

The results from the pilot project suggest that this scheme can have an effect on young people's participation in physical activity and that there is a link between physical activity and academic achievement.

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Pupils get 'Fit to Succeed'

A pilot project in the Westcountry found that not only could regular exercise be promoted - but also found links with academic performance.

The project was in response to teachers' struggles to motivate 'lethargic' pupils to reach their academic potential, and growing evidence of children's 'couch potato' lifestyles.

The unique 'Fit to Succeed' project brings together schools, Exeter Academic Council, Devon Curriculum Services, Exeter City Council, DC Leisure Management and the Schools Health Education Unit (SHEU).

It came about in response to teachers' struggles to motivate 'lethargic' pupils to reach their academic potential, and growing evidence of children's 'couch potato' lifestyles.

There are strong indications, from research carried out at seven Exeter middle schools, of a link between physical exercise and pupil's school performance.

Concerns

'Fit to Succeed' emerged from a number of key concerns identified locally and nationally:

- ✓ Headteachers reported lethargy in the classroom and increasing difficulties in motivating children to reach their academic potential
- ✓ Many children in Exeter and elsewhere are not sufficiently active to maintain good health. Lack of activity has been particularly identified in girls
- ✓ Even more concerning, the levels of recorded obesity are high and increasing
- ✓ At the Sports Centres Consultative Group, which had Exeter Youth Forum representatives on its committee, a number of problems regarding access to activities were highlighted.

At the initiative of the SHEU, a group was convened of organisations that may have been able to help children in the Exeter area.

A partnership emerged which enabled these key concerns to be addressed in an innovative fashion. This collaborative approach has been crucial in finding practical ways to help

towards solving these problems and at the same time helping to raise standards in school.

Key elements

- ✓ Teachers have the motivation to get children into clubs and activities and schools are keen to investigate a possible link between active bodies and active minds
- ✓ Children have the interest in a variety of activities
- ✓ DC Leisure have the facilities and are keen to involve more children
- ✓ Devon and Exeter Councils have the contacts with schools to bring partners together
- ✓ The Schools Health Education Unit has the research expertise to monitor the effectiveness of the project

Pilot project

The pilot project in 7 schools started with a survey of 1400 pupils in Years 5 to 7 (age 8 to 12). The questionnaire was then re-administered 6 and 12 months later to act as a monitoring tool. Three surveys were carried out involving 5000 'Fit to Succeed' questionnaires. Several important features of the relationship between young people's exercise levels and other aspects of their lifestyle have been identified.

Teachers' observation confirmed the association between children who lead active lives, their greater interest in school work and their higher levels of success. A major project aim therefore was to increase the overall levels of exercise reported by the youngsters involved in the project.

Activity levels

- ✓ Comparisons for the Exeter Year 6 with SHEU wider

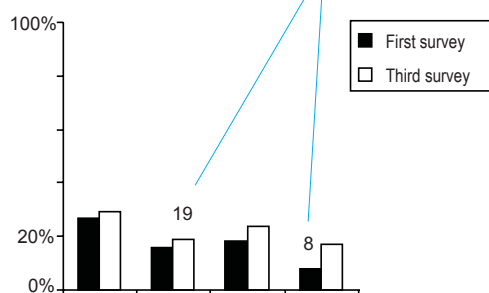
databanks (37,500 pupils in 1999) showed encouraging levels of exercise in the sample. By the time the initial Year 6 had been involved in the project for 12 months, boys reported 53% (43%) levels and the girls 39% (33%) for participation in hard exercise at least three times last week

- ✓ The exciting data here however are the increase in activity observed for the girls. SHEU data consistently show that as girls get older, their participation in active sports declines, and the decline continues through to Year 10 and beyond.

Perceived fitness

There was a significant increase in the Exeter Year 7 girls' data over the course of the pilot year (table 1). The Year 6 girls data are also exciting. Their third survey figure of 19% was collected when they had moved in to Year 7. If this figure is compared to the 8% for the original set of Year 7 girls perhaps the project is making a difference to the attitude of the older girls towards exercise.

Table 1: % who think they are very fit

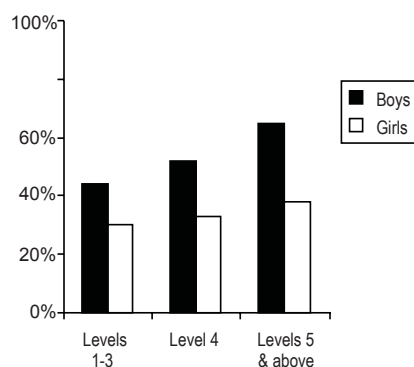


Activity and performance

Pupils who reported exercising hard three times a week or more were thought to be more likely to achieve higher SATs scores. Tables 2A and 2B are derived from the initial data collected for Year 7 pupils linked to their SATs scores for Maths and English.

Table 2A: MATHS

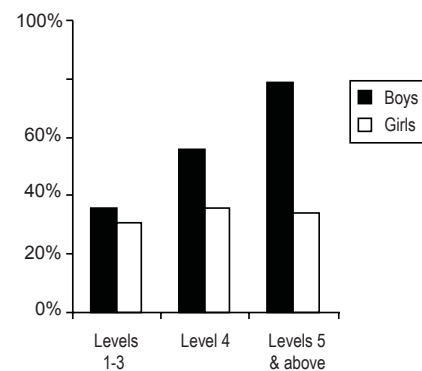
Percentage who report taking part in hard exercise last week three times or more



Grouped SAT scores

Table 2B: ENGLISH

Percentage who report taking part in hard exercise last week three times or more



Grouped SAT scores

These results suggest that there is a link between high level activity and high academic performance, particularly in boys.

