

IMPACT MEASUREMENT REPORT 2025

SAMEN SPORTEN EN SPELEN

An independent evaluation by Leiden University of inclusive football and hockey for children aged 6 to 12 with and without disabilities

APRIL TO JUNE 2025

Summary

Samen sporten en spelen works.

In its pilot season, the inclusive football and hockey lessons supported by Stichting Equal Play brought children with and without disabilities together as real teams, and an independent evaluation by Leiden University found the programme delivering every key condition that international research links to successful inclusion.

Children loved taking part, grew in skill and confidence, and built friendships that carried beyond the field. Parents formed a warm, engaged community around the teams. Trainers delivered sensitive, high quality coaching that met each child at their own level.

Both clubs launched with a 4 to 6 week trial in winter 2024, paused for the winter break and began regular training in January 2025. By the time of the evaluation, April to June 2025, the teams had been running for six months at most.

30

CHILDREN REACHED

22 in football, 11 in hockey, 3 playing both

62%

CHILDREN WITH A DISABILITY

8 of the 13 children in the research sample

2

MAINSTREAM CLUBS

RVC Celeritas and Hockey Club Ypenburg

11

TRAININGS OBSERVED

Producing 18 observation reports

7 of 9

PARENTS

Say their child looks forward to training

5 of 5

CONDITIONS FOR INCLUSION MET

As defined in Dutch and international research

Headline impact

Five results stand out from the evaluation.



Children love it

7 of 9 parents say their child looks forward to training or talks about it at home. One boy always wants to go: when his father cannot bring him, his brother does.



Real inclusion

Children greet, help and play with each other, and their connection deepened across the season.



Visible growth

Trainers can describe each child's progress from their first session onward.



A thriving community

Parents became assistant trainers and organisers, and the groups grew into true teams.



Excellent delivery

Small groups in every observation report; attunement, group moments and sensitive coaching at both clubs all season.



METHODOLOGY

HOW THE STUDY WAS BUILT

The programme, the science behind it and the research design of Leiden University.

Programme and target group

Samen sporten en spelen brings children aged 6 to 12 with and without disabilities together in the same sports team, close to home.

Specialised clubs support children with a disability well, yet contact with peers without a disability is largely absent in out of school sport and play. Participation is a core value of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by the Netherlands in 2016.

Inclusion is progressing in education, while inclusive out of school sport and play remains rare.

Element	What the programme does
Lessons	Weekly inclusive trainings in football at RVC Celeritas and in hockey at Hockey Club Ypenburg
Target group	Children aged 6 to 12 with and without disabilities, including children with a long-term illness, an intellectual, physical or sensory disability, or neurodivergence; girls with and without a disability; and children from refugee and migrant communities. Together these groups formed the core of the teams during the research.
Club support	Stichting Equal Play helps clubs set up and sustain the inclusive team, both in content and financially at least during the first year and gradually ensures club independence.
Coach training	Trainers are trained in inclusive coaching
Specialist staff	Specialised support staff are deployed at trainings.

PROGRAMME

Stichting Equal Play

DELIVERY

RVC Celeritas and Hockey Club Ypenburg

EVALUATION

Leiden University, led by Dr. Lotte van der Pol

Theoretical foundation

Samen sporten en spelen rests on a strong international evidence base: when children with and without disabilities train in the same team, research shows benefits for every child in that team.

A right for every child

Participation is a core value of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006, art. 19), ratified by the Netherlands in 2016.

National momentum

The Netherlands has taken visible steps toward inclusive education (Ledoux & Waslander, 2020). This programme carries that ambition into out of school sport, where grassroots initiatives lead the way.

Close to home

Children with a disability gain a place in everyday club life alongside neighbourhood peers, and children without a disability get to know and learn from them.

What international research shows

Benefit	For whom	Evidence
Fewer negative stereotypes and less social distance	Children without a disability	Ryuh et al., 2019
More social acceptance and positive social interaction	Children with a disability	Morgan & Parker, 2017
Less problem behaviour and less socially withdrawn behaviour	Children with a disability	Özer et al., 2012; Ryuh et al., 2019
More friendships with other children	Children with a disability	Özer et al., 2012; Ryuh et al., 2019

Contact theory

Quality of contact makes the difference

The contact hypothesis holds that contact between people reduces prejudice when four conditions are met (McKeown & Dixon, 2017). The pilot shows Samen sporten en spelen meeting each of them.



