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Airedale Back Care for Children (ABC) Programme

Research has shown that 50% of children would experience low back pain by the age of 14 and poor lifestyle practices and postures in childhood can lead to spinal problems in adults. The ABC initiative now equips and empowers children from 6-12 years old to change their lifestyle and also enhances schools’ PSHE programme.

The Airedale Backcare for Children (ABC) programme in Bradford was introduced in response to the ‘Growing Pains’ report of Low Back Pain. The national statistics show that 50% of the population will suffer with disabling acute low back pain, this may resolve within 6 weeks but in 60% will occur without resolution and in up to 35% will become permanent.

Research by the charity ‘Backcare’ (www.backcare.org.uk) alarmingly found that 50% of children would experience low back pain by the age of 14. Poor lifestyle practices and postures in childhood can lead to spinal problems in adults.

In 2000, Bradford Health Authority, funded by Health Action Zone and subsequently in partnership with Bradford’s Children’s Fund, supported the setting up of the Airedale Backcare for children (ABC) Programme. This exciting health education initiative was the idea of three chartered Physiotherapists based at Airedale Physiotherapy and Sports Injury Clinic, Keighley, West Yorkshire.

Shocked by Backcare’s research findings and urged by clinical pressures to prevent rather than simply treat low back pain, the ABC team used their professional expertise to design and deliver a dynamic, interactive workshop presentation. The simple concept was to take back care into the class-room. By visiting class sized groups of children, and working together with teaching staff, the sessions aim to equip and encourage young people to change their lifestyle, thus increasing the chance of preventing low back pain throughout life. The ABC’s long term aim is to promote the subject of adolescent back care within the school environment and offer advice to schools on the topic.

Courses

- The ‘ABC’ Team run one day courses for health care professionals throughout the UK. The course aims to share the experiences of the ‘ABC’ Team and encourage others to use this valuable programme nationwide. To date, over a 100 delegates have attended the course - from Exeter to Stirling to London - all have learnt about adolescent back pain, health education for minors and issues around funding. Past attendees have subsequently started back care programmes throughout the UK. To date, mostly physiotherapy practitioners have attended the course, and the ‘ABC’ Team are particularly interested in meeting school nurses and teachers who would like to attend.

Service

- The ‘ABC’ Programme teaches back care to 7-12 years olds with the help of their families, teaching them how to maintain their back and keep themselves healthy.

Excess body weight is now the most common adolescent disorder experienced, affecting one in six children. Some countries have a higher prevalence. A recent Irish survey found one in three of 8 year old girls to be either overweight or obese, with boys not far behind. Halting the rising prevalence of childhood obesity is a public health priority. Obesity is threatening our children’s wellbeing, their development and their future health as adults. The toxic environment in which we live simultaneously restricts mobility and stimulates higher calorie intake. It is a target for change. It requires tackling on multiple fronts.

A Research Study Series

Against this background, the Department of Public Health Executive - Southern Area (covering the counties of Cork & Kerry: pop 500,360) undertook a survey of four independent schools on key aspects of childhood obesity in today’s Ireland. The research complemented that of an independent study on health and lifestyle surveys. It delved into the ‘micro’ environments of home and school, looking at how young families eat and enjoy their leisure time; the influence of food advertising on healthy eating; the physical activity practices in primary schools and the meal options for healthy eating in post primary schools.

Insights into how the next generation might be influenced towards healthier eating and a more active lifestyle were gained. The study highlighted behind the scene information through the interviews with the children themselves. It found that the atmosphere in the development of ‘good’ or unhealthy eating and physical activity habits. Since its launch in March 2006, the national body report ‘Our children’s future. Their health. What’s next?’ has informed current debate and direction on the issue in Ireland. In particular, the reports findings were directed to the National Obesity Task Force as it considered future strategies to address Ireland’s obesity crisis.

Study 1: Family Eating & Physical Activity

Family preferences and practices relating to diet and physical activity of 8-9 year old children were examined. Parents of children in 2nd class in two primary schools in the greater Cork area were surveyed by questionnaires (380 parents). The schools reflected a mix of urban