



HOW DOES SMILES WORK THROUGH GRASSROOTS TRAINING? A REVIEW STUDY ON CHILDREN'S SOCCER COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Background. One must follow a gradual and continuous development process so that clear goals can be achieved at each level through grassroots training with SMILES elements that can provide a comfortable space and safe equipment (safe from danger). Children are active throughout the grassroots training. **Objectives.** The purpose of this article is to determine the success or effectiveness of applying the SMILES elements in children's soccer communities through grassroots training. **Method.** The search in this study used the Harzing Publish or Perish application. The search began using the Google Scholar database, which is considered one of the citation indexing systems. The search strategy included a combination of keyword variations ("children" OR "kids" AND "football" OR "soccer" AND 'grassroots' AND "smiles"). The search was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. Initially, 534 publications were obtained from the identification process through the Google Scholar database search. After applying the exclusion criteria, only 5 articles remained. **Results.** Based on the results of literature research on various national and international journals and several books on grassroots training by applying the SMILES elements to children's soccer communities. The results indicate that grassroots training conducted using the SMILES elements can support children's soccer communities in mastering good technical and tactical soccer skills, maintaining excellent physical condition, and developing a strong mental attitude. **Conclusion.** Everyone (the children's football community) is involved regardless of ability or disability. There are goals, development, and challenges to become better, as well as trying new things. Enjoying grassroots training and achieving success according to one's football playing ability.

Keywords; football, grassroots, safe space, children, SMILES elements



A. INTRODUCTION

The rapid development of science and technology has had a significant impact across various sectors, including the field of sports. Today, sports play a positive and tangible role in improving public health. Moreover, sports contribute to enhancing a nation's capabilities in implementing a sustainable development system (Soniawan & Irawan, 2018). Sports activities benefit not only physical health but also mental well-being. Regular exercise enhances the body's metabolism, making nutrient distribution and absorption more effective and efficient (Abdullah & Abdullah, 2025; Agustina et al., 2024).

Play is a primary and essential activity for children, inherent in all. Therefore, the main goal of grassroots football is to introduce children to football and to initiate their practice through play (Yvon et al., 2022). This concept is also emphasized by the Football Association (2019) in its publication *Grassroots Football Safeguarding Children Policy and Procedures*, which highlights the excitement children feel about participating in grassroots football as a valuable field experience. Football must be a safe, positive, and enjoyable experience for the millions of children and youth who regularly play, watch, coach, referee, pump balls, or help set up goal nets. Grassroots football thus plays a significant role in engaging many young individuals.

Football is one of the most well-known sports globally, with major competitions, the most prestigious being the FIFA World Cup (Ebrahim & Hussein, 2025; Ivanov, 2025). Nusri & Hidayatullah (2022) also note that football is one of the most popular sports in the world. It is a sport favored by people of all ages—from children, teenagers, and adults to the elderly, including in Indonesia.

According to Susanto (as cited in Izzulhaq & Syafii, 2023), football is a game consisting of a series of tactical group situations around the ball, dictated by shifts in the point of attack. Sucipto (as cited in Nusri & Hidayatullah, 2022) defines football as a team sport involving two teams of eleven players each, including one goalkeeper. The game is primarily played using the legs, except for the goalkeeper, who may use their hands within the penalty area. Rohman (Izzulhaq & Syafii, 2023) explains that the outcome of a football match is determined by the goal difference between the two teams. Many players, such as athletes, are aware that an aggressive playing style can lead to success on the field; however, such

aggression—often bordering on illegality—can also increase the risk of injury (Schwebel et al., 2020).

It is crucial for children to become familiar with their environment and to be given the freedom to engage in various desired activities, one of which includes exploring the playing field. Moreover, ensuring safety on the field promotes physical activity, and integrating physical activity promotion with injury prevention increases the health benefits. In African countries, women and girls still face challenges when participating in sports (Chafidz et al., 2023). Gender-responsive sports facilities can enhance access to sports by providing safe spaces, thus promoting empowerment. Gender-responsive field design begins with choosing locations that are safe and accessible to girls (Abade et al., 2019; Ugochukwu, 2016). This includes preferring multipurpose sports fields over specialized ones, providing proper lighting, toilets, and changing facilities, and minimizing injury risks through quality construction. Safe environments also involve adding ramps and other elements to ensure accessibility for persons with disabilities (Bonn & Eschborn, 2019).

In addition to introducing children to football, grassroots development must also provide them with enjoyable and safe experiences. This includes inspecting the field before training begins, removing any potentially hazardous objects such as cones to avoid slipping or injury. According to *Grassroots* (Yvon et al., 2022), equipment must be checked before children arrive to ensure everything is ready and available. Even though FIFA provides equipment for each grassroots project, there may still be shortages of bibs, cones, or even appropriate footwear for the children.