Sports Development

Following completion and analysis of the survey questionnaires, the project was able to inform local decision-making on youth sports development priorities and programmes. This was a unique opportunity for the community to discover which activities their young people wanted to do more of. It enabled the project to identify appropriate participation opportunities and to provide a mechanism for bringing more young people into suitable local clubs and facilities.

The survey results clearly highlighted the changes that are taking place in the perception of sports and physical activity amongst young people. The local City Council and other local sports providers need to react to these changes by establishing development programmes which will enable children to develop and fulfil their sporting interests throughout their school life and into their adult years.

To give an example of the changing nature of sports perceptions amongst young people, the data below came from the responses to a survey question relating to PE activity at school. The question was:

“What do you enjoy most about PE ?”

The top three activities shown by the boys responses could have been predicted by most people - but consider the result shown by the girls' responses and it is clear that some changes have most definitely taken place in girls sporting interests.

Top three PE sporting activities:

Boys	%	Girls	%
1. Football	38	1. Gymnastics	18
2. Rugby	8	2. Basketball	15
3. Basketball	7	3. Football	11
3. Hockey	7		

We also asked if there were anything that they would like to do more of, if they had the opportunity. (Note: numbers shown are a count of responses not a percentage)

Top twelve* activities

Boys		Girls	
1. Football	75	1. Swimming	82
2. Martial Arts	62	2. Gymnastics	78
3. Hockey	52	3. Dancing	51
4. Rugby	46	4. Basketball	49
5. Swimming	37	5. Martial Arts	45
6. Cricket	36	6. Tennis	39
7. Basketball	35	7. Football	30
8. Baseball/Rounders	31	8. Netball	29
9. Tennis	29	9. Rollerblading/Skateboarding	23
10. Cycling	23	10. Cycling	22
11. Rollerblading/Skateboarding	12	11. Hockey	21
11. Gymnastics	12	12. Baseball/Rounders	15

* The only activity omitted from these lists is Horseriding – which would have been 1st in the girls list with 101 responses and 11th in the boys list with 14 responses. However, it was not felt to be an appropriate physical activity and was therefore excluded from this analysis.

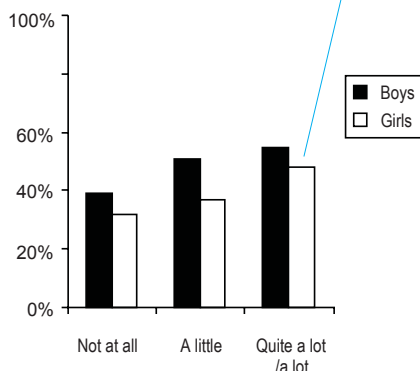
It is clear from these results that young people are now being attracted to new activities such as martial arts and sports more traditionally associated with boys are also appealing to girls (e.g.: Football & Basketball). A particularly encouraging result was a noticeable increase in interest between the two surveys in Baseball/Rounders. This followed a programme of Baseball development which took place in four of the pilot schools with assistance from the local Baseball club.

Influence of parents

Table 3 shows there to be a statistically significant link between how much Dad enjoyed physical activity and the participation levels of his daughter. Only 32% of girls, whose dad did not enjoy physical activity at all, exercised 3 times or more 'last week'. For those dads who enjoyed it 'a lot' this figure rose to 48%.

Table 3: Dad enjoying physical activity/pupils exercise level

Percentage who report taking part in hard exercise last week three times or more

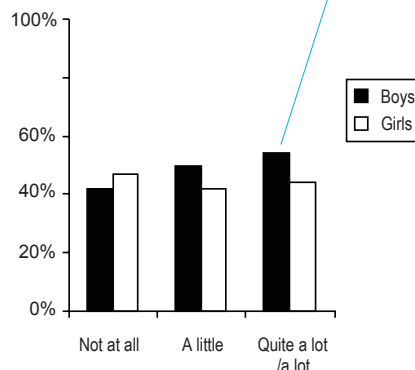


Dad enjoys physical activity

Table 4 shows there to be a statistically significant link between how much Mum enjoyed physical activity and the participation levels of her son. Only 42% of boys, whose mum did not enjoy physical activity at all, exercised 3 times or more last week. For those mums who enjoyed it 'a lot' this figure rose to 54%.

Table 4: Mum enjoying physical activity/pupils exercise level

Percentage who report taking part in hard exercise last week three times or more



Mum enjoys physical activity

Effects

The project provided information packs for pupils, and an Activity Card Scheme, which offered free opportunities for sports activities. Other initiatives have been pursued including group aerobics at the start of the school day. One school is now encouraging pupils to exercise for 5 minutes between classes, while another is making sure children have bottles of water to drink during the day.

Thanks to a £33,000 Barnardo's/Glaxo Wellcome 'Right Fit Award', the project is now being extended to all Exeter middle and high schools focusing on pupils aged 7 to 16. 'Right Fit' is a joint partnership between children's charity Barnardo's and healthcare company Glaxo Wellcome which aims to improve health among young people.

Included below are a few comments, from pupils about their experience of the pilot project: (spelling and grammar true to the original)

- “I thought that fit to succeed was a good idea because it gave me the chance to get out of the house and have fun. The best bit was that it was free.”
How it could be improved...
- “Next time it would be a good idea if you made a few more activities such as ice-skating and stuff like that because its expensive and not many people can afford it.”
- “I think it was a good idea because people who don't live with both parents or parants who have no job can try sports like swimming or football for free and then they might continue to do that sport.”

The more that Mum or Dad enjoyed being physically active, the more likely was their child to be involved in active sports.