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ICUDDR'S SCIENTIFIC COLUMN

IN FOCUS: ADDICTION RESEARCH

IN FOCUS: TURNING FOOTBALL INTO A PREVENTION PATHWAY

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Photo from Reclaiming Futures Nigeria

International Consortium of Universities for Drug Demand Reduction (ICUDDR)

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ICUDDR's Scientific Column

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Editor's Note (ICUDDR): This In Focus article highlights a community-based prevention initiative implemented in Kaduna State, Nigeria. It offers practice-based evidence by illustrating how sports settings can be used to identify and respond to early substance use risk among adolescents. The article has been lightly edited by ICUDDR for clarity and flow while preserving the author's original voice and program description.

In Focus: Turning Football into a Prevention Pathway

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Photo from Reclaiming Futures Nigeria

Substance use prevention often struggles to reach young people early, particularly in community settings where access to formal services is limited. In many contexts, adolescents encounter alcohol and other substances before they have consistent access to trusted adults who can guide safe decision-making. This gap highlights the need for prevention approaches that meet young people where they are.

Background

Across Kaduna State, many young people first encounter alcohol and other substances long before they have access to trusted adults who can support informed choices. Peer influence, emotional stress, and limited structured recreational opportunities often shape these early experiences. At the same time, most prevention services remain clinic-based, leaving many adolescents unreached.

The Dream-Catchers Sports Programme

The Dream-Catchers Sports Programme was developed to address this gap. Operating across six communities, it engages adolescents aged 10–18 through weekly football sessions that combine recreation with substance use prevention. The programme integrates Screening, Brief Advice, and Referral to Support (SBAT) into routine sports activities, allowing facilitators to identify early warning signs and respond within a familiar and trusted environment.

How the Model Works in Practice

1. Brief advice in trusted spaces

Facilitators incorporate short, relatable conversations into breaks before or after matches. Topics include peer pressure, stress, decision-making, and substance use risks. These informal discussions create space for openness and honest dialogue among adolescents.

2. Recognizing early signs of risk

Facilitators use observation, guided group discussions, and age-appropriate questions to identify behavioral changes. For example, a 14-year-old participant who became withdrawn later shared that he was

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experiencing pressure from older peers to consume alcohol. Early identification allowed timely engagement with caregivers and connection to local support services.

3. Referral and follow-up support

When concerns are identified, facilitators provide follow-up support, involve caregivers, and connect adolescents to NGOs or public services. All activities follow child safeguarding protocols, including informed consent and confidentiality.

Observed Outcomes

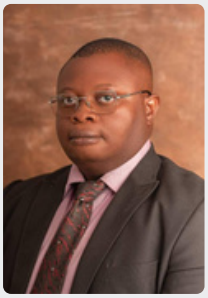
As the programme continues, early observations suggest several positive trends. These include consistent attendance, increased openness in discussing stress and peer influence, improved awareness of substance-related risks, and greater identification of adolescents who may be at risk. There are also indications of enhanced parental engagement. Football spaces are increasingly being viewed as safe environments not only for play, but also for conversation and support.

Significance

The programme demonstrates that sports can function as effective prevention platforms within community settings. Integrating SBAT into football activities provides a low-cost, youth-friendly approach that reaches adolescents early. This aligns with evidence supporting early screening and brief interventions (Babor et al., 2007) and with broader strategies emphasizing community-based prevention (WHO, 2018).

Looking Ahead

Future efforts will focus on strengthening referral systems, expanding programme reach, enhancing monitoring and evaluation, and increasing collaboration with schools and local service providers. Strengthening evaluation efforts will also support potential replication in similar low-resource settings.



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Selected References

1. Babor, T. F., et al. (2007). Screening and brief intervention for risky substance use.
2. World Health Organization (WHO). (2018). SAFER initiative.