Development is the effort to establish, foster, improve, and advance existing conditions and achievements. Mydi and Humaedi (as cited in Lubis et al., 2020) describe the sports development process as a systematic procedure aimed at achieving performance outcomes. Numerous factors must be considered to ensure that each phase of the development process is carried out correctly. In football development, several quality standards must be met, such as coach competence, appropriate training programs, adequate facilities, sound management, nutritional support, and well-organized competitions to enhance player performance (Afifudin & Prianto, 2022).

Coaching children requires a special set of skills that blend both art and science to support optimal development (Primasoni, 2017). According to Indra Sjafri (as cited in

Handoko et al., 2019), football training programs for children are divided into three age groups: 6–12 years (Grassroots), 13–15 years (Youth Formative Phase), and 16–19 years (Youth Final Phase). The grassroots program is a FIFA training method aimed at developing football and futsal talent from an early age (Faridatul et al., 2021). In the book *Curriculum Development for Indonesian Football*, Danurwindo et al. (2017, p. 60) outline PSSI's training phase strategy based on age groups: (1) Ages 6–9: "Football Fun Phase", (2) Ages 10–13: "Football Skills Development Phase", (3) Ages 14–17: "Game Development Phase", and (4) Ages 18 and above: "Performance Phase". The goal is to produce football players with solid fundamental skills through grassroots training approaches (Emral & Yudi, 2021).

Instilling healthy habits in children is essential, and grassroots football programs are an excellent way to convey messages about health and sports. This includes avoiding harmful substances, maintaining good nutrition, and practicing hygienic and healthy behaviors (Yvon et al., 2022). Grassroots training incorporates the SMILES framework, an acronym that encompasses six key elements for effective activity delivery: Safe, Maximum participation, Inclusive, Learning, Enjoyment, and Success (Premier Skills, 2022). Based on this background, this paper will further examine the application of SMILES elements within children's football communities through grassroots training.

B. METHOD

Search Strategy

This study utilized the *Harzing's Publish or Perish* application to conduct the literature search. The search was carried out using the Google Scholar database, which is considered one of the widely used indexing systems for citation tracking and is frequently accessed by researchers worldwide. The search strategy employed a combination of keyword variations: ("children" OR "kids") AND ("football" OR "soccer") AND "grassroots" AND "SMILES". The search process followed the guidelines of the *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses* (PRISMA) (Mohamed Shaffril, Samah, Samsuddin, & Ali, 2019). PRISMA emphasizes reporting standards for systematic reviews evaluating randomized trials, but it can also serve as a reporting foundation for other types of systematic research (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009).

Exclusion Criteria

The exclusion criteria applied were as follows:

1. Articles not published in journals indexed by Google Scholar.
2. Articles not written in English.
3. Articles published outside the five-year window (2019–2023).
4. Articles that did not explicitly address the application of SMILES elements in children’s football communities through grassroots training.

Procedure

An initial total of 534 publications were identified through the Google Scholar database search. After applying the exclusion criteria, only 5 articles remained. The majority of excluded items did not discuss the application of SMILES elements within children's grassroots football training. All articles were extracted from the sources and analyzed using Mendeley software to remove duplicates.

