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Experts examine footballers' impact on school children's fitness

Experts from Northumbria University are examining the impact of a school wellbeing course offered by the Newcastle United Foundation.

Match Fit, which is operated in partnership with the University, combines fitness, football and nutrition to increase health awareness and physical activity in children aged 7-11. The six-week course is delivered in schools by qualified coaching and nutrition staff from Newcastle United with an overriding message that food, fitness and football can be fun and enjoyable for everyone.

Newcastle United footballers regularly join the Match Fit programme and go into schools to meet pupils and tell them about the foods they need to eat and the exercise they need to partake in to be at the top of their game. Since its launch in 2008, more than 10,000 children have participated in the scheme, but to date, there had been no evaluation of its effectiveness.

Dr Melissa Fothergill, a senior lecturer in Sport and Exercise Psychology, has been working with academics specialising in sport, nutrition and psychology to assess how the scheme is benefitting children.

“Football is the most predominant sport in the world, so it’s great to see how the Newcastle United Foundation is using it as a vehicle to get children involved in active healthy behaviour,” she said.

“The power the footballers have when they go into schools is astounding. The children are spellbound and it’s clear that they are fully absorbing everything they tell them.

“The project ties in to the Department for Education’s strategy to increase physical education and cooking and nutrition in schools, so it’s therefore important that we review the scheme to ensure it is working as effectively as it can.

“We are taking a holistic approach to seeing how the scheme is impacting on physical activity and wellbeing. From a psychological perspective we are examining the effects on cognition, behaviours and enjoyment of physical activity, and from a nutritional perspective we are looking to see changes in knowledge and how this complies with Public Health England guidelines.

“The results of our pilot study are already showing some positive change. Children are demonstrating an increase in nutritional knowledge and physical activity by the end of the programme. We hope to see this followed through when we review the full data set later this summer.”

Professor Greta Defeyter, Director of Northumbria’s Healthy Living research unit, recently attended an event at Stocksfield Avenue Primary School in Fenham with Newcastle striker Ayoze Perez. They were joined by BBC TV presenter Ricky Boleto who was filming a piece for Newsround as part of an investigation into childhood obesity.

“As an interdisciplinary team of academics, we are delighted to be working with the Newcastle United Foundation in evaluating the effectiveness of their Match Fit programme,” she said.

“We have been impressed by how much notice children take of health-related messages delivered by Premiership footballers. The messages about good nutrition and an active lifestyle have so much more strength when they come from their idols.

“It will be most interesting to see how this information is embedded and promotes continued positive behaviour in school children. We hope that our findings from this study can also be applied to other sports to encourage other clubs, teams and leagues to use the influential positions they have in society to inspire and educate others.”

The recent national Research Assessment Exercise (REF 2014) which measures the quality of research in all UK universities assessed Northumbria’s research in psychology and sport and exercise sciences. Almost three quarters of research in psychology was judged to have outstanding reach and significance for its impact, and Northumbria was rated as the best university in the North East of England for its research power in sport and exercise science.

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