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**Exploring Therapeutic Power of Football in Rehabilitation Process among Wounded  
Children and Youth in Rwanda**

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## Exploring Therapeutic Power of Football in Rehabilitation Process among Wounded Children and Youth in Rwanda



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### Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study was to explore the transformative power of football in addressing psychological trauma and promoting holistic healing among disadvantaged children and youth in Rwanda. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the research assesses how football intersects with multiple environmental systems such as microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem to support physical, psychological, emotional, social and cognitive development.

**Methodology:** Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through questionnaires, focus group discussion and interviews from 110 respondents with at least three years of football involvement considering the age interval ranged between 12 and 22.

**Findings:** Findings reveal that football significantly contributes to emotional recovery, self-esteem, resilience, identity reconstruction and social reintegration for children and youth affected by various traumatic backgrounds. The study disclosed an average improvement of 89.2% of Physical development, 80.2% of psychological development, 72.5% of emotional development, 74.2% of social development and 76.1% of cognitive development. Despite positive outcomes, significant challenges remain, especially for individuals from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds. Their holistic development is often hindered by limited access to resources, unresolved trauma, emotional vulnerability and experiences of social exclusion within team dynamics. The study concludes that football is more than a game; it is a therapeutic space that fosters healing, nurtures life skills and rebuilds the lives of traumatized children and youth. The research offers evidence-based insights for educators, policymakers, NGOs and practitioners seeking holistic, culturally relevant approaches to healing and youth development.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy:** The study recommends the adoption of football as a therapeutic intervention, given its demonstrated effectiveness in supporting trauma recovery. It further advocates for inclusive, community-based football initiatives as essential mechanisms for psychosocial healing, capable of addressing both individual trauma and broader systemic inequalities.

**Keywords:** Football, Rehabilitation, Wounded

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## INTRODUCTION

A significant number of children in Rwanda experience various forms of violence, leading to profound emotional and psychological trauma. According to the 2015-2016 Violence Against Children and Youth Survey (VACYS), over 50% of girls and 60% of boys reported experiencing at least one of the forms of violence including sexual, physical or emotional before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2018). The childhood trauma has long-lasting effects. Children who experience violence are at increased risk of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Kemal et al., 2023). They easily engage in risky behaviors such as early sexual activity and substance abuse. Childhood violence is frequently cyclical, through victims internalizing abusive behavior and later repeating it as if it were normal (Villaveces et al., 2022). One of the strategies of holistically addressing this issue is using soccer game therapy that associate physical, emotional and mental healing and recovery of affected children and youth. Healing is not limited to curing a wound or sadness; it encompasses a deeper transformation of lifestyle that involves rebuilding strength, resilience and a renewed sense of self and others (Martín-Rodríguez, et al, 2024).

Healing in its core does not always mean returning to the way things were, it is a process of adapting, evolving and finding peace in a new form; it is a coming back to fulfilled life (Macy & Brown, 2014; Bazubagira, 2023). It involves acknowledging pain, accepting what cannot be changed and choosing to move forward without being defined by previous wounds (Enright, 2019). Healing transforms how we carry traumatic memories shifting from a place of suffering to one of understanding and growth rather than erasing difficult experiences. It releases resentment, guilt or shame and reclaims in power traumatizing violence have taken away (Roth, 2011; Winfrey, & Perry, 2021). Healing is finding the strength to live with it, learn from it and allow it to shape a more compassionate and resilient self. The past instead of being a prison of trauma it becomes an inspiring class (Flood, 2018).

Beyond its competitive edge and global fame, soccer offers something deeply personal: a space for self-discovery, emotional release, connection with a real environment and renewal, a sense of community (Kuhn, 2019). It helps a child or youth to rediscover joy, purpose of living, appreciations, togetherness and the other becomes a necessity to the success (Witzig, 2006). The emotional power of soccer lies in its simplicity and universality. Playing offers a sense of belonging, structure, discipline and achievement through movement, teamwork and shared passion, it fosters resilience and reignites the inner spark of those who feel lost or broken. Around the world, countless stories remind us that football doesn't just build athletes it helps mend hearts, it creates a sense of identity the backbone of a supportive and inclusive environment (Landrum, 2006; Guest, 2021).