Five conditions for successful inclusion

Dutch and international research, policy makers and experts by experience point to five conditions for successful inclusive sport (de Jonge et al., 2022; Gehandicaptensport Nederland, 2024; Kiuppis, 2018; van Lindert & de Jonge, 2022). Samen sporten en spelen puts all five into practice.



A fluid, child centred view of disability

The programme treats disability as a fluid characteristic. Children with and without a formal diagnosis are equally welcome, and trainers focus on each child's own support needs, social skills and interests.

This sets the programme apart from most Dutch institutions, where a recognised disability is usually an entry criterion.



SENSITIVE RESPONSIVENESS

“The ability of an adult to detect a child's signals and needs, interpret them correctly and respond promptly and appropriately.”
Pederson et al., 2014.

This concept from developmental science is at the heart of the coaching observed during the training sessions..

Research methodology

Designed and carried out independently by Leiden University. The research design described here was developed and carried out by Dr. Lotte van der Pol, principal researcher at the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, Leiden University, together with a team of four trained researchers from the Master's programme in Pedagogical Sciences (Van der Pol, 2025).

Research aim

The central aim of this exploratory study was to gain insight into the aspects of daily practice in inclusive sports lessons that matter for an optimal fit with the diverse support needs, interests and abilities of children with and without disabilities in one team.

Based on international literature, the study paid particular attention to four themes:

1

The organisation and structure of the lessons

2

The extent and quality of interaction among the children

3

The attunement between trainers and children

4

The attitude and role of parents during the trainings

Design and procedure

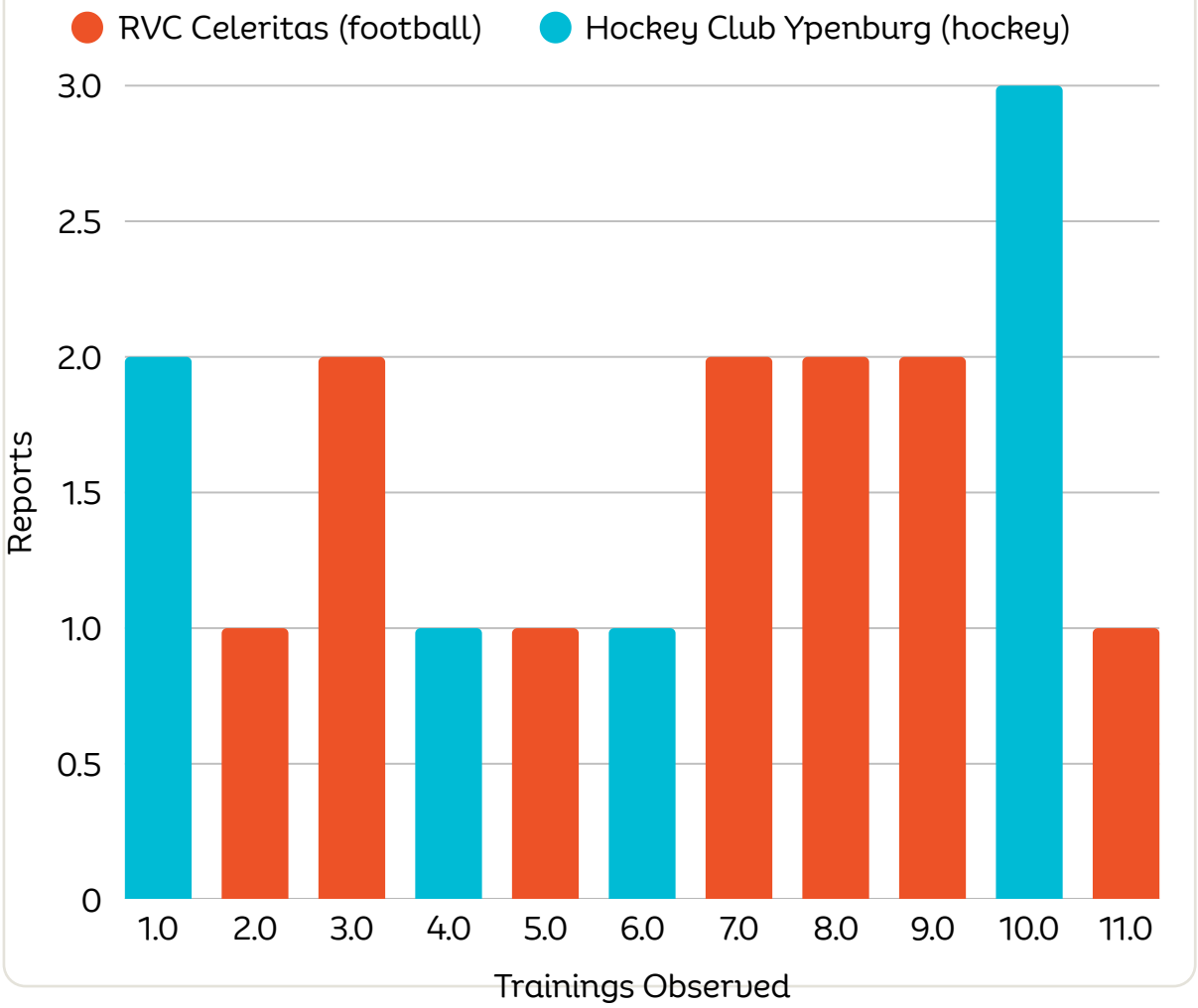
The study used a qualitative, exploratory design based on repeated field observations and interviews, collected between April and June 2025 at RVC Celeritas (football, Rijswijk) and Hockey Club Ypenburg (hockey, The Hague). Four trained researchers attended seven football and four hockey trainings, agreeing beforehand which parts and subgroups each would observe.

