

Using Football to Promote Health

1) Playing football as exercise

Playing soccer has now become popular with girls and women as well as males. It is also loved by many different BAME groups within the UK. It obviously offers benefits in terms of physical fitness, but perhaps it is also good for releasing stress.

2) Sport to promote values and skills

In the late Nineteenth century the influence of Muscular Christianity and the moral value of sport took hold in British public schools. Christian Socialists later exported this to the 'slums' as a community development tool. They saw how football could be used to promote certain values and skills, such as teamwork, competition etc. Team sports are still sometimes encouraged for these reasons today. However, different sporting values may well produce different health outcomes. Promoting the physical activity of dancing may lead to greater sociability than promoting gym use that could make people relatively more isolated. The value of using particular sports people as deliberate role models is also another way of promoting values.

3) Football as a way to build communities

The work of Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone* suggests that sport clubs and local leagues may help maintain a local sense of community, with purpose and meaningful social contact. This in itself is good for health according to Richard G Wilkinson in *Unhealthy Societies: The Afflictions of Inequality*. (In a similar way I am aware of, the possible urban myth of, disabled people in receipt of direct payments from the state to spend as they want, using their money to buy a season ticket rather than spending it on paying to go to a day centre. Football giving their life more meaningful social contact and purpose, as well as a sense of identity.)

4) Football as a place to reach people

Football stadiums are good places for advertisements aimed at certain target groups. However, the bigger clubs are now so expensive that the groups most in need of health information may not be able to go. It may be worth thinking about working with smaller clubs or local weekend leagues to reach certain target groups. This could be by direct contact or advertising on shirts or in stadiums and programmes. Health charities may also find football a good 'venue' to reach people if they are looking to raise money.

5) Football as a way of linking health to people's own interests

Football can be used as a topic to help to engage people on health topics. This has two aspects to it. One can be described as superficial and the other, explored more in 6) below, as more intrinsic to the game. Neither is any better than the other. A 'superficial' approach is where football is used to 'sugar the pill'. This is a variation on the commercial world using footballers to promote their products. So, for example, a member of a local team is invited to a health fair. The hope is that people will come to see him and then stay for the rest of the event. Another approach under this heading would be the use of football as a metaphor in advertising e.g. 'Moving the goal posts'.

6) Bringing out health related issues within football

As discussed in 2) football is not morally neutral. The professional game has certain topics, values and contradictions embedded within it. You can therefore use it to engage people in a debate about a range of health matters. These topics and values include:

- * Issues round lifestyle associated with player and fan behaviour such as alcohol, drugs, violence, stress, gender roles and class
- * Issues round health education skills that often derive from the role of the manager such as decision-making, communication, dealing with feelings and promoting others' self-esteem
- * Issues round the wider determinants of health. Examples here include helping others, poverty, racism, the role of government and the media. These are all a reflection of the world that clubs operate in

7) Football as a diversionary activity

Soccer can be used as a diversion, for example to get young people away from drinking on street corners and into the sports hall.

8) Football and inducements in health promotion

Sometimes people have been offered inducements to change their health behaviour. This could be money however, perhaps free tickets to a match or the chance to meet a star player could be used instead.

9) Football as a way of changing perception

Theoretically football could also be deliberately used to attempt to change how disadvantaged groups see themselves or are seen by others. Has disability sport done this successfully already? Could the relative success of the English Woman's football team further change attitudes towards women and physical activity?

10) Football as reminiscence therapy

Football clubs in places such as Spain and Scotland have joined forces with Alzheimer organisations and universities to see how to use football in reminiscence therapy. This is help people recover lost memories.

11) Using football to directly tackle the wider determinants of health

In some circumstances, such as a World Cup tournament, football is also claimed to improve the infrastructure of an area and develop the local economy. In which case this could potentially lead to long or short-term health benefits, as well as possible negative side effects. A health impact assessment would obviously need to be carried out at the start to study this. Few policy makers will ever have this kind of global opportunity on their hands of course. The redevelopment of local professional or amateur stadiums may or may not have a similar, if reduced, impact. (Simon Kuper and Stefan Szymanski have written about claims that sport tournaments and stadium are tools of social and economic development, and the limits of this model, in *Why England Lose*.)

Combining football with other approaches

Social market research will tell you what messages, skills etc. to link to football. It will also show you whether to link football into some of the other approaches on this website such as computer games, magazines or a romantic novel about WAGs aimed at young women.

Football can also be combined with other aspects of popular culture e.g. wellbeing choirs or singing projects around football music, such as *Three Lions*, *World in Motion* or songs associated with particular clubs. There are also plenty of non-football songs that might work as well too around themes of keeping going, positive thinking, celebration and friendship. Mental health education information could also be included in all this. Another idea would be to produce football banners, scarves, alternative kits or T-shirts with health messages on them