



Marketplace for Best Practices  
on non-communicable diseases  
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# Icehearts – sport-based, long term Positive Youth Development programme

- What is Icehearts
- Design and implementation
- Obstacles related to the implementation
- Concrete results achieved
- Impact of the practice
- Elements contributing to Icehearts success





# What is Icehearts?



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tNpOa9wy26o>



# Design of Icehearts

- Icehearts was founded in 1995 by Ville and Ilkka Turkka as a result of Ville's experiences in working with child protection facilities.
- Icehearts provides long-term professional support for vulnerable children and adolescents.
- Core element of the Icehearts programme is the trustworthy relationship between child and mentor.
- Mentors are paid, full-time professionals, 12 year commitment to the child, work in teams.
- Icehearts prevents social exclusion, promotes holistic well-being, physical activity, positive mental health and social skills of children.
- Team sport serves as an environment where children – besides physical activity – have the possibility to learn social skills, get friends and experience sense of belonging.
- Now 60 teams in 14 cities in Finland, 6 teams for girls

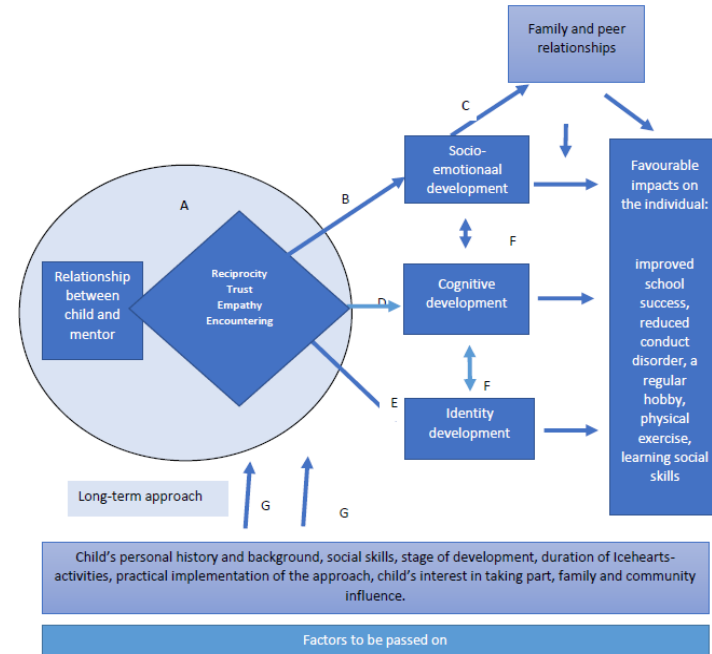


Figure 2. Programme theory of Icehearts approach.<sup>1</sup> (Smolej 2017)



## Recruitment and forming a team

- The first children are selected and invited for a team at the age of 6 years in co-operation with professionals from pre-school, school and social services. This core group of between six to ten children will be selected for the activity due to the concerns of professionals.
- The typical concerns include impulsiveness, learning and concentration difficulties, and behavioural and emotional disorders. Some of these children also suffer from neurological and motor function disorders.
- After forming the core group, the team gradually enlarges to the extent that its social carrying capacity and practical activities permit. Besides children of core group, children with less severe challenges in life (balancing children) are invited to the programme.
- Typical criteria for these “balancing children” include a low-income family background, immigrant background, several siblings or single parent family, a condition in which the family has challenges to offer the child a meaningful leisure-time activity.
- By the fourth operating year the overall composition of the team has generally clarified, with between 20 and 30 participants in the same age group continuing into later years.