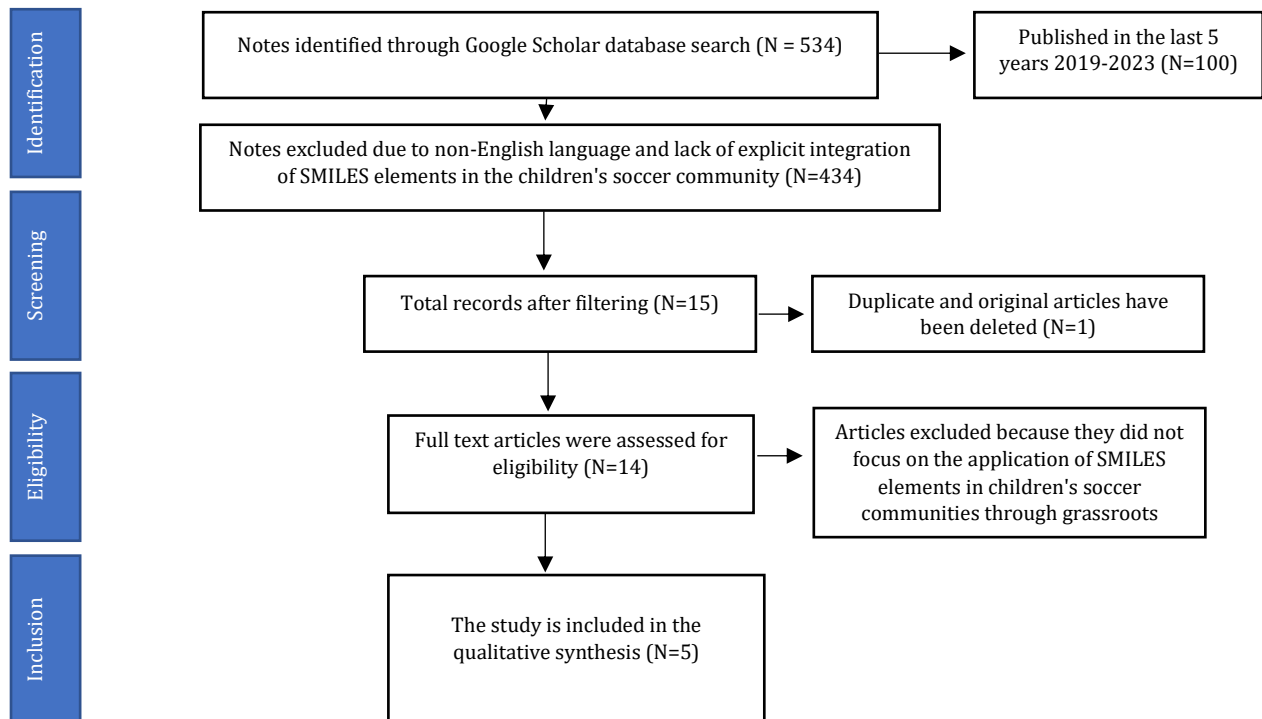


Figure 1. PRISMA Research Flow Diagram

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Grassroots training is one of FIFA's official training methods aimed at developing futsal and football, with the goal of fostering a greater emergence of young talent (A'la, Prawira, Prabowo, & Gemael, 2021). The development of players with solid fundamental football skills is pursued through this grassroots coaching methodology (Emral & Yudi, 2021).

Gellatly et al. (2018) emphasize five broad quality-of-life domains shared among initiatives focused on children and young people (CYP), which are also highlighted in the current CYP agenda: (1) health, (2) safety, (3) economic well-being, (4) enjoyment and achievement, and (5) positive societal contribution. The application of the SMILES framework in grassroots training is aligned with these domains and includes the following elements:

1. Safe – Providing a comfortable environment and safe equipment that is free from hazards.
2. Maximum Participation – Ensuring children remain actively involved throughout the entire grassroots training session.
3. Inclusive – Involving all children, regardless of ability or disability, in football community activities.
4. Learning – Creating learning objectives, offering developmental opportunities, and presenting challenges that support skill progression and the acquisition of new knowledge.
5. Enjoyment – Ensuring that children find joy and fun in participating in grassroots training.
6. Success – Achieving goals appropriate to the child's abilities and celebrating progress.

According to *Sport Wales* (2022), each SMILES component can be further elaborated as follows:

1. Safe: A safe playing area must be clean, free from obstructions and tripping hazards. Coaches must be aware of their surroundings and ensure that the environment is appropriate for the planned activities. Equipment should be securely stored away

from the active area, and the playing space should be large enough to support the session activities.

2. **Maximum Participation:** Coaches should strive to keep all participants actively engaged. One effective method is to break larger groups into smaller ones, allowing every child to have more opportunities to play. If children are waiting in line or idle, coaches are encouraged to find creative ways to keep them moving—such as adding obstacle routes back to the start or assigning small tasks or challenges while waiting. Coaches can also involve children in suggesting ways to enhance the game.
3. **Inclusive:** Activities should be adapted to meet diverse needs by making them easier or more challenging, ensuring that everyone is included and able to participate meaningfully, regardless of ability. The aim is to promote equal involvement and developmental progression.
4. **Learning:** Training must have clear goals, developmental pathways, and achievable challenges. Coaches are expected to monitor each child’s progress, requiring confidence, motivation, knowledge, understanding, and analytical skills. Coach educators must encourage children to try new things and understand that learning involves effort, mistakes, and persistence. Awareness of this process makes the sessions more engaging and filled with opportunities for both play and growth (Yvon et al., 2022).
5. **Enjoyment:** Children who enjoy training will continue playing even when the session ends, show eagerness to face new challenges, and are more willing to make mistakes. A safe and supportive environment leads to visible signs of joy, such as smiles, energy, and enthusiasm.
6. **Success:** Children experience success when they achieve their set goals through intrinsic motivation. This involves reflecting on progress, celebrating achievements in an honest and fair manner, and learning from mistakes without fear of criticism. Children should also be encouraged to collaborate in diverse groups to solve problems and apply learned skills to new challenges.