Players unite around a common goal, developing trust, loyalty and complementarity that are key elements of any strong family dynamic. Shared experience of victory and defeat within the team builds a deep-rooted community that feels like home. Team building turns strangers into companions and develop a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, celebrating wins like family milestones and mourning losses as one, there is collective effort in moments of struggle and triumph (Kuhn, 2019). Football teams is a potential environment of a vital support system, offering encouragement during both sporting and personal challenges. Its inclusive nature draws people from all backgrounds into a common space, reinforcing compassion, solidarity and mutual care (McSweeney et al., 2024).

Football offers a powerful pathway to healing for children and youth affected by trauma. It provides a safe, structured space where they can release anguish, built-up emotions and begin

to rebuild trust in others (Campbell, 2024). On the pitch, they regain a sense of control over their excessive anger and experience emotional control that words alone often cannot provide. The game becomes a refuge, a place where the invisible wounds of violence, isolation and anxiety can be gently addressed through movement, connection and joy. Beyond the emotional release, football plays a vital role in helping young people reconnect socially and rediscover their sense of identity (Clinebell, 2013). By promoting teamwork, discipline and belonging, the sport nurtures essential life skills and gradually rebuilds self-esteem. As children begin to trust teammates and feel supported by coaches and peers, their confidence and resilience grow (Singh, 2022). Community-based football programs, especially those designed for vulnerable populations, offer more than just a game, they provide mentorship, positive role models, and a supportive network. In this way, football becomes a lifeline, offering wounded hearts the chance to mend, rediscover hope, and move toward a healthier future (Christensen, 2020; Dandurand & Heidt, 2022).

Football games offers numerous benefits for children and youth particularly those from disadvantaged families it helps them build a strong therapeutic alliance, enhancing self-control, and supporting moral development. Games also foster self-expression, executive functioning, mood elevation and self-esteem, while providing stress relief and promoting attachment and social skills. These playful interactions help children and youth express emotions, learn coping strategies, and develop valuable cognitive and interpersonal abilities. The study aimed to:

- (1) Evaluate the role of football game in promoting healing and emotional recovery among traumatized children and youth;
- (2) Examine the effectiveness of football game to rebuilding resilience, identity, emotional expression, self-esteem and a renewed sense of self for long-term recovery and development; and
- (3) Explore the underlying factors associated with high-performing football teams.

In Rwanda, childhood trauma remains a critical concern which affect a considerable number of children and youth. Such trauma has long-lasting effects including anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and engagement in risky behaviors (Kemal et al., 2023). Evidence further shows that survivors often internalize abusive behaviors, perpetuating cycles of violence (Villaveces et al., 2022). Existing interventions provide limited holistic and culturally relevant strategies for healing and reintegration. Football, with its accessibility and therapeutic value, has been shown to support psychological recovery (Borg et al., 2021). Yet, empirical research in Rwanda on football as a psychosocial intervention remains scarce. The study seeks to fill this gap by examining how inclusive, community-based football programs foster trauma recovery, resilience and identity reconstruction among disadvantaged children and youth. It offers actionable insights for educators, policymakers, NGOs and practitioners on the effectiveness of adopting sports in trauma recovery process.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This section discusses Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a framework to analyze how football influences the growth and resilience of disadvantaged children and youth. It considers both direct environments and broader social factors shaping individual development.

### **Ecological Systems Theory**

Developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979, the Ecological Systems Theory identifies five interrelated systems that shape human development: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Guy-Evans, 2020). The theory emphasizes that a child's



growth is influenced by self-motivated interactions across these multiple environmental layers. Within a team or social context, the image of the self and others plays a crucial role in shaping interpersonal relationships, respect for structure, and team dynamics. Social interaction and cultural context create an active learning environment that reveals a learner's potential, both when working independently and when participating in a guided group setting (Cross, 2017; Burakgazi, 2025).

The microsystem refers to the closest and most influential environments in which individuals engage in direct intimate interactions such as family, school, peer groups and workplaces where all aspects of individual development is directly influenced. For instance, a child's regular participation in a local football team, where they interact with coaches and teammates, can foster self-confidence, discipline and emotional regulation through those direct, daily relationships. A person is the product of his/her microsystem (Vélez-Agosto, et al., 2017; Rus, et al., 2020).

