

Research article

Children's Involvement in Grassroots Football: A Sports Psychology Perspective

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the psychological dynamics of children's involvement in grassroots soccer through a sports psychology perspective. A descriptive qualitative method was used with purposive sampling, involving 11 participants there were five parents, five child athletes, and a head coach from SSB Bina Mandiri Tembilahan. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations, then analyzed thematically. The results revealed that children's experiences are shaped within a complex psychological ecosystem, characterized by the interaction between the child's intrinsic motivation to play and socialize, the extrinsic expectations of the parents, and the coach's play-learn-play philosophy. The findings indicate that the soccer environment functions as a holistic developmental space, not only honing motor skills but also fostering emotional regulation, athletic identity, and social competence in children. The key to the success of this environment lies in the alignment of roles within the triadic support ecosystem like parents as logistical and emotional supporters, coaches as architects of the motivational climate, and children as active participants. This study concludes that a sports psychology approach is crucial for designing a grassroots environment that supports children's psychological well-being and long-term engagement in sport, beyond simply the pursuit of athletic talent.

Keywords: Sports Psychology, Grassroots Football, Child Motivation, Motivational Climate' Parental Support

1. Introduction

Grassroots football is the foundation upon which the entire world of football is built. It allows millions of children access to the sport through school teams and football clubs, where the primary goal is engagement, skill development, and enjoyment [1]. While these early stages of play may be seen as merely a stepping stone for future sports stars, they are much more than that. These are formative years for the development of physical health, social skills, emotional stability, and personal identity [2]. While the development and strategies used in training and game progression have been at the forefront for many years, the psychological elements at play cannot be ignored. Examining children's involvement in the world of sports psychology allows the debate to move beyond strategy and rewards to consider its implications for continued development and engagement in the sport[3].

The influence of the microenvironment on the soccer field cannot be underestimated. For most young soccer players, these experiences may not lead to professional careers, but the psychological imprint of those experiences will remain. It will be an environment where children will experience cooperation, conflict, victory, and defeat [4]. It will be an environment where children will experience a powerful feedback loop, whether it instills lifelong involvement in sports and a healthy lifestyle or

anxiety, low self-esteem, and early inactivity. Thus, it is clear how the psychological atmosphere plays a significant role. Sports psychology offers tools to examine and optimize this environment, focusing on the child, not the sporting outcome [5].

One of the primary ways sport psychology contributes to the discipline is through its emphasis on motivation [6]. Studies have shown that intrinsic motivation, which stems from the enjoyment and satisfaction derived from playing, can also be distinguished from extrinsic motivation, which stems from rewards or pressure to achieve. Grassroots football is an ideal context for promoting intrinsic motivation [7]. However, an overemphasis on winning, premature specialization, and adult pressure can easily lead a child to become extrinsically motivated. Such extrinsic motivation is an important finding for sport psychology [8]. When children become extrinsically motivated, self-esteem becomes fragile and is linked to uncontrollable outcomes. Sport psychology seeks to determine ways to maintain children's intrinsic motivation by ensuring that children play for intrinsic, rather than extrinsic reasons [9].

Motivation and self-perception are two sides of the same coin. A child's formative years playing grassroots football are a critical period in determining their self-esteem and the sporting personality they will develop [10]. How children react to praise or recognition for scoring goals, advice from their coaches, or how their parents react on the sidelines can directly impact their perception of their abilities. In sports psychology, the need to develop a growth mindset has been emphasized. A growth mindset focuses on the effort an individual puts into a sport or activity. How a child reacts to setbacks or failures can determine how they develop mentally [11]. A child praised for their perseverance and knowledge of the game has a much stronger psychological profile than one praised solely for scoring goals.

Furthermore, sports psychology also provides insight into children's emotional lives. Grassroots football is an emotionally charged environment where children experience emotions such as joy, pride, frustration, and disappointment [12]. How children learn to identify, interpret, and manage these emotions plays a crucial role in their development. A psychologically informed environment will enable children to learn how to manage emotions such as "winning stress," "pre-match jitters," or "coping with disappointment" through psychological principles. For example, instead of telling children "don't be sad" or "you shouldn't be nervous," adults can transform these situations into learning opportunities. Emotional intelligence is one of the most beneficial learning outcomes children can gain from grassroots sports [13].