Each researcher wrote a separate report on the subgroup they followed: 18 reports across 11 trainings. At six trainings, two or three researchers each documented a different subgroup. At five trainings one report was written, so standout moments in the other subgroups went unrecorded.

At the time, the teams had been running for six months at most: a 4 to 6 week trial in winter 2024, a winter break, and regular training from January 2025.

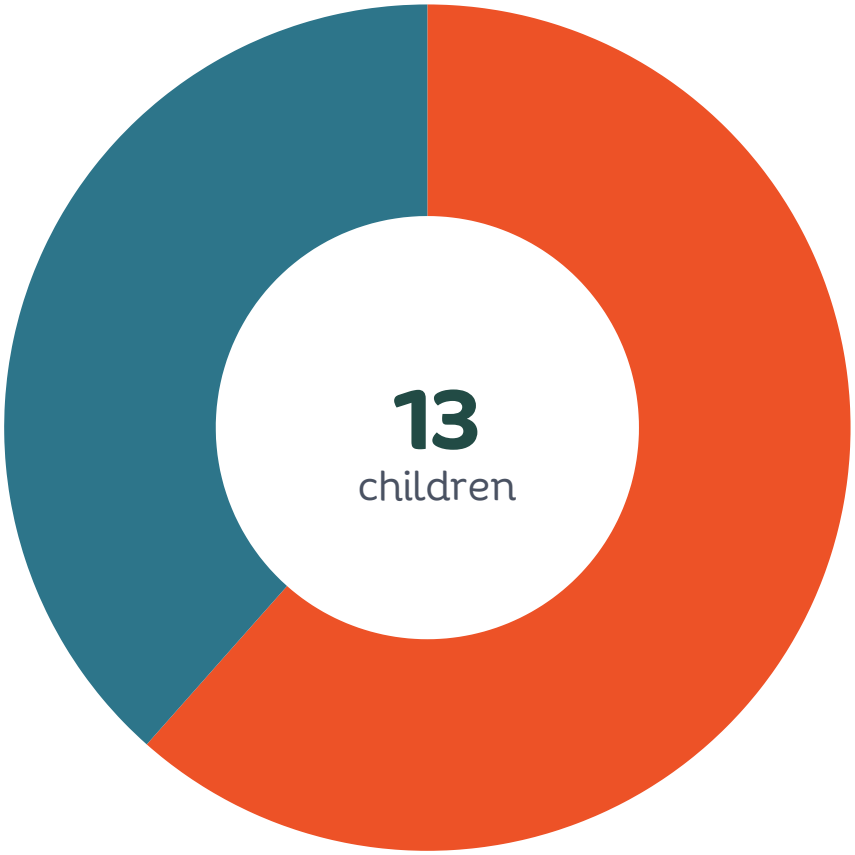
11 trainings observed, 18 observation reports written

Number of observation reports per training.
Each report covers one subgroup of the team.



Participants

Thirteen children aged 6 to 12 and their parents took part in the study, together with six trainers. The participating children formed a research sample drawn from the two teams, which had 30 children in total.