A mesosystem is an interaction, a relationship among two or more microsystems. A family that has an active interaction with school can either strengthen or hinder emotional and psychological development of a learner depending on the quality of those interactions. A football coach who communicates regularly with a child's teacher or caregiver about the child's behavior and progress exemplifies a strong mesosystem that reinforces consistent values and support across surroundings. These connections influence the individual's development through varied experiences and emotional responses (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022).

The exosystem includes contexts that do not directly involve the individual but still exert an impact. For example, if a parent's demanding job prevents them from attending matches or engaging with the team, this may affect the child's sense of support and motivation. Equally, if a community organization funds football equipment and facilities, children benefit from improved access even though they have no direct interaction with the decision-makers. Government policies and mass media that are promoting conducive environment of football play a vital role in shaping individual's microsystems (Rus, et al., 2020).

The macrosystem encompasses broader societal influences in which development happens such as cultural values, social norms, national policies, ideologies, stereotypes, historical factors and economic structures that shape individual beliefs, expectations and opportunities. These elements are crucial and they have long-lasting influences on individual experiences and opportunities towards their development. In some cultures, football is highly valued not only as a sport but also as a means of social mobility, identity-building, and even trauma recovery, making it a powerful developmental tool (Van Wormer & Besthorn, 2017; Garavan, et al., 2023).

Finally, the chronosystem refers to the dimension of time in personal development including life transitions, historical events and changes over time in both individual and their environment. It comprises major changes in life events and broader socio-historical changes that significantly affect an individual's developmental trajectory. One of the crucial elements is the ageing that force individual to change their priorities and what they value. For example, a child who joins a football team shortly after experiencing displacement due to conflict may, over time, find stability, rebuild resilience and re-establish a sense of identity through continued engagement with the sport. Chronosystem underscores that development is not static but

dynamic and continuous. It is influenced by timing, historical events and nature of life experiences (Garavan et al., 2023; Kaushik, et al 2023).

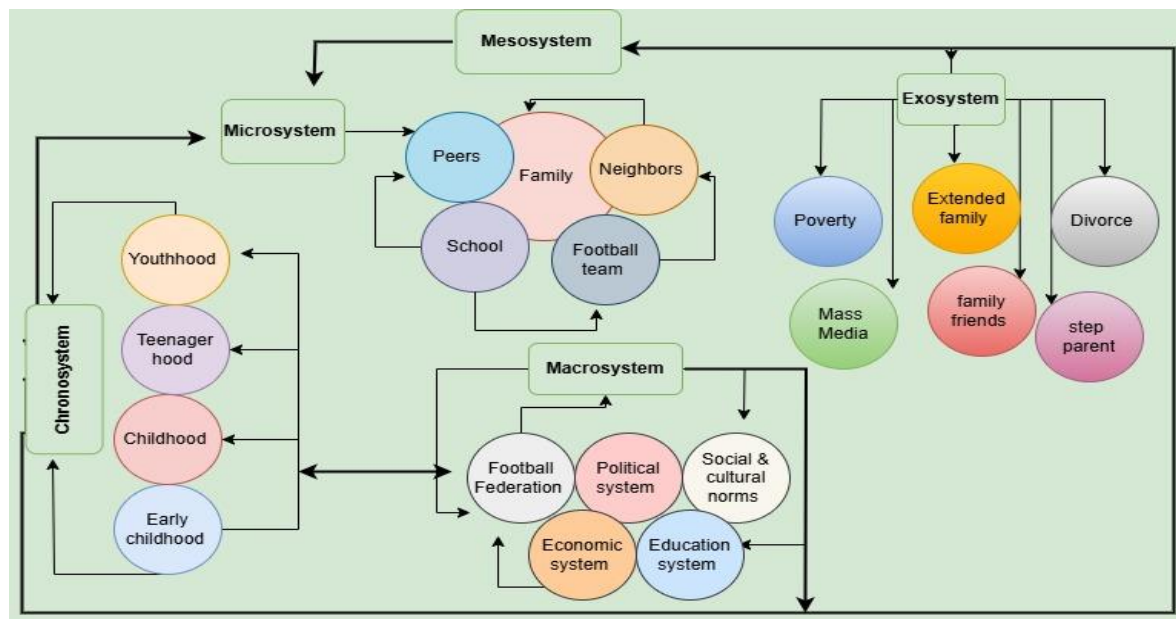


Figure 1: Adapted from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979)

