

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Inspiring health: Role models enhance physical activity and nutrition outcomes

AT A GLANCE

In year three, Soccer for Success reveals how role models elevate youth engagement and healthy behavior change.

The Situation

Community-based strategies that support health and wellness in accessible, everyday settings are needed in Idaho. Currently, 12.2% of Idaho children are overweight or obese, placing them at increased risk for chronic illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease. This concern is heightened by the 12.4% of youth who do not engage in daily physical activity. To address these challenges, the Extension educator identified an opportunity to offer Soccer for Success, a nationally recognized youth development program from the U.S. Soccer Foundation, which uses soccer as a vehicle to teach physical activity, nutrition and life skills using mentors and education to prevent childhood obesity and empower youth to make healthier choices.

Our Response

In 2025, University of Idaho Extension in Kootenai County — through support from Eat Smart Idaho and UI Extension Innovative Project Funds — launched its third year of the Soccer for Success program. This year's program was operated at Northwest Expedition Academy (NEXA), Winton Elementary and Ponderosa Elementary in the Coeur d'Alene and Post Falls school districts. Three lead coach/mentors and two support



Soccer for Success youth at Northwest Expedition Academy along with their University of Idaho coach/mentors.

mentors delivered high-energy soccer sessions featuring multiple skill-development stations designed to build player confidence, coordination and enthusiasm for physical activity. A unique feature of the 2025 program was the intentional integration of role model storytelling, mentorship and local role model visits. Each week, college interns prepared youth-centered stories featuring professional athletes known for their positive character, discipline and perseverance. Themes such as teamwork, resilience, work ethic, healthy habits, positive attitude and leadership were highlighted. One of the five coach mentors read the stories aloud to participants, weaving in their own experiences to reinforce the message. Youth at the NEXA site also benefited from visits by local role models, including college athletes from the Coeur d'Alene area who shared their

personal journeys of grit, determination and academic-athletic balance.

Program Outcomes

Youth were interviewed at the conclusion of Soccer for Success programming. Youth were asked, “Who makes or has made an influence on your eating and/or physical activity habits?” Eighty-one youth identified the coach/mentors, visiting role models and the Eat Smart Idaho instructor as having the strongest influence on their eating and physical activity behaviors this summer.

Youth also shared the following statements:

- The coaches made me feel like I can do anything.
- The coaches taught us all the healthy food I should be eating and I am choosing to eat more fruits and vegetables now.
- I have been going home and running more in the driveway and riding my bike because I know how important it is.
- The role models and coaches at Soccer for Success influence me as much as my parents and my teachers.
- I have talked to my parents about what we do here in nutrition class and at soccer and I told my mom we need to eat healthier food, not so much pizza. She listened to me and now we are eating more chicken.
- At my house, we put a lot of healthy fruit and vegetables names in a jar and when I have a snack I choose what I am going to eat from the jar.

Evaluation Statement	Yes	Did not respond
Do you feel happy when someone you look up to joins you in healthy activities? n=31	88%	12%
Does it help when a role model shows you how to make healthy choices or be active instead of just telling you? n=31	94%	6%
Have you tried something new because a role model you met this summer did it first? n=31	90%	10%
Did coaches/mentors or role models help you try harder when doing soccer activities? (SFS only, n=24)	96%	4%
This summer, have you wanted to show others what you learned to help them be healthy? (n=31)	97%	3%
Does it help when a role model shows you how to make healthy choices or be active instead of just telling you? n=31	94%	6%
Do you feel more active because of the role models and coaches you met this summer? (SFS only, n=24)	71%	29% were already active

The addition of role models appears to have amplified youth motivation, confidence and positive behavior change. Youth comments confirmed that role models made a meaningful difference: youth described feeling more capable, more supported and more inspired to make healthy choices. Together, the data and youth feedback suggest that integrating role models deepened the program’s educational impact and strengthened youths’ belief in their own ability to make healthy decisions and apply these concepts beyond the soccer field.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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