8 (62%)

Children with a disability, boys and girls

5 (38%)

Children without a disability

Sport followed by the 13 children

6	4	3
Football only	Hockey only	Both sports

Instruments and ethics

Field observations

The researchers observed from the sideline in an observing role: they stayed out of the sports activities themselves and had brief contact with children, trainers and parents. They took free notes on the structure of the training, instructions, interaction among children, interaction between trainers and children, and the role of parents.

After each training the notes went into a two column observation journal: events in chronological order on the left, associations and interpretations on the right. This keeps what concretely happened separate from the impression it created.

Parent interviews

In the second half of the study, two of the four researchers interviewed nine parents (three at hockey, six at football) with five open questions:

1. motivation for taking part,
2. experience with regular sports lessons,
3. benefits and positive experiences,
4. points for improvement,
5. how the child experiences the lessons at home.

Ethics

The design was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, Leiden University.

The founders of Equal Play informed parents and trainers beforehand.

No audio or video was recorded and all data were processed anonymously.

All trainers and parents gave informed consent for themselves and their child.

Quality assurance and analysis

Peer debriefing (intervision)

Every two to three trainings, the principal researcher met with the research team to discuss, compare and supplement the reports. Each meeting critically examined the researchers' reflections and interpretations, discussed differing views of the same event, and kept the team alert to confirmation bias: the tendency to see and remember what confirms existing beliefs. Researchers were encouraged to look explicitly for what was new or different at every training.

Reflexive thematic analysis

The data were analysed with reflexive, inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021): the patterns in the data guide the themes. This suits a field where little is yet known about how inclusive youth sport works in practice in the Netherlands. Themes were then set against the international literature. Because most trainings were observed by two or more researchers, differences in interpretation could be examined explicitly.

The six steps of the analysis



The analysis yielded seven themes: six from the observations and interviews together, and a seventh, the role and attitude of parents, from the observations. All codes are documented in the study's codebook.



RESULTS

WHAT THE EVALUATION FOUND

Reach, strengths throughout the study period and outcomes for children, parents and clubs.