## METHODOLOGY

The study explored the role of football in addressing childhood wounds and fostering resilience among disadvantaged children and youth in Rwanda. Using a qualitative research design, the study aimed to understand human behavior through specific perspective of social actors (Gupta & Gupta, 2022; Kumar & Praveenakumar, 2025). Specifically, the study examined how football contributes to resilience in communities where developmental trajectories have been disrupted across the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem levels. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions from 110 respondents purposively selected with the age range between 12 to 22 years that have at least a seniority of 3 years in football team (Saunders et al., 2019). Data were analyzed using content analysis to systematically classify, categorize and interpret responses into thematic patterns (Kitchin & Tate, 2013; Kumar & Praveenakumar, 2025).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Football game frequently engage multiple levels of a child and youth's ecology bringing together families, schools, community, stakeholders and institutional support nurturing social cohesion and promoting inclusive values (Holt et al., 2017). The development of a child and youth within a football team is shaped by the dynamic inter-influences of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem as discussed in theoretical review.

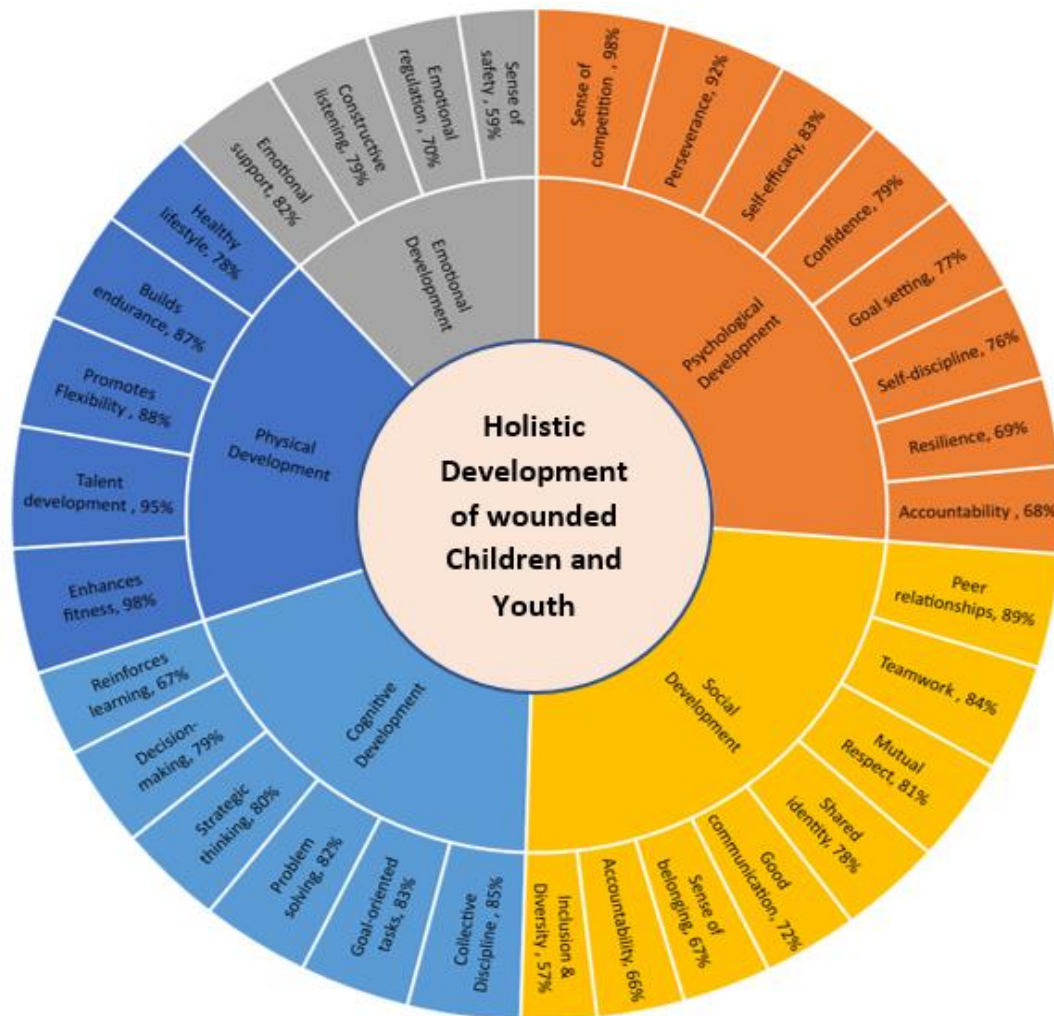


Figure 2: Summarized Findings

### Physical Development

Physical development as assessed through indicators such as improved body fitness (98%), enhanced endurance (87%), increased flexibility (88%), Talent development (95%) and Healthier lifestyle (78%) achieved an average score of 89.2%. These factors contribute significantly to nurturing children's and youth's physical wellness. Football plays a vital role in rehabilitating and enhancing individuals' physical abilities. However, children and youth from disadvantaged families often face significant barriers, such as limited access to basic need including food, football equipment, geographic disparities in sports infrastructure and parental stereotypes that discourage participation. Beyond school-based football teams, many community teams require financial contributions from participants, which further restricts inclusion for those from low-income backgrounds. Even if a high average score of 89.2% in physical development, this may obscure the uneven distribution of progress among different socio-economic groups. Without addressing these broader systemic factors, efforts to use football as a tool for physical development risk reinforcing existing inequalities rather than overcoming them.

## **Psychological Development**

Psychological development embodies growth through a person's mind and behavior over time. Born into disadvantaged families and raised in difficult conditions where basic needs such as food, safety and family stability are not consistently met, mental growth may be delayed or overshadowed. Their psychological development faced varieties of challenges such as negative image of the self, low level of competition and confidence. They struggled with self-belief and emotional regulation not due to a lack of talent but because their early environments did not nurture the psychological foundations that support personal and athletic growth. As a result, the psychological dimension of athletic performance is often neglected, even though it is essential for long-term success not only in football but also in all dimensions of live (Singh, 2022).