# Implementation of Icehearts

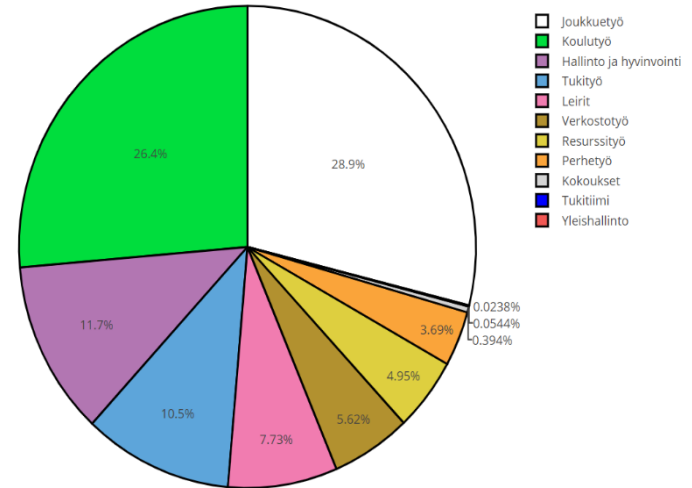
The work of Icehearts mentors can roughly be divided into four sections:

**School work:** The mentor of the team supports the children in their studies. Mentor is an extra adult resource for the school and with his/her presence supports and stabilises the whole class and school activities.

**Team sport:** After school the mentor helps the children of the team to do their homework and organises afternoon activities. During the afternoon the children of the team spend time together, practise and play together and have excursions with their mentor. Team sport is selected in collaboration with the mentor and the children. Different sports are tested in a wide range depending on the local opportunities.

**Individual support:** Icehearts mentor works one-to-one with a child if necessary. The best approach is often simply unhurried conversation and listening to the child. The need for individual attention is particularly evident when problems emerge or an acute crisis develops in the child's life.

**Social work/family support:** The mentor helps the children of his/her team and their families by supporting them in problems arising in everyday life. The mentor takes part in meetings concerning the wellbeing of the child when necessary. The mentor works closely with social, health and educational services.



## Obstacles related to the implementation

- Icehearts started as volunteer work - a whole new way of doing social work with children.
- Due to latest promising preliminary outcomes of the programme and the need of municipalities for this kind of support, the number of Icehearts teams has increased over the last years.
- Due to rapid diffusion of the programme, the organizational structure has been formed with national and regional boards.
- The programme was further developed as Icehearts manual (Smolej 2017) for programme providers was accomplished.
- Icehearts Association has built its own web-based tool for evaluating both the processes and the outcomes of the programme.
- Despite promising results the main obstacle has been finding a “home base” for funding since the work of Icehearts spreads in many different fields (education, preventive work, sports, healthcare, social services, child protection etc).

