



Get Up & Go

An evaluation of physical activity workshops
on early years provision in Bristol

Executive Summary

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Kate Hulm (BA Hons) Early Years & Play Consultant



Get Up and Go!

An Evaluation of Physical Activity Workshops for Early Years Practitioners in Bristol

Executive Summary

It is a good time to be stipulating the importance of physical activity. Following on from London's extremely successful hosting of both the Olympic and Paralympic Games, it is safe to say that the profile of sport 'for everyone' has rarely been as high as during the summer of 2012. Given very real concerns about children's health today and especially the rising incidence of childhood obesity, we would be failing our children not to capitalise on the interest and enthusiasm that has been generated by the Games. Physical activity impacts on all areas of children's overall development and is especially significant for physical and emotional health. For all children to stay healthy and enjoy physical activity, we need to develop a good understanding of what being active means for them and make sure that experiences from the earliest years onwards motivate them to fulfil their potential.



Running with Olympic torchbearer, Andy Townsend, in Redcatch Park

An evaluation was undertaken between April and June 2012 to ascertain the impact for two groups of early years' practitioners attending workshops aimed at promoting physical activity with young children. This professional development opportunity was one of the preventative strategies to combat the incidence of childhood obesity in Bristol. The first round of workshops was commissioned by NHS Bristol, using funding received from the British Heart Foundation's *Hearty*

Lives Programme. Bristol City Council funded the second cohort through the programme as well as funding a physical activity resource bag for the first group. The first workshops commenced in October 2010 and the second in October 2011. In addition to the workshops, the evaluation aimed to capture how the Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) guidelines on physical activity, *Start Active; Stay Active*, published in July 2011, have been received and promoted within the early year's sector in Bristol.

The evaluation report recognises some key issues for children and practitioners in respect of promoting physical activity. These include the importance of physical activity on all aspects of children's development and growth. While the initial aim of the workshops was to address obesity concerns, the impact of thoughtfully planned physical opportunities on all areas of children's learning cannot be ignored. Typically, being outside provides better opportunities for children to be physically active, mostly because the scale of the environment is bigger and there are fewer physical barriers. Some of the best recounted story acting opportunities happened out of doors. Moreover, where practitioners are enthusiastic, confident role models the more likely children are to enjoy being active and have fun.



Enjoying a skipping game

Being active is not only fun and good for learning, it is also fundamental for the prevention of childhood obesity. Statistics identified in the report show that childhood obesity is a very real national concern, with one in five children being overweight when they start school. The figures for Bristol are slightly above this national average and worryingly the incidence of overweight and obesity increases as children go through Primary School. Much has been written about the importance of diet in maintaining a healthy weight for both adults and

children. If children consume more calories than are needed for healthy growth and development they will store the additional ones as fat. It is important that early years' settings have a good grasp of what constitutes a nutritious diet for children and support their interest in food. Equally essential is to help children understand the connection between being healthy and being active. Promoting physical activity early on can have long term positive benefits for children's health, as well as how they may perceive themselves as future Olympians and Paralympians.



Feeling 'Superhuman'

Case Study 1

An early years practitioner who attended the first set of workshops has incorporated a 'once a month' physical activity session into the weekly community group she runs for parents and children. The children are a mixed age group, from babies up to three years old. The session starts with a warm up to music that includes stretching, bending and balancing. The practitioner explains what they are going to do and models the actions. Parents at the group join in and so do their children. After the warm up planned activities include dancing with scarves, hopping and throwing soft balls into buckets as a team game. It is a turn taking game and the first team to throw all their balls in their bucket sits down. Some parents run twice to support very young children to have a go. The final minutes of activity are spent cooling down and relaxing. The practitioner talks about how she feels and encourages the children to think about how they feel too. The session finishes with a drink and something to eat.

Supporting children's interest and enthusiasm in being active does not simply promote good health, it also provokes good learning. Action stimulates brain activity, while the opposite is true for sedentary behaviours. In other words, the

more active children are the more good connections their brains make. This is now seen as essential for learning and future academic success. The early years workforce is well placed not only to play with and encourage children to be active but also to help their families understand the real significance of these early opportunities too.

Physical activity should also be considered in relation to emotional well being. Children are not all destined to be future Olympians but this does not mean they cannot enjoy or engage enthusiastically in different physical activities or sports. While winning at the Olympics and Paralympics was clearly important, another message was more sublimely imparted by the majority of athletes who did not;



'it is not whether you win or lose but how you play the game'. In other words, without the level of participation evident there would be no Olympics and there are always more losers than winners. The two clear messages that shone through the Games were that sport is challenging but fun and participation key. Adults, either disabled or able-bodied, having the right attitude to physical activity can be motivational and inspiring for everyone.

'I'm gonna try with a little help from friends'

If the message we want children to understand is that sport and physical activity are fun then participation should easily follow. It is essential that children develop a positive attitude to physical activity from early on and the best way for this to happen is if they are encouraged and supported to be physically active from when they are babies. Leaving very young children for prolonged periods of time, and unnecessarily, in car seats or pushchairs does not support early muscle development or the inclination to be active. It is essential that parents and practitioners understand why babies need time on their tummies and toddlers opportunities to walk. Most of all children need time and space to develop as the physically active beings that nature intended them to be.

It is essential to understand that this may not occur easily if adults do not consider their responsibility in giving children the freedom they need to play and explore in physically active ways.

