



Photo: Charlie Forgham-Bailey / Save the Children

COACHING FOR LIFE
IN ZA'ATARI CAMP, JORDAN

IMPACT EVALUATION: 2018 – 2021

In 2011, **Save the Children UK** and **The Arsenal Foundation** formed a unique partnership to improve the lives of thousands of children and young people living in the world's toughest places. Working as one team, Arsenal and Save the Children combined their expertise to create 'Coaching for Life'. A unique football coaching model designed by Arsenal and Save the Children, combining their respective expertise in football coaching and child protection, the programme works to build children's resilience and wellbeing.

Prolonged exposure to conflict, stress and uncertainty, without adequate support, can have immediate and long-lasting effects on children's physical and mental health. Coaching for Life was launched in **Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan**. Children there have had to flee their homes, and many witnessed things no child should see. The programme aims to build children's courage and inner strength through football – supporting them with issues such as dealing with difficult emotions, communication, decision making, self-esteem and conflict management. Children also learn about their rights and gender equality.

From December 2018 to February 2021, Coaching for Life helped more than 1,500 children and young people in Za'atari camp

Coaches from the community teach six resilience-building modules designed by Arsenal and Save the Children, using football as a vehicle for communicating and developing skills. These modules are not taught in a classroom, but on the football pitch. Four cohorts of children from Za'atari camp took part over the course of **20 weeks**. The programme was designed to engage girls and boys equally. It also incorporates complementary activities with parents and caregivers and community-based advocacy, creating opportunities for children's voices to be heard and highlighting child protection issues.

While playing football, children naturally interact with each other and with trusted adults, helping to develop their social skills. They also experience a range of emotions, which they then reflect on as part of the resilience coaching and learn to solve problems through play. These skills in turn improve their ability to manage stress. Playing as a team also helps to nurture a sense of belonging and build social connections.

EVALUATION OF COACHING FOR LIFE IN JORDAN

Through play, children can learn social and emotional skills like empathy, building relationships, and coping with difficult situations and feelingsⁱⁱ. There is also evidence that physical activity can support children’s cognitive function and reduce the risk of depression. Team sports in particular are linked with improved psychological and social healthⁱⁱⁱ.

Recent evidence suggests that pairing physical activity with mental health, psychological and social support programming for people who have been displaced from their homes^{iv}, 1) contributed to children’s social and emotional development, such as learning conflict resolution, fairness, initiative/leadership and communication and 2) can help build a child’s self-esteem, positive relationships with peers and a sense of belonging. These are all important protective factors for the mental health of children in adversity.

However, there remains an evidence gap on the link between physical activity and children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing in low- and middle-income countries.

To contribute to the evidence base and further show the relationship between sports and mental health and wellbeing, we carried out a robust systematic evaluation of the impact of the Coaching for Life programme in Jordan from 2018-2021. Not only will our learnings from the evaluation help us to adapt the approach for other contexts so it can be rolled out more widely – our findings will also support the growth of sports for development programmes in the international community.



Rama* and Hiba* are sisters who take part in the Coaching for Life programme.

These two Syrian sisters are using rap music to spread a crucial message about girls’ rights. They’ve helped stop a girl from their school being married and got their parents’ support to turn down proposals themselves.

When the family arrived from Syria, Roma had been badly injured in an airstrike. Her big sister, Hiba, helped her find fresh hope through writing and rap music. Now, the sisters are unstoppable – and they are growing in confidence thanks to Save the Children and Arsenal’s Coaching for Life programme.

**Names changed to protect identities.*



EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

HOW DID WE DO IT?

Our evaluation included a quantitative **survey** and a qualitative study based on **interviews and focus group discussions**, to ensure breadth and depth of evidence. We aimed to measure the effectiveness of the programme and the impact of the football coaching sessions on children's resilience and wellbeing. The intended outcomes of Coaching for Life are:

1. Girls and boys have increased resilience
2. Girls and boys have access to safe spaces and support services
3. Increase caregivers' and communities' capacity to support children's resilience and wellbeing
4. Drive legal, policy and / or systemic change to help protect children from violence
5. Strengthen the evidence based for embedded resilience building in sports coaching

This evaluation focused mostly on outcomes 1 and 2. It aimed to measure: sense of belonging to the programme; whether children felt there was a trusted adult at the programme; resilience; and wellbeing.