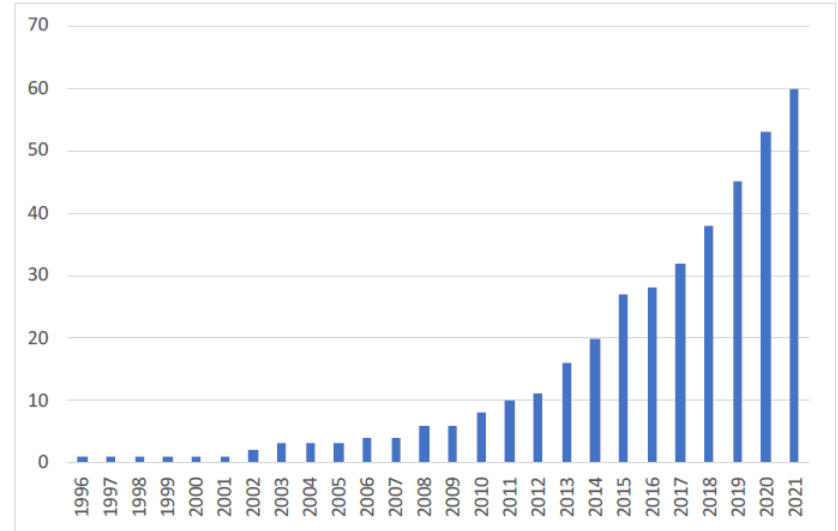


Figure 2. Number of Icehearts teams in Finland 1996-2021



## Concrete results achieved – longitudinal study

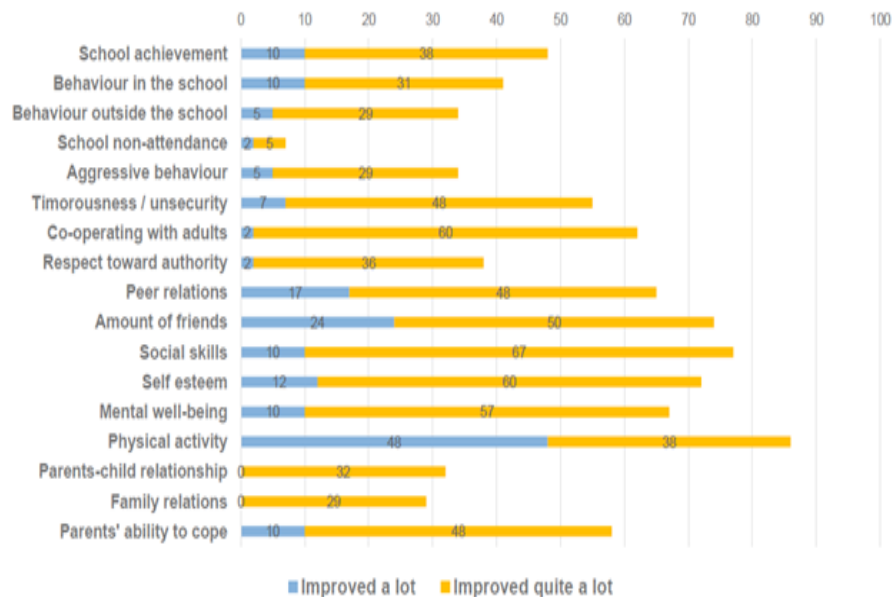
- The longitudinal Icehearts study (2015-2028) by Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare aims at investigating 1) the feasibility and outcomes of the programme as well as 2) the psychosocial well-being and development of children participating in the programme (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al. 2017).
- The target group of the study are five Icehearts teams (n=52) and the data is collected with mixed methods (questionnaires and focus groups interviews) from children participating in the programme, their mentors, parents and teachers as well as other school staff. Data is collected with questionnaires among children, parents and teachers from the children and with focus group interviews among parents and school staff of five school participating in the programme.
- The findings of the study showed that families of programme participants were more likely to have health, mental health and financial problems, to be from a single parent family and to have experienced many changes in family structure compared to controls (children with same age in the same schools). Icehearts participants were more likely to experienced socioemotional and behaviour problems compared to controls. Two thirds of the children participating in the Icehearts programme reported becoming easily tired and more than half reported being annoyed by other children. Almost 40 per cent reported frequent conflicts with other children and feeling often worried and crying.
- According to the assessments from the teachers, two thirds of Icehearts participants had socio-emotional and behavioural problems.





## Results from longitudinal study – impact after 1 year assessed by mentors

- After the first year, Icehearts mentors assessed the programme as having a positive impact on participants' physical activity, child-adult relationships, peer relations, social skills, self-esteem, mental health (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner et al. 2017)
- The programme also showed a positive impact on the parent's ability to cope.
- After the first **four** years, the mentors reported that the physical activity and self-esteem had increased at least to some extent in 83 %, mental health in 80 % and social skills in 77 % of the children and peer relations improved in 78 of the children. (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner & Kekkonen 2020b.)



## Results from longitudinal study – SDQ by parents

- In one-year follow-up, the socio-emotional well-being, measured with the Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) by the parents, had increased or stayed the same among 53–69 percent of participating children. However, the socio-emotional well-being worsened in 31–47 of cases (Figure 1).
- Further analyses showed that the well-being had increased particularly among those children having less behavioural challenges at baseline and among those who had contact also with mental health services (Appelqvist-Schmidlechner & Kekkonen 2020a) indicating the programme to be feasible particularly as early intervention and highlighting the need of psychiatric support for those with more severe mental health or behavioral problems.