Reach and outputs

66

TOTAL REACH OF THE PROGRAMME

people reached by the inclusive teams

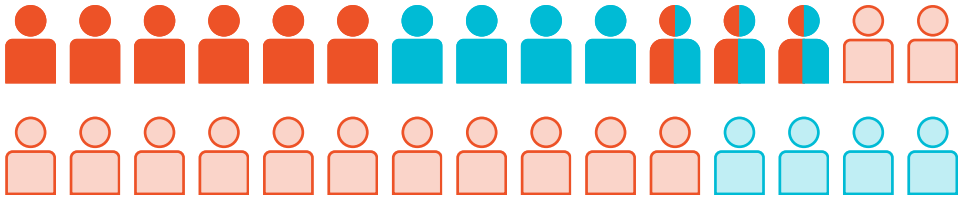
Took part in the research

Reached by the programme

30

children

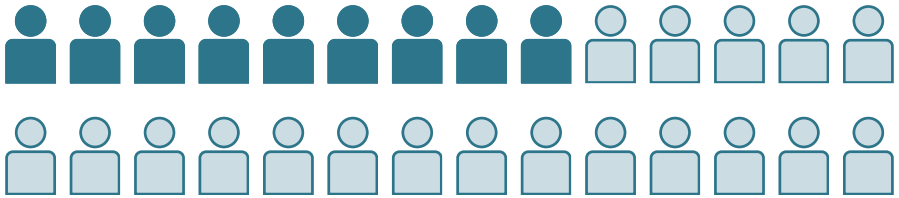
aged 6 to 12



28

parents

closely involved, several as assistant trainers



8

coaches

leading the weekly trainings



RVC Celeritas HC Ypenburg both clubs

RESEARCH SAMPLE

28

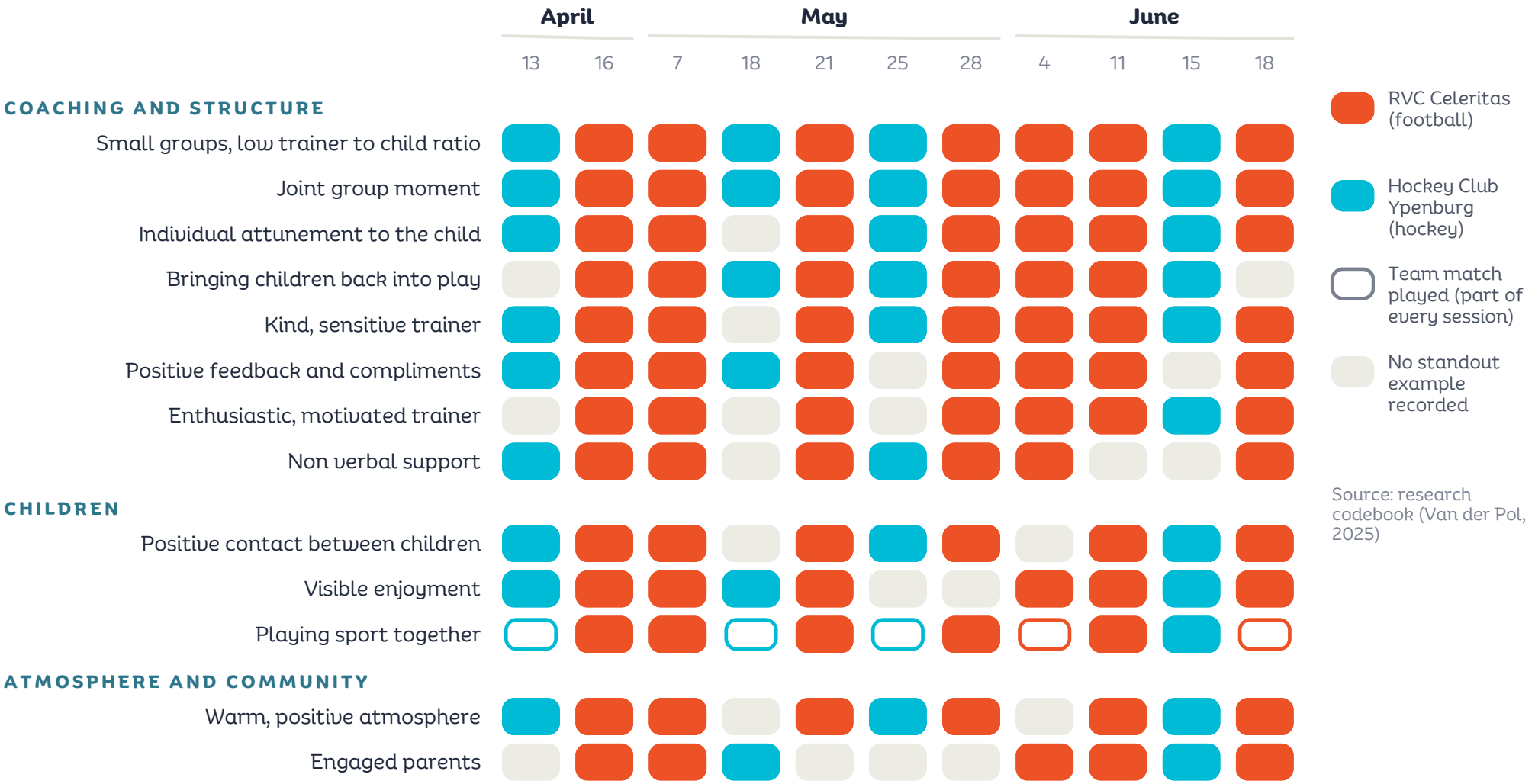
of the 66 were followed by the Leiden University researchers, April to June 2025.

13	**children** of 30
9	**parents** of 28
6	**trainers** of 8

22 children play at RVC Celeritas and 11 at Hockey Club Ypenburg; 3 play at both clubs and are counted once.
Sources: Stichting Equal Play; research sample from Van der Pol (2025).

Strengths seen throughout the period

Standout moments of the same strengths came back at training after training, at both clubs. Each filled square marks a standout example the observers recorded at that training.



Source: research codebook (Van der Pol, 2025)

What parents said

Nine parents were interviewed at the trainings. Their answers tell the same story as the observations.

7 of 9



say their child looks forward to training or talks about it at home

5 of 9



described their child's enjoyment

5 of 9



praised how well the trainers know and respond to their child

Outcomes by stakeholder

The programme creates value for everyone involved: children gain enjoyment, belonging and friendships, parents gain a community, and clubs gain skilled inclusive coaching and a warm team culture.

Children

Enjoyment. Children visibly enjoyed the sessions and looked forward to them.

Belonging. Greeted by name; high fives and hugs after training; a closing cheer with hands stacked together.

Connection. They sought each other out, helped one another and played cooperatively; friendships grew beyond the field.

Growth. Trainers describe each child's progress; advanced children got extra challenge.

Self regulation. Children knew what was expected and needed less steering.