Research by Furley and Thrien (2023), in their article *“A Smile Can Go a Long Way: The Effects of Dominant and Rewarding SMILES of Coaches on Athletes in an Evaluative*

Performance Context,” demonstrated that the implementation of SMILES elements can influence athletes’ subjective affective states, stress levels, and facial expressions. Their findings indicate that athletes who received dominant smiles from coaches after performance showed higher heart rates compared to those who received supportive and rewarding smiles.

Discussion

Based on a literature review of various national and international journals, as well as several books discussing grassroots football training that incorporates the SMILES framework in children’s football communities, it is evident that effective and optimal football development requires adequate facilities and infrastructure. One critical factor in the development process is the presence of qualified coaches. Coaches who lack professional competence in both delivering and designing training programs will hinder the overall effectiveness of the development process. Poorly trained coaches are unlikely to select or create training methods that are both efficient and effective in achieving desired outcomes.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that every child has the right to childhood (including protection from harm), the right to education (where both girls and boys should complete primary school), the right to health (including access to clean water, nutritious food, and medical care), the right to fair treatment (by reforming laws and practices that are unjust to children), and the right to be heard (including considering their views in matters affecting them) (UNICEF, 2018). In this context, children and adolescents have the right to participate in football development within a safe and enjoyable environment. Sports development refers to efforts made to enhance and improve athletic activities with the goal of achieving better performance. Therefore, a training approach that positively influences children’s football skills is needed—one of which is grassroots training.

This research is among the first to demonstrate that subtle differences in a coach’s facial expressions can influence athletes’ heart rates and affective states during evaluative performance contexts. These findings align with research on the interpersonal effects of non-verbal behavior between athletes and coaches within grassroots training settings. They provide evidence that a coach’s facial expressions carry communicative meaning perceived by athletes and impact them on multiple levels.

The primary aim of grassroots football sessions is for children to play, learn, and have fun. The key is to teach football fundamentals while simultaneously developing physical and mental capacity through play. Every session should emphasize enjoyment and education, guided by the principle of "learning the game through play"—implemented through the SMILES framework (Yvon et al., 2022). Based on the background and discussion above, it is clear that the application of SMILES elements in grassroots training has been proven effective in enhancing children's mastery of football techniques and tactics, developing physical fitness, and improving mental well-being. Furthermore, for children who view grassroots training as an introduction to field play, incorporating SMILES elements significantly increases enjoyment, thereby improving their chances of achieving the intended training outcomes.

The success of applying SMILES in grassroots football has been supported by research conducted by Furley and Thrien (2023) in their article *"A Smile Can Go a Long Way: The Effects of Dominant and Rewarding SMILES of Coaches on Athletes in an Evaluative Performance Context."* Their study found that the implementation of SMILES elements affects athletes' subjective affective states, stress levels, and facial expressions. The findings revealed that athletes who received dominant smiles after a performance exhibited higher heart rates than those who received encouraging and rewarding smiles. This indicates that athletes are capable of self-regulating in joyful environments. When children experience joy during grassroots training, all six SMILES elements—Safe, Maximum Participation, Inclusive, Learning, Enjoyment, and Success—can be implemented more effectively. As a result, children can better develop technical and tactical football skills, improve physical fitness, and cultivate strong mental resilience. In conclusion, all six SMILES elements contribute positively to the success of grassroots football training for children.

D. CONCLUSION

Grassroots training conducted using SMILES elements can support children's soccer communities in mastering good soccer skills and tactics, maintaining excellent physical condition, and developing a strong mental attitude. One must follow a structured and continuous development process so that clear objectives are achieved at each stage through grassroots training incorporating SMILES elements, which provide a comfortable

environment and safe equipment (free from hazards). Children remain active throughout the grassroots training sessions. Everyone (the youth football community) is involved, regardless of ability or disability. The presence of coaches in grassroots training is to create methods and ideas so that children can remain active and learn while playing by applying the SMILES elements. There are goals, development, and challenges to become better, as well as trying new things. Enjoying grassroots training. And achieving success according to the player's abilities. Further research recommendations can develop appropriate methods for children's soccer communities. Additionally, a more in-depth review can be conducted using other databases such as ERIHplus, DOAJ, EBSCO, Scopus, and WoS.

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F. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

DA acted as the person responsible for writing and designing ideas. AP assisted in completing a qualitative analysis of the reviews obtained.

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