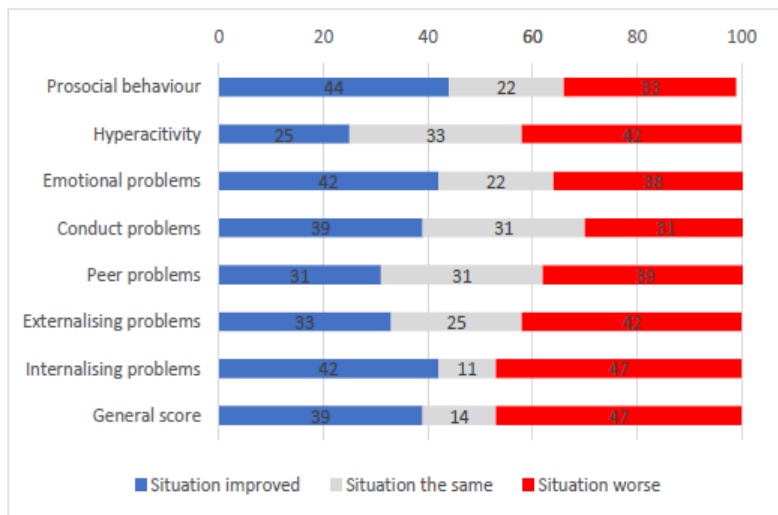


Figure 1. Socio-emotional well-being (measured with SDQ) among programme participants assessed by the parents

## Concrete results achieved – parents survey

- Parents valued especially the possibility to have someone who is trustworthy and provides long-lasting support and listens to their concern related to their children (Figure 3, unpublished findings)
- Focus group interviews (Kekkonen et al. 2021) among parents (n=28) showed that the programme provides social support for families of participating children. Icehearts mentor provides substantive support for parents in everyday life, e.g. by picking up a reluctant child to school.
- Parents valued highly the possibility to contact the mentor 24/7 and having him available, not only at office hours but also in evenings and at weekends.
- Mentors' presence in children's lives was experienced as a strong support for parenthood and upbringing of the child. Helping children with the homework, conflict solving and afternoon activities unburdened parents' stress at home. Parents also welcomed the mentor as a partner in different meetings with professionals.
- The perceived benefits were related to parents' better coping with problems in everyday live, improved school performance of children and in the trustful relationship between the child and mentor who was seen as a positive role model for the children.

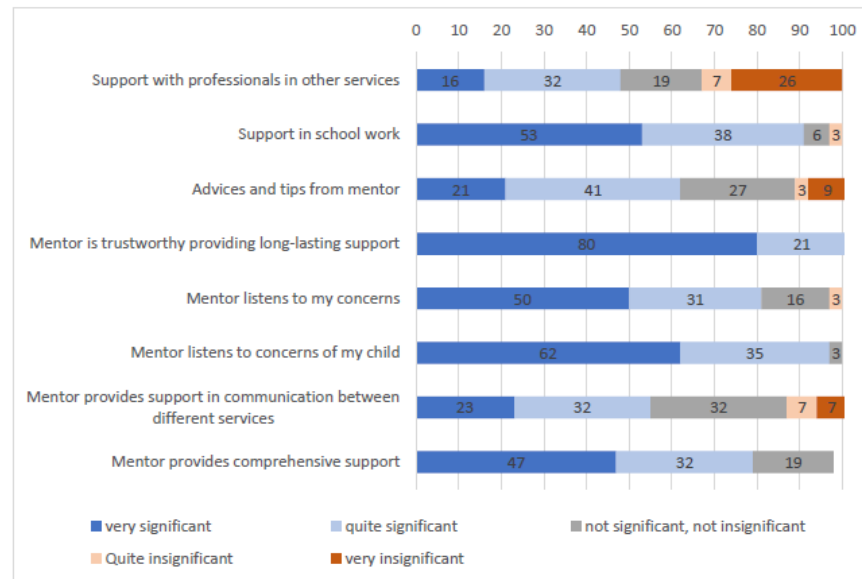


Figure 3. Support provided by the mentor according to the parents of participating children (n=46)