Findings revealed that through consistent training and competitive play, participants began to develop a more positive self-image and a clearer understanding of their personal strengths and capabilities. This transformative process fostered key mental attributes, including competitiveness (98%), perseverance (92%), self-efficacy (83%), confidence (79%), goal-setting (77%), self-discipline (76%), resilience (69%) and accountability (68%). Across the analyzed football teams, these improvements reflected an overall average development rate of 80.25% since players began their football journey of at least three years' experience. With the right support systems in place such as mentorship, coaching and structured developmental programs, they are able to rise above the disadvantages of their early life experiences. Actually, their challenging backgrounds become a source of strength and motivation reinforcing their resilience and competitive spirit both on and off the field.

## **Emotional Development**

Emotional development is the process through which individuals learn to recognize, express, and manage their emotions in healthy and constructive ways. For children born into disadvantaged families, this process is often disrupted by chronic exposure to poverty, instability, violence and neglect as their families prioritize meeting basic survival needs. As a result, their emotional world is often shaped by fear, anxiety, anger and helplessness which can lead to emotional dysregulation and social withdrawal. These children often struggle with trust, self-worth and emotional expression as their environments lack the security and support necessary for healthy emotional growth (Bazubagira & Umumararungu, 2023).

Nevertheless, findings reveal that since their integration into the football team, these children/youth have experienced significant emotional progress with an average improvement rate of 72.5%. Key areas of growth include emotional support (82%), active listening (79%), emotional regulation (70%) and emotional safety (59%). The structured and supportive environment of the team offers more than just physical activity, it creates a space where children feel seen, heard and valued. These are essential conditions for emotional healing and resilience. Football, therefore, emerges as a powerful platform for emotional development, helping vulnerable children and youth rebuild a sense of stability, confidence and belonging in their lives.

Despite the findings stressing a good number of respondents that confirm the contribution of football team to emotional progress, significant challenges to emotional development persist for children from disadvantaged and violent backgrounds. Deep-rooted trauma, accumulated over years of exposure to neglect, abuse or chronic stress does not disappear rapidly (Bazubagira & Umumararungu, 2020). Many of these children and youth carry emotional



marks that hinder their ability to trust others, share their vulnerability or regulate strong emotions of anger and fear. Even within a support of peers and coaches, the remaining part expressed their low self-esteem and insecurity within the same team. The absence of consistent emotional support by most of their parents maintains their fragility even if they are talented. This environment maintains most of children and youth into emotional instability potential to limit both their personal growth and athletic potential.