The social aspect of teams is an area well worth exploring. Soccer is a highly social activity. It is collaborative and communicative. Through the study of sports psychology, we can learn more about the development of positive peer relationships, communication, leadership, and a sense of belonging [14]. A child's decision to persist in a sport is heavily influenced by their social integration within a team. How well a child feels accepted, valued, and socially connected with their peers is a powerful determinant of their decision to continue participating in the activity [15].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Design

The researchers used descriptive qualitative research methods to study how children interact with grassroots football through their complex social and psychological behaviors. The researchers chose qualitative research methods because they could gather deep personal experiences and views and the football environment's essential stakeholders developed their own distinctive understanding of the sport [16] [17]. The

research design focuses on achieving thorough comprehension because it enables researchers to study how participants understand their respective duties and their connections with others and the entire youth sports environment. The study aims to present a comprehensive description of the operational system and the actual experiences of people within the established football academy which functions as SSB. The research design aims to develop an extensive understanding of psychological factors through three complete yet interrelated viewpoints which include child athletes and their parents and their coaches. The youth sports environment needs this combination of different viewpoints because it establishes a complete and intricate understanding of the space.

2.2 Procedure

Data collection occurred during three months at the SSB Bina Mandiri Tembilahan training facility. In-depth semi-structured interviews served as the main method for collecting data from the selected participants who represented each stakeholder group. Separate, tailored interview guides were developed for children, parents, and the coach. The guides established open-ended questions and prompts which asked participants to share their experiences and motivations and challenges and emotional responses and perceptions of the training environment together with their own important topics. The procedure followed all established ethical standards for research. The researchers obtained informed consent from all adult participants and from the parents of child participants before beginning their study, while the researchers also obtained assent from the child participants. The researchers obtained permission to record interviews which they transcribed word-for-word and later translated without losing the original meaning and emotional tone of the responses.

2.3 Participants

The researchers used purposive sampling to select study participants who possess specialized knowledge about the researched phenomenon. The research method enables participants to deliver extensive information which meets the requirements of qualitative research. The selection process required individuals who actively participated in SSB Bina Mandiri Tembilahan operations through three essential roles which included children who functioned as main participants and their parents who acted as main supporters and the coach who served as main educational instructor.

A total of eleven people participated in the study. This research included five child athletes (aged 14-16 years) who had trained at the SSB for more than two years and their parents who included both mothers and fathers who attended training and matches and the academy head coach who had more than five years of coaching experience at the youth level. Qualitative research commonly uses small focused sample sizes to achieve in-depth case study research. The children were selected to represent a range of skill levels and tenure within the club to capture varied experiences, while the parents provided insights into familial support, pressures, and aspirations.

Recruitment will begin by establishing contact with the management of the selected football academy. After obtaining formal permission from the academy, the researcher will request access to information about potential participants. An introductory meeting will be arranged with coaches and parents to explain the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the procedures involved. Parents who express initial interest will be provided with detailed information sheets. From those who agree, their children will then be invited to participate. Recruitment will

continue until data saturation is reached the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from the interviews.

The tripartite participant structure exists because youth sports psychology requires a systemic framework which connects its various elements. A child develops his or her life experience through continuous interaction with his or her coach and his or her parents. The study develops a complete psychological environment framework through the combination of three distinct viewpoints. The coach's philosophy determines training conditions which create training conditions while parents' beliefs about their children lead to increased motivation and decreased anxiety in their children. The child displays their internal response to external factors through his personal understanding of those factors. The three elements work together to create a comprehensive view of participation. To make it easier for readers to understand, the researchers used the codes PM for children, OT for parents, and PL for coaches involved in this study. The sample size was deemed sufficient according to the principle of information saturation in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2016)