Parents

Community. Parents got to know one another along the sideline, at times discovering shared backgrounds.

Active involvement. Several acted as assistant trainers or organised the shared lemonade moment.

Satisfaction. The parent group was engaged, supportive and positive about the programme.

Trainers and clubs

Inclusive coaching. Verbal instruction combined with non verbal support, such as kneeling to eye level.

Sensitive responsiveness. Trainers read signals and brought children back into play when attention wandered.

Continuous improvement. Routines grew stronger week by week; materials ready, transitions announced.

Positive culture. A warm, accepting atmosphere with much shared laughter.



In their own words

“It's really cosy, the feeling that everyone truly plays together and that everyone is treated as equal.”

Parent, interview 7

“He makes friends with children who live close by through these lessons.”

Parent, interview 1

“The children join in the exercises well; they know exactly what to do.”

Field observation 7

Quotes are translated from the Dutch research report.

Impact scorecard

The study showed positive results in all eight outcome areas, with community and friendships growing steadily as the season progressed.

Outcome area	What the evaluation found	Result	Indicator to track
Safe, structured setting	Small groups noted in every observation report; joint group moments at both clubs, April to June	Achieved	Sessions delivered to the fixed format
Trainer attunement	Individual attunement at both clubs throughout the season; praised by 5 of 9 parents	Achieved	Instances of sensitive responsiveness
Enjoyment and motivation	Visible enjoyment at both clubs throughout the season; 7 of 9 parents say their child looks forward to training	Achieved	Share of children who look forward to training
Peer interaction	Positive contact and playing together at both clubs throughout the season; greetings, high fives and shared play	Achieved	Cooperative behaviours per session
Coaching quality	Positive feedback, enthusiasm and non-verbal support at both clubs throughout the season	Achieved	Praise and encouragement per session
Positive atmosphere	Warm, positive atmosphere at both clubs throughout the season	Achieved	Club climate rating
Parent engagement	Engaged parents at both clubs, with up to 16 parents present at a training	Achieved	Parents in active roles
Friendships and community	Friendships near home; groups becoming teams	Growing	Friendships beyond training

What makes it work

The lessons realise five conditions that international literature links to successful inclusion. These are the main drivers of the impact observed, and they match contact theory: equality, a shared goal, cooperation and adequate guidance.

01

Close to home

Everyday activity in the own neighbourhood

02

Skilled, sensitive trainers

Praise for small steps, verbal and non verbal support

03

An equal sporting culture

Everyone is known by name

04

A favourable ratio

Room for small group and one to one work

05

Individual attunement

Challenge for some, support for others



A programme that keeps getting better

Strength	How it showed in the pilot
Learning organisation	Routines grew stronger through the season, with materials ready and transitions announced centrally
Tailored challenge	Football subteams were formed by skill level, so every group worked at the right pace
Cooperative play	Trainers actively encouraged teamwork in matches, and children took it up with enthusiasm
Personal attention	Trainers adjusted instruction to each child's starting point, kneeling to eye level and demonstrating



RECOMMENDATIONS

Ready for the next phase

Four recommendations that follow from the pilot

Recommendations

The pilot shows that the model works. Four recommendations follow from it.



1
Scale up nationwide

Within six months, the inclusive teams already delivered every condition for successful inclusion. Bring the model to sports clubs across the Netherlands, using the five success factors as the quality standard for every new team.

2
Conduct a full impact study within two years

Measure social acceptance, friendships and wellbeing on a wide scale, and track participation, attendance and retention of children with and without a disability.

3
Invest in off the pitch activities close to home

Help children build friendships in their own neighbourhoods, so that those friendships carry back onto the pitch.

4
Develop and document children's stories

Give children's own voices a permanent place in the evidence, alongside observations and parent interviews.

Conclusion

Samen sporten en spelen turns the promise of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities into everyday reality on the sports field.

Children with and without disabilities train, play and celebrate together, close to home, guided by skilled and caring trainers. Within six months of starting, the independent evaluation already shows enjoyment, acceptance, growth and a flourishing community around every team. In the words of the researchers, the pilot provides a firm starting point for the next phase. Stichting Equal Play is ready to bring this proven approach to many more children and clubs.

Sources

Underlying study: Van der Pol, L. (2025). Samen sporten en spelen [Research report, July 2025]. Leiden University, Faculty of Governance and Global Affairs, in collaboration with Stichting Equal Play. Supported by the synthesis of 14 July 2025 and the research codebook.

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