Getting going right from the start



Overall, the evaluation showed a positive impact on practitioners' abilities and confidence to facilitate

physical activity with children in their settings. Especially in respect of using stories to encourage movement, along with increased awareness of themselves as role models. Where there is perhaps more work to be done is to consider how practitioners are encouraged and enabled to share their knowledge and skills more widely within settings and with children's parents and carers, in order to maintain a higher profile of the importance of physical activity in children's lives today.

Case Study 2

A parent and child group was set up by a practitioner after attending the physical activity sessions. The workshops had helped him to identify a gap in provision and, with support from colleagues in his setting, use of the hall in an adjacent school was negotiated. The hall provided space for large equipment that was lacking in his own centre. The group runs weekly and another member of staff joins in with session. Large equipment such as balancing beams, a slide and a crawling tunnel are set up by the two practitioners before the parents and children arrive. Part of the hall is kept free of equipment and the session starts with a circle time of actions songs and rhymes. The two practitioners' role model actions and words; parents join in singing with their children. Children can then explore the equipment freely. There are opportunities to run, jump, balance, throw and crawl. Children's choices are respected. The session ends with another short circle time.

Learning how to ride a bike is fun



Participants were also canvassed for their views on further training needs around physical activity in light of recent

changes to the *Early Years Foundation Stage*. Also if there was scope for practitioners to cascade aspects of their training to a wider audience, one of the original intentions of the workshops. This clearly demonstrated the value placed on the course by most participants but also raised the question of further support that could be put in place to enable practitioners share their ideas and skills as widely as possible. Evidence gathered in relation to the *Start Active, Stay Active* guidelines for this evaluation appears to suggest that the profile of the guidance was fairly low within the early years sector in Bristol. It will be essential for the guidelines to become more thoroughly embedded in practice, and shared with parents, in order to influence the amount and kinds of physical activity that children are encouraged to do.

Case Study 3

One practitioner uses her small group time with her key children to really promote physical activity using resources from her red bag. Two or three times a week planning for this time incorporates physically active opportunities. First of all the practitioner modelled bending and stretching with the children to warm up their muscles. The practitioner had placed some large rubber 'spots' in different areas of the outside play space. Each child had a spot and when the practitioner called two children's names they had to run to each others spots. After they had all had two or three turns at running to change places she encouraged them to talk about they felt. The children explained that they were 'hot,' 'sweaty', 'breathless'. One child said he could 'feel his heart in his head'. Following on from this the children joined in with an egg and spoon and a three legged race. The three legged race stimulated discussion about balancing as well as the difficulties of making three legs work together.

Six recommendations have been made in respect of the evaluation, which reflect the feelings and ideas of the practitioners and managers who were interviewed.

Recommendation 1

Any CPD opportunities for early years practitioners promoting either the revised Early Years Foundation Stage framework or physical activity need to highlight the importance of physical development as a prime area and the significance of



physical activity within that context.

The responsibility to devolve ideas from CPD opportunities should be embedded within the course and followed- up by managers in settings to ensure that information is shared with colleagues at team meetings or specific staff training days.

Recommendation 2

Children should be involved in regular conversations about the health benefits of being physically active.

‘Having the right equipment as well as the right attitude and moves’

Recommendation 3

Identify and support some ‘*Healthy Champions*’ from both cohorts to share aspects of the training they found the most helpful through local networks by developing a ‘Community of Practice’. Additional, regular training provided should support the practitioners involved. For instance, Bristol City Council to provide one annual update training in order for *Healthy Champions* to jointly deliver two half days of training per year through the local area networks.

Healthy Champions should have responsibility for ensuring that physical activity, within the context children's learning and health, is discussed with parents from a child's entry into a setting, consistently observed and reported on to inform assessment of children's holistic development.

Recommendation 4

Develop further local CPD opportunities that will raise practitioners understanding and confidence levels in promoting physical activity with children especially in relation to:

- Pre-walking children;
- Disabled children (and perhaps some children with educational needs);
- Girls;
- Reducing environmental barriers/developing more flexible routines;
- Supporting parental understanding.



Songs and movement

Recommendation 5

All early years settings should have one downloaded copy of the CMO guidelines available to staff. These should be made an agenda item at staff meetings in order that practitioners become familiar with their content.



Being active starts early

Settings should also make available the relevant content of the CMO guidelines to parents in the ways that feel most appropriate for the families involved. For instance, on parent's notice boards, web site links or as information in newsletters and handouts.

Recommendation 6

Written materials from CPD opportunities are made available swiftly and easily, especially where participants have contributed ideas in an ‘information pack’.

Encouraging young children to be active should not be hard; many do seem pre-programmed to run around and make use of all available space and resources. Often to the puzzlement of the adults around them, who wonder where all the energy comes from? However, evidence of the incidence of childhood obesity needs to be taken seriously. Practitioners in early years settings should pay close to all children in order to identify whether some have an inclination to more sedentary behaviours and understand the potential far reaching health consequences of not encouraging a more active approach to learning. It is essential to support children’s parents and carers on this journey too as they are the most significant and long lasting role models for their children. In this day and age, and especially in light of the political and public response to the 2012 Games acknowledging the importance of sporting activity in people’s lives, it is incomprehensible that we would not use this realisation to help us address a very real concern for children’s health.



Creating opportunities that let children's potential shine through