respect, and teamwork. Training programmes for school staff and community coaches should incorporate psychological principles related to child development, emotional support, and positive communication. Coaches who adopt autonomy-supportive and non-punitive approaches can strengthen children's motivation and emotional security. Professional development workshops can equip coaches with strategies to reinforce confidence, manage conflict constructively, and promote cooperative interaction among team members.

**Integration with Well-Being Initiatives:** Football clubs can align with school mental health programs. Schools may integrate football activities into broader well-being frameworks that emphasize emotional resilience, social competence, and positive peer relationships. Collaboration between physical education departments and pastoral care teams can ensure that football programmes contribute directly to psychological support objectives. Such integration enhances the educational value of sport and reinforces its role in promoting holistic child development.

**Monitoring Team Climate:** Schools should assess peer dynamics to prevent exclusion or bullying. Teachers and coaches should regularly observe team interactions and identify signs of social isolation or negative behavior. Anonymous student feedback and reflective discussions can help educators evaluate the emotional climate of football programmes. Early identification of interpersonal difficulties allows timely intervention, ensuring that football environments remain supportive, inclusive, and psychologically beneficial.

## 8. Limitations and Future Research

Limitations include cross-sectional design, reliance on self-report measures, and potential selection bias. The cross-sectional nature of the study prevents definitive conclusions regarding causal relationships between football participation and psychological well-being. Self-report instruments may also be influenced by social desirability or individual interpretation of survey items. Additionally, children who choose to participate in football may already possess higher levels of social engagement, which could influence the observed associations.

Longitudinal studies are needed to establish causality and examine developmental changes over time. Future research may also explore moderating variables such as gender, competitive level, coaching style, and programme quality. Investigating contextual factors, including school culture and parental involvement, would further clarify how football

participation influences psychological outcomes. Such research can contribute to more targeted interventions that maximize mental health benefits for children.

## 9. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that football participation positively influences psychological well-being among primary school children in the United Kingdom, with social support and sense of belonging functioning as significant mediators. The findings highlight that the psychological benefits of football extend beyond physical activity, operating through relational and identity-based processes. By fostering supportive, inclusive team environments, schools and community programs can leverage football as a powerful tool for promoting children's mental health and social development.

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