Table 1 Participant Characteristics

Code	Category	Gender	Age
PM1	Players	Male	14
PM2	Players	Male	14
PM3	Players	Male	16
PM4	Players	Female	16
PM5	Players	Female	16
OT1	Parents	Male	38
OT2	Parents	Male	41
OT3	Parents	Male	42
OT4	Parents	Male	40
OT5	Parents	Male	41
PL1	Coaches	Male	32

2.4 Data Analysis

The research team applied iterative thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006) which enables researchers to discover and examine and document extensive patterns in their qualitative research. The analysis process began with researchers reading all interview transcripts and field notes multiple times until they achieved complete understanding of the data. The researchers created initial codes which function as brief descriptors that indicate vital aspects of the data which connect to the research goals. Researchers conducted manual coding throughout the dataset while giving equal attention to all data which included children and parents and the coach.

The research team progressed to a new stage of research after completing the first stage of coding. The team compiled coded data extracts to analyze their contents for emerging patterns of meaning which resulted in the identification of candidate themes. The process involved sorting and clustering codes into potential themes and sub-themes that captured something significant about the data in relation to the sports psychology perspective. The researcher used codes which related to "fear of making mistakes" and "enjoyment of drills" and "excitement for games" to create a broad theme which investigated "Sources of Motivation and Anxiety." The researchers performed a thorough examination of this stage to check themes against coded extracts and complete dataset to confirm that they established a clear pattern.

The researchers used the final stage to establish and develop and label their thematic categories which produced a structured analytical framework. The researchers used distinct theme descriptions which they supported with striking transcript extracts from field notes to demonstrate their themes. The researchers investigated both the similarities and differences which existed among the three groups of participants.

3. Result

The results of this study are based on an in-depth analysis of interview data from parents, children, and coaches at SSB Bina Mandiri Tembilihan. These findings reveal the complexity of children's psychological experiences in soccer grassroots, with key themes emerging from all three perspectives.

3.1 Parental Perspective: Future-Oriented Support and Hope

Parents play what they see as the primary supporter. Their motivation stems from recognizing their child's interests, but is often accompanied by strong hopes for an athletic future. OT1 unequivocally stated his reasoning:

"I just wanted to encourage my son's talent to become a soccer player, so I put him in training at SSB Bina Mandiri. At Bina Mandiri, he felt awkward. At first, he was enthusiastic because his talent could be channeled."

This support is manifested in very concrete forms, especially physical presence and external incentives, as explained by OT3:

"I always support my child to keep him motivated to participate in training. I also reward him if he remains enthusiastic about participating."

Their long-term hopes are also clear. When asked about their aspirations, one respondent (OT2) answered:

"My hope for my son is that he will become a professional footballer."

This pattern suggests that parents, while very caring, create a motivational environment that is unconsciously outcome-oriented, where the value of children's participation is linked to future achievements and career prospects.

3.2 A Child's Perspective: Fun, Togetherness, and Developing Identity

In contrast to parents' views, children described their experiences with an emphasis on intrinsic pleasure (*enjoyment*) and the social dimension of playing ball. Their happiness comes from moments spent with friends and collective success. One child, PM2, enthusiastically recounted:

"I felt happy, especially when my parents were watching. So after I finished playing, I could take a photo with my parents. What made you proud at that time? Being able to be watched by so many people and giving your best performance."

For another child, PM5, pride comes from team dynamics:

"What makes me proud is the teamwork, everyone supports each other, and the game is compact. So, we were able to play well."

The friendship aspect is a very strong attraction, as expressed by PM1:

"It's fun. I made lots of new friends, new coaches, new experiences... What I like: Made new friends."

Despite having lofty aspirations like playing for the national team, the children attribute these aspirations to personal effort and commitment, not external pressure. Zikri explains:

"You have to practice diligently, take care of your physical condition, live a healthy life, and don't be lazy. The main thing is, you have to be serious if you want to make the national team."

