

Heads up! How small-sided football can help the nation's health

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Dr Dan Parnell, of the Business School at Manchester Metropolitan University, offers some thoughts on recently-published research which highlights how small-sided football training can contribute to the health of the nation.

In England, we have observed the growth of professional football clubs as deliverers of Primary Physical Education (PE) ([Parnell et al., 2016](#)). Whilst Primary PE has been outsourced to a range of willing providers, recent research suggests that football could offer some real answers to tackling the health of the nation.

In June 2016, the British Journal of Sports Medicine published an editorial by Peter Krstrup, Juri Dvorak and Jens Bangsbo, which discusses the role of small-sided football training in schools and leisure-time sports clubs, and how it improves physical fitness, health profile, well-being and learning in children ([Krstrup, Dvorak and Bangsbo, 2016](#)).

How can small-sided football training help children?

The editorial highlighted that of the research on Football for Health (about 100 scientific articles from 2009 to present), approximately one third have investigated football training in schools and in sports clubs.

The conclusions are encouraging:

- small-sided football training induces high heart rates, a large number of intense actions along with high involvement, technical success rates and training effects for boys and girls irrespective of body mass index, fitness level or prior experience with football;
- 98% of children who are members of football clubs live up to the physical activity recommendation of health authorities and they have stronger bones, less fat and greater aerobic fitness than non-sport club members, and
- small-sided school-based football interventions with just 2×30, 3×40 and 2×45-minute weekly games improve bone health, heart health, physical capacity and learning in children aged eight to 12 years old.

This provides a clear message for all stakeholders from policy-makers to headteachers: *Football has the potential to get children fit and healthy!*

What can we do?

We have already highlighted the lack of research and understanding of the role of professional football clubs in the delivery of Primary Physical Education ([Parnell et al., 2016](#)). But that aside, those involved in (and genuinely interested in) getting our children fit and health need to, in football terms, ‘get their heads up’.

We need to deliver high-quality, focused programmes which use small-sided football training to deliver health targets. And this needs to be supported with clear research and evaluation, to make sure we are getting this right in practice ([Lansley and Parnell, 2016](#)). The evidence is there – we just need to make this happen.

This article is based on the following research article:

Krustrup, P., Dvorak, J., and Bangsbo, J. (2016). Small-sided football in schools and leisure-time sport clubs improves physical fitness, health profile, well-being and learning in children. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, doi:10.1136/bjsports-2016-096266 ([open access here](#)).

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