## Concrete results achieved – school survey

- The focus group interviews among the school staff (n=30) were conducted among teachers, headmasters and school welfare professionals of five schools involved with the programme (Kekkonen et al. 2018).
- The findings of the interviews showed that the programme prevents children at risk from school exclusion and school drop out by creating longstanding and trustful partnerships with schools.
- Schools benefit from the programme in multiple ways. Children with learning difficulties are assisted by Icehearts mentors in classrooms, in afternoon activities and at home. An intensive partnership with teachers is created to promote learning.
- Secondly, mentors are actively involved with school community during school breaks, sport events, excursions and group activities. Aim is to promote participation of Icehearts –children and to prevent them to get into fights, conflicts or get involved with bullying.
- Finally, according to teachers, mentors build a trustful partnership with teachers and families. Mentors share the responsibility for upbringing of children and provide intensive support in acute crisis. Mentors participate also in meetings related to well-being of the child and represent child's interest. Besides vulnerable children involved in the programme, support provided by the mentors reaches to the whole school community.



## Concrete results achieved – retrospective qualitative study

- Besides the longitudinal Icehearts study, a retrospective interview study (Wessman et al. 2018) was conducted in 2015 among young adults (n=19) who had been participating in the programme during their childhood and adolescence till the age of 18. The study participants had been in the team from three to 12 years.
- The study set out to investigate the experiences and insights of young men about participating in the Icehearts programme.
- The study identified the factors that may prevent the exclusion of boys and contributing to the debate on the productive nature of masculinity and sport. The research focuses on the long-term educational relationship and to the community built around physical activity and their significance for the boys involved in Icehearts.
- *The findings showed the teammate relationships and emotional support provided by the team were of particular importance in building and strengthening the boys' experiences of belonging and well-being.*
- *Further, the findings highlighted the role of mentor as a positive male role model.*





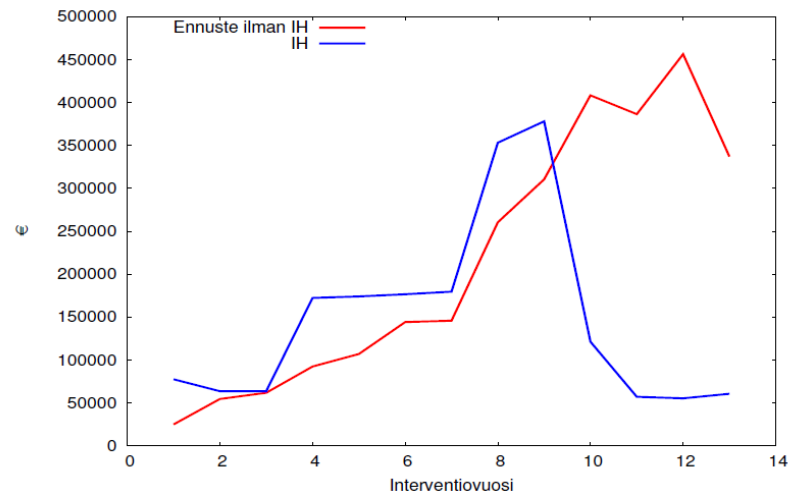
## Concrete results achieved – Icehearts own surveys