However, the key dynamic that influenced their experience was the relationship with the coach. PM3 felt supported and comfortable because

"The way the coach teaches. The way he gives input on how to play football. And also being able to play with friends."

while another child, PM4, kept his confusion to himself:

"The coach is sometimes unclear... Just keep it to yourself."

This highlights the central role of the coach as the primary regulator of the emotional and motivational climate on the pitch.

3.3 A Coach's Perspective: Building Character through Structured Discipline and Fun

Head coach PL1 outlined a training philosophy consciously designed to bridge skill development with children's psychological well-being. Its foundation is character building and discipline through simple routines:

"What's clear is that at SSB, we first emphasize discipline and character building. We start with small things, like how to drink. The children must drink while sitting down and bring their own tumblers. From there, we've already accustomed them to discipline."

However, he is very aware that at the grassroots level, the element of fun is key to sustainability. Therefore, the method is flexible and child-centered:

"The grassroots level has to be fun. So we give two materials, then move on to games... Our method: play, learn, play. If it's just material all the time, the kids get bored."

To maintain engagement and manage behavioral challenges, PL1 implemented practical psychological strategies:

"Usually, kids under 10 tend to joke around and lose focus. We talk to them, encourage them, or create an icebreaker. This helps them smile again and get their spirits up. If they're tired, we switch to a light, fun activity."

Three-way communication with parents is also an integral part of her approach to creating a cohesive environment:

"With parents, we usually communicate through WhatsApp groups. Sometimes they ask directly, 'Coach, what's today's material? Can we review it at home?' We answer that and ask them to help monitor the children's practice at home."

Overall, these findings depict a dynamic psychological ecosystem. Parents provide a framework of future-oriented aspirations and logistical support. Children enliven this space with intrinsic motivation derived from the joy of play, social bonding, and pride in self-mastery. In the midst of this, coaches act as critical architects and mediators, actively constructing a structured environment that aims to balance disciplinary demands with children's fundamental needs for enjoyment and emotional support. A child's healthy and sustained engagement appears to depend largely on the coach's effectiveness in embracing these three motivational streams, thus protecting the child's intrinsic fire while constructively navigating external expectations [21] [22].

The grassroots football experience is a psychologically rich ecosystem. Children are intrinsically motivated by social play and enjoyment, which is carefully preserved by the coach's "play-learn-play" philosophy. Play-Learn-Play is a tiered approach to early

childhood soccer development that positions play as both the entry and exit point of the learning process. This concept is relevant to this research because it addresses the problematic symptoms of excessive pressure and over-focus on results.

The first stage, Play (Early Play), is a phase of free exploration. Children are introduced to soccer through simple games without rigid rules, aimed at building joy and a love for the ball. The second stage, Learn, is an introduction to basic skills, but is still presented in the form of fun, small-sided games, rather than boring, repetitive drills. The third stage, Play (Late Play), is the application of learned skills to real-life match situations.

This intrinsic engagement is simultaneously scaffolded by parental support and gently directed toward future aspirations by both parents and the coach. The environment successfully functions as a venue for developing not only football skills but also emotional regulation, social competence, and a positive athletic identity, contingent on the continued balance between enjoyable participation and structured development [23].

4. Discussion

The findings indicate that grassroots football is shaped by diverse motivations, social interactions, and intentional design. In sports psychology, this suggests youth development extends beyond technical skills to include a climate that balances enjoyment and growth [24]. The main themes like Motivation and Future Orientation, Social-Emotional Development, and the Support Ecosystem clarify how the academy supports children's development. This discussion examines the findings through key theories, considers practical implications, and underscores the importance of maintaining balance to keep children engaged.

The centrality of the coach's "play-learn-play" philosophy aligns robustly with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that intrinsic motivation flourishes when the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported. By deliberately prioritizing enjoyment ("harus menyenangkan") and social interaction, the coach directly nurtures the needs for relatedness (through team play) and autonomy (through engaging game-like activities). This strategic focus helps explain the children's primary reported motivation being "main sama teman," suggesting the environment successfully fosters the internal drive that is crucial for long-term engagement and effort. Consequently, the coach's role emerges not merely as a technical instructor but as an architect of a basic psychological need-supportive environment, which is foundational for positive sport experiences [25] [26] [27].