We carried out a **survey with 415 children** (47% girls / 53% boys) at the start and end of the first programme cycle (enabling a before-and-after comparison). Half (212) of the children surveyed participated in the first programme cycle, while the other half (203) were selected from communities listed to join the programme in the second cycle (known as the **control group**). This meant we could directly compare the two groups to see what changes were a direct result of taking part in the programme. The survey included four standardised **questionnaires designed by mental health researchers**.

We engaged experts in child and youth resilience and mental health research to design and run the qualitative part of our evaluation. Through interviews and focus groups, the researchers gathered multiple perspectives from children, parents/caregivers, coaches, staff and other key stakeholders. The interview questions were broad and open-ended – they worked **with children** to explore their experiences and themes emerged unprompted. The team also captured the voices of children by recording their stories and highlighting those that represented the most significant changes from the programme.



Hiba and Rima walking in Za'atari camp

WHAT DID WE FIND?

Overall, both **children and caregivers spoke highly of the programme**. They found it highly valuable and beneficial and felt that the right balance between the wellbeing and sports components made the programme comprehensive and impactful. **Although playing football was an important incentive for participants to join the programme, the main reason was to learn new skills and reap benefits such as developing a stronger personality, overcoming shyness, improving mental health and increasing confidence.**

The evaluation showed that Coaching for Life was effective in improving children's wellbeing (both mental and physical), enhancing their communication skills and helping them to build relationships. It also helped to increase their resilience. The programme was particularly effective for children who were out of school and those who had little experience of football. **Playing football was shown to be a key factor** for improving children's physical and emotional wellbeing. Taking part in a team activity, practising new skills and combining physical exercise with complementary theoretical work supported **active learning**, which enhances children's ability to retain knowledge and transfer this learning into their lives off the pitch.

Improved wellbeing – particularly social wellbeing

Increased physical wellbeing

Family relationships (key factor for resilience)

Greater inner strength: self-efficacy

Greater self-esteem

Trusted adults: coaches

IMPACT OF COACHING FOR LIFE

Sense of belonging to a community

Better communication skills

Improved interpersonal and problem-solving skills

Coaching For Life evaluation findings: headlines

IMPROVED WELLBEING, RESILIENCE AND RELATIONSHIPS

The evaluation found that children who took part in Coaching for Life improved their wellbeing, their coping mechanisms, and aspects of their relationships with others.

Children mentioned **enhancing self-worth, self-esteem and confidence, and getting better at solving problems and regulating their emotions**. Some talked about their increased ability to make decisions and feeling like they could do whatever they put their mind to.

Children, caregivers, staff, and stakeholders identified **communication skills and ability to interact with others** as key areas of improvement. Male participants tended to emphasise treating others with more respect and kindness and less aggression, whereas female participants talked about learning to better express themselves, speak out and overcome their shyness.

Girls learned to speak out and boys are kinder and less aggressive.

“ At the beginning, I was shy, but this feeling began to disappear over time. Nowadays, I can communicate with my friends and interact without feeling shy. ”
Coaching for Life participant

Better communication skills in turn impacted children's relationships with others. Those we spoke to commented particularly on the improvement in their **relationships with their families**, which is a key protective factor for children's wellbeing. But relationships with other children at school, teachers and the wider community also improved.

Children out of school particularly showed significant improved resilience and wellbeing.

The analysis of the survey data suggests that the programme is particularly effective for children who are not part of regular and structured learning opportunities where they engage with peers. The data showed that there was a **significant improvement in resilience and wellbeing for children who were out of school** at the start of the programme (25%) compared to those attending school. These differences were not observed in the control group, suggesting that this was a direct result of taking part in the programme.

SENSE OF BELONGING AND TRUSTED ADULTS

During the interviews and discussions, most children commented that Coaching for Life made them feel they belonged to a group – close to 90% of children said they **always felt safe, comfortable and part of the programme**. And more than 90% felt that there was often or always **an adult they trusted** – who listened to them, told them when they did a good job, or really cared about them. Analysis of the survey data confirmed that a sense of belonging and having a trusted adult were also associated with an increase in resilience and wellbeing.

A higher sense of belonging is associated with greater wellbeing in children.

COACHES

Coaches play a key role in influencing children's resilience and mental health, highlighting the importance of motivation and encouragement on enhancing wellbeing. Having a coach who made the children believe that they would be a success enhanced their sense of belonging to a group and boosted their social and emotional wellbeing.

