

Grassroots sports clubs give children belonging and strengthen communities, according to new report

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A University of Bath study of 12 grassroots sports clubs in Bristol, Manchester and London has found that almost all children who attend

them feel a sense of belonging and emotional connection.

The new [report](#), led by Dr. Haydn Morgan from the Department for Health at the University of Bath, commissioned by Access Sport, involved 270 children completing an online survey about their sense of belonging and emotional connection to their [sports clubs](#).

When asked if they felt a sense of belonging, 74% strongly agreed, 23% agreed, and only 3% disagreed. Similarly, when asked if they felt an [emotional connection](#) to their sports clubs, 68% strongly agreed, 27% agreed, and just 5% disagreed.

As well as unlocking improvements in physical and mental well-being, respondents highlighted in qualitative interviews, how their local clubs help improve educational attainment, reduce feelings of [social isolation](#) and divert attention away from antisocial behavior.

Access Sport is a national charity that helps community sports clubs and volunteers run inclusive programs. This study highlights the transformational impact of community sport and suggests it has been undervalued. Going forward, the research calls on the sports sector to reevaluate community clubs' role in providing young people with a sense of belonging and creating stronger communities.

Dr. Morgan said, "It is well documented that children are experiencing a wide range of issues concerning social isolation, which is having a direct impact on their mental health. This was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, so it's more important than ever for all young people to build connections with their [local communities](#).

"Having access to community sports clubs, that can provide essential opportunities for young people to have positive and safe social interactions; address feelings of social isolation; and foster a sense of

belonging and community, is something that our research highlights as being critical in many young people's lives."

Dr. Morgan thinks building a sense of belonging is a significantly overlooked aspect of sports and community intervention work.

"Whenever we talk of the benefits of sport participation, we tend to focus on the physical, mental, social and emotional benefits. However, what we typically overlook is that achieving these benefits can take time, and only really happen when children feel fully included in their sports club.

"We see a lot of children dropping out of sport because they don't feel that they are 'part' of their club, so enabling a sense of belonging needs to be a central pillar of club development to enable these wider outcomes to be achieved through sport and [physical activity](#)."

Access Sport CEO, Helen Rowbotham, said, "For too long a sense of belonging and community engagement have been undervalued benefits in sport. However, as set out in our Manifesto for Change, these outcomes underpin the wider transformational benefits of sport and need to be prioritized. This research showcases something we've always been aware of here at Access Sport—inclusive community sport is the ultimate tool in tackling societal inequalities and strengthening underserved communities."

This sentiment is echoed in the experience of University of Bath sporting scholar Aleeya Sibbons, a GB Track Athlete and European Champion. Aleeya began attending Newham and Essex Beagles, a community club in the London Borough of Newham, when she was 12 years old and still trains.

She said, "The club was a second home. It was a way to socialize and build friendships and role models that influenced us all outside of sport.

What you might not get at school or at home, you get from the club. It gave us all discipline that we could apply inside the sport and outside the sport."

Daniel Bethell is a Paralympic GB badminton player who took home a Silver in Tokyo 2020. Daniel was born with [cerebral palsy](#) but he's never let that stand in his way. From the age of 4 he joined many community sports clubs in Bath playing rugby, tennis, football and cricket.

"Community sports clubs are really inclusive. They bring together people from all different backgrounds to play one thing: sports. All the coaches did a good job of integrating me into the sessions by providing me with specialist ankle supports and shoes, which enabled me to keep up with my friends without getting injured.

"Sport clubs also introduced me to other people with disabilities. I learned a lot of life skills about living with a disability, like tying my shoelaces with one hand. I met a community of people who had been through the same experiences as me, growing up with a disability and facing that adversity. This was massive for me."

Stephen Baddeley Director of Sport at Team Bath and a former professional badminton player (Commonwealth, European, national) said, "Community clubs are at the heart of sport in this country and are vital, underappreciated cultural assets that bring people together, enhance community cohesion and give many a sense of purpose and belonging.

"The social and mental benefits of community sports clubs are probably much greater than the obvious physical benefits of involvement in a sport. Driven by volunteers, they are vital for enabling children and [young people](#) to enjoy sport in a supportive environment which can lead to a lifelong engagement in a sport."

By embedding the recommendations from this report, Access Sport believes that the sport for development sector can collaboratively address societal inequalities and make a real difference in communities across the country.

More information: Access Sport: Building Stronger Communities—Final Report:

<https://www.accesssport.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=f3016353-5ba9-408f-9402-69793f6188b4>

Provided by University of Bath

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