However, the pervasive presence of future professional aspirations voiced by both children and parents introduces a layer of extrinsic motivation that requires careful management. While such dreams can provide direction and perseverance, an over-emphasis on distal outcomes can undermine the intrinsic enjoyment vital at the grassroots level [28]. The data reveals a potential tension where parental hopes for a professional career ("menjadi pemain sepak bola profesional") could, if overly emphasized, shift the child's focus toward external validation. The coach's methodology appears to act as a crucial buffer here, grounding the experience in immediate, fun-focused activities and thereby helping to maintain a healthier motivational balance that protects the child's innate love for the game.

The social-emotional benefits reported, including coping skills and a growing athletic identity, demonstrate the pitch's role as a key context for psychosocial development [29] [30]. Learning to manage boredom by seeking coach support or tolerating physical discomfort are forms of emotional regulation directly practiced in a meaningful

context. Furthermore, the pride derived from competitive success and the sense of belonging within the team contribute significantly to the construction of a positive self-concept, a process aligned with the theory of identity development in sport. This environment, therefore, functions as a formative arena where children not only learn to play football but also to navigate challenges and see themselves as capable individuals within a collective [31].

The tripartite support ecosystem of parents, coach, and child emerged as the structural backbone of the psychological environment, a finding consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory [32]. Each actor occupies a distinct but interdependent role: parents as enablers and validators, the coach as a need-supportive mentor and structural guide, and the child as an active agent navigating this system. The open communication channels, particularly between coach and parents, are vital for maintaining alignment and preventing conflicting messages that could generate anxiety or confusion for the child [33] [34]. This synergy creates a coherent microsystem that provides the stability and consistent reinforcement necessary for holistic development [35].

A critical implication for practice drawn from this study is the paramount importance of educating all stakeholders especially parents and coaches on the principles of sports psychology [36]. Coaches should be supported in implementing and maintaining play-centered philosophies that resist the creeping pressure of early specialization and outcome-focused training [37]. Simultaneously, parental education programs could help channel supportive involvement toward fostering autonomy and celebrating effort, rather than solely focusing on talent identification and future results [38]. Such initiatives would strengthen the ecosystem, ensuring that adult influences consistently bolster, rather than inadvertently undermine, the positive climate [41].

This study reveals that successful grassroots football from a sports psychology perspective is defined by its capacity to sustain a motivational climate where enjoyment, personal growth, and social connection are paramount [39]. The children's involvement is shaped by a confluence of the coach's intentional pedagogy, the parents' supportive presence, and the peer-driven joy of play. For the vast majority who will not become professionals, this environment's true success lies in nurturing a lifelong positive relationship with physical activity, resilience, and a sense of community [40]. Future research could longitudinally track how shifts in this motivational climate over time influence dropout rates, well-being, and the sustainability of sport participation beyond childhood.

5. Conclusion

Based on this research, it can be concluded that children's involvement in grassroots football constitutes a complex psychological ecosystem. Children's experiences are shaped by the dynamic interaction between their intrinsic motivation to have fun and socialize with friends, the extrinsic support of parents in the form of expectations and presence, and a coaching climate intentionally designed by coaches to be enjoyable and support basic psychological needs. The play-learn-play philosophy implemented by coaches plays a crucial role as a primary balancer, protecting children's intrinsic motivation from undue pressure while guiding the development of skills and character. Future research is recommended to involve a more diverse group of participants from various regions in Indonesia, so as to capture the diversity of children's experiences based on different social and cultural backgrounds. Longitudinal studies are also needed to observe how children's perceptions develop over time and how external factors dynamically interact throughout their football careers. Furthermore, a

deeper exploration of coaches' perspectives and how their understanding of child psychology influences daily coaching practices would complement the overall picture of the ecosystem.

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