Overall, children, caregivers and other stakeholders felt that the coaches were highly competent and committed to the programme and were invested in children's wellbeing. Coaches themselves felt that they had adequate experience and training, with a few coaches saying they wanted to receive more training to develop their skills further.

“ Being part of the programme was like having a sense of pride, self-confidence, and having the desire to strengthen my personality and character. The coaches made me feel self-affirmed and made me want to excel. My position on the defence line made me feel that I am an effective participant within the team. ”

Coaching for Life participant

PLAYING FOOTBALL HELPS CHILDREN'S COPING SKILLS

We found evidence that playing football is a key factor to help children become more resilient:

- Physical activity is connected to feelings of self-worth, self-esteem and confidence.
- Through teamwork and being assigned specific roles, children learned to feel good about themselves and have more self-confidence.
- The pitch provided a change of environment which, according to families, was important for their emotional and mental health. Having a safe space to form relationships with coaches and make friends with other kids helped them feel less isolated.
- Football also seemed to help strengthen children's relationships with their siblings and, to some extent, counter the taboo associated with girls playing football.
- Coaches influenced self-reliance, responsibility and motivation.

“ [Football] helped me become active and changed my mental state. ”

Coaching for Life participant



WHAT'S NEXT?

THE FUTURE OF COACHING FOR LIFE

Photo: Sherbel D'issi / Save the Children

We are committed to listening to and learning from feedback. Throughout the programme, we held regular learning workshops with families and communities, to enable us to continuously refine the approach, such as: changing the sessions we run for parents / caregivers; doing more to engage communities to encourage equal participation from girls and boys; putting on more football tournaments; and involving more 'Junior Coaches' (former participants of Coaching for Life who volunteer and provide support to coaches in delivering the modules, organising tournaments and raising awareness of the programme).

Already, the evaluation is driving further improvements of the programme. For example, we are:

- adjusting the strategy for targeting participants – to recruit more children, involve younger children, and focus on those who have little to no football experience
- addressing barriers to getting to the pitch – for instance, organising walking groups so girls don't have to walk long distances alone
- investing in coaches and their training
- exploring further the role of the programme in influencing broader societal change
- refining our approach to measurement and evaluation
- planning to ensure the programme's sustainability.

The learnings from this evaluation will be crucial to help us refine the Coaching for Life programme and help more children to cope through difficult times and get the chance to explore a world full of possibility.

CONCLUSION

The evaluation generated key evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of the Coaching for Life programme in Jordan – particularly for children who were out of school. It showed that **taking part in Coaching for Life improved children’s physical and mental wellbeing** – in particular, it was their **social wellbeing** that benefitted. The studies found that children had a high **sense of belonging** – which we found had a positive association with their wellbeing – and felt that there were **adults they could trust**. After taking part in the programme, children’s **communication skills** improved, and they had better **relationships** with their family and the wider community. The programme also enhanced children’s **resilience** and they had greater self-esteem, self-worth and confidence.



We gave children in Za’atari camp polaroid cameras to document their lives – these are the pictures Mariyan took of her and her friends

Mariyan* is a 16-year-old of many talents. “I have hobbies that I like to share with others,” she says. “Writing novels, poetry, thoughts, stories, rap, drawing anime [Japanese cartoons] and designing movements on songs [choreography].”

She’s developed a passion for football too. Having fled Syria’s civil war, Mariyan has lived in Za’atari refugee camp for the past nine years. She enlisted in Coaching for Life, along with hundreds of other Syrian children in the camp,

Mariyan lists what she has gained so far from the programme: “Tolerance, love, helping others, self-confidence, courage and spreading good.” She’s also becoming a pretty good goalkeeper by the sound of it. “I saved the team from a penalty kick!” she says.

ⁱ Introductions to the Coaching for Life programme can be accessed here: <https://www.arsenal.com/thearsenalfoundation/coachingforlife/>; <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/about-us/who-we-work-with/corporate-partners/arsenal/>; <https://blogs.savethechildren.org.uk/2018/09/save-the-children-arsenal-coaching-for-life/>

ⁱⁱ Summertime, Playtime. 2018. Harvard Graduate School of Education. <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/18/06/summertime-playtime>

ⁱⁱⁱ Eime, R.M., Young, J.A., Harvey, J.T. et al. A systematic review of the psychological and social benefits of participation in sport for children and adolescents: informing development of a conceptual model of health through sport. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* 10, 98 (2013). Available from: <https://ijbnpa.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1479-5868-10-98>

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