### **Social Development**

Social development refers to the process by which individuals learn to interact with others, building meaningful relationships and function successfully within society. Findings reveal a promising average of 74.25%, indicating a positive trend in responses. Since respondents joined the football team, they have shown significant progress in their social interactions and relationships. Notable improvements were observed in peer relationships (89%), teamwork (84%), mutual respect (81%), shared identity (78%), communication skills (72%), sense of belonging (67%), accountability (66%) and inclusion and diversity (57%). Findings strongly suggests that football serves as a powerful tool for fostering social growth and community cohesion.

However, even if benefits are considerable, certain challenges to social development still persist within team settings. Issues such as exclusion and the formation of sub-groups within the same team that hinders group cohesion and leave some members feeling isolated. Latent conflict, unequal participation among teammates that eroded trust and relations. One respondent said that *'One of the hardest parts of my past growing up as a child who felt invisible was watching others consistently receive more attention and playtime than me. It wasn't just about the game; it echoed a deeper feeling of being overlooked. In those moments, fairness felt distant, and my worth felt questioned.'* The competitive nature of football team can create pressure and stress, affecting how individuals interact socially and emotionally especially when a team lose its game. Some players may struggle with criticism or high expectations, leading to anxiety and reduced confidence.

### **Cognitive Development**

Cognitive development refers to the process by which a person learns to think, reason, solve problems and understand the world around them. Participation in structured football activities positively contribute to their development (Campbell, 2024). Findings disclose that involvement in football teams promotes substantial mental growth: collective discipline (85%), goal-oriented tasks (83%), problem-solving (82%), strategic thinking (80%), decision-making (79%), reinforcement of learning (67%) and critical thinking (57%). These elements contribute to an average cognitive development rate of 76.1%, highlighting the sport's potential as a developmental tool.

Even though the cognitive benefits of football are well-documented, several challenges can still hinder optimal development. Not all players engage equally in the mental aspects of the game, some are held back by complex personal backgrounds, family issues and peer pressure. These factors often lead to low confidence and poor decision-making, limiting their ability to fully participate in cognitive growth opportunities. Additionally, when constructive criticism from coaches is not delivered in a supportive manner, these players may struggle to receive it positively, further stalling the development of their talent.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study confirms that football serves as a powerful and culturally grounded tool for promoting healing, resilience and long-term development among traumatized and disadvantaged children and youth in Rwanda. Far beyond its recreational or competitive functions, football offers a safe, structured and emotionally viable environment where children and young people can process trauma, rebuild trust and rediscover their sense of identity and belonging. Through consistent team engagement, participants experienced significant improvements in physical fitness, psychological strength, emotional regulation, social interaction and cognitive skills. The findings underscore the value of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory in understanding how football influences individual development within complex social environments. Each level from immediate relationships to broader societal influences plays a critical role in shaping the effectiveness of football as a therapeutic and developmental intervention. However, the study also reveals persistent challenges, including inequality of access, deep-seated emotional wounds and systemic barriers rooted in poverty and social exclusion. These issues call for sustained efforts to integrate football-based interventions within broader psychosocial support systems, including mental health services, family involvement and policy-level commitment. Ultimately, football is more than just a game; it is a dynamic and inclusive platform for emotional recovery, character formation and social transformation. For healing to be truly sustainable, investment in community-based football programs must be accompanied by holistic support structures that prioritize the emotional and developmental needs of vulnerable children and youth.

The study revealed football to be not only a recreational activity but also a therapeutic and developmental tool that provide holistic recovery of traumatized children and youth. Grounded in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the findings show how football engages multiple ecological levels that nurture resilience, healing and social inclusion. Theoretically, it advances understanding of sport as a multidimensional process of healing that incorporates physical, psychological, emotional, social and cognitive growth. Practically, it offers educators, coaches, NGOs and families evidence-based strategies for designing trauma-informed football initiatives that foster identity, life skills and emotional recovery. At the policy level, it calls for integrating football into national child protection and mental health frameworks which ensures equitable access to sports and investing in community-based programs as inclusive pathways for psychosocial healing and youth empowerment. When approached intentionally, football can be a lifeline mending invisible wounds and empowering young people to envision and pursue healthier, more hopeful futures.

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