- According to **children's own feedback** in 2020, Icehearts children reported in a scale of 1 to 5, score 5 indicating the best score, that they feel that they can talk to their mentors about issues that bother them on average 4,1, children have been able to do sports thanks to Icehearts 4,2, know that they will always get support from their mentors 4,5, have received good friends in Icehearts on average 4,5, children would recommend Icehearts to their friends very likely average score being 4,5.
- According to the findings of a **survey among parents** in 2019 (n=260) 81 % of parents reported that the well-being of their child had increased due to participating in the Icehearts team. 79 % reported that their daily family life had become easier, 84 % that their child had get new friends and 94 % that the child has got meaningful leisure time activity due to the programme. Among parents, 96 % were happy that their child participated in the programme. Parents were satisfied with the support provided by the mentor. 93 % believed that the mentor is always acting for the best of the child, 92 % experienced that the mentor listens to the parents in every concern related to the child, 97 % reported easily to get contact with the mentor whenever needed and 97 % expressed to trust the mentor. The programme was rated at average with the score 4,7 in a scale between 1 to 5, score 5 indicating the best score.
- According to Icehearts latest **national network survey** in 2020 (n=166) in a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 is the best number, the respondents viewed Icehearts as necessary 4.9, effective 4.8, well organised 4.5, transparent 4.4 and a good addition to municipal services 4.8.



## Impact of the practice- cost benefit analysis

- Petri Hilli (2017, unpublished findings) from the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra analysed retrospectively the cost benefits of the programme based on outcomes of one team after participating 12 years in the programme. Register data on national cohort 1987 study was used in the analysis as a comparison group. The use of social and health services and status of NEET (not in employment, education or training) was used as outcome variable.
- The findings showed that, compared with the national cohort data, the programme had halved the number of NEET cases.
- In addition, Icehearts programme seemed to reduce the need for heavy social and health care interventions. Due to this, the society saved 857 000 Euros in social and health care costs and increased the Gross Domestic Product with 1,9 million Euros.
- *Altogether, the cost benefit of the programme for the society was estimated to be 2,8 million Euros per team*



Red line = prognosis without Icehearts  
Blue line = actual costs with Icehearts



## Elements contributing to Icehearts success 1/2

- Engagement in productive and health activities support positive development of children and youth. Sports is frequently regarded as an effectual mechanism for promoting positive youth development (Jones et al. 2017; Hagel, 2016; Holt, 2008).
- Sport-based programmes oriented toward improving life skills and social, psychological and emotional resources in young people have been shown to be effective (Fuller et al. 2013; Ho et al. 2017; Hermens et al. 2017), especially among socially vulnerable children and adolescents (Haudenhuyse et al., 2013 and 2014a).
- Sports as a leisure time activity has the potential to provide a place where these young people can be engaged in meaningful activities and have positive experiences of support and appreciation, in contrast to the negative experiences they may have in other societal domains (Haudenhuyse et al., 2014b). For these young people, organized sports can be used as a tool with great potential to engage them in a pedagogical and supportive setting for positive youth development.
- Icehearts programme is based on these principles.



## Elements contributing to Icehearts success 2/2

- The theoretical background of the programme bases on salutogenic orientation of health and wellbeing (Antonovsky1996). According to this paradigm, efforts and resources should be invested in promoting protective factors for health and wellbeing. These protective factors can be, for example, meaningful leisure-time activities, social participation and trustful social relations.
- The salutogenic model aligns well with the positive youth development (PYD) paradigm, as both appreciate the assets and resources that youths have available to meet the demands of everyday life (Catalano et al. 2002). PYD programmes have been identified as a good example of mental health promotion programmes among young people (Catalano et. al. 2002). Promotion of resilience and life competencies, recognition of positive behaviours and providing opportunities for prosocial involvement are the key principles of PYD programmes
- Core element of the Icehearts programme is the trustworthy relationship between child and mentor. It is known, that already one positive child-adult relationship built on trust can protect the child from problems in later life (Whitehead et al. 2019). Through this relationship, built on reciprocity, trust, empathy and encountering, mentor has the potential to promote the socioemotional, cognitive and identity development of the child.



## Icehearts in a nutshell

- Long term support - 12 year commitment
- Trustworthy relationship between the child and mentor
- Use of team sport as a method for doing social work
- Supporting children in their everyday life without artificial boundaries
- Manualized program
- Centralized organisation
- Constant psychosocial support and training for mentors
- Constant evaluation and monitoring with own web-based tool

Hope this type of work spreads widely enhancing both physical and mental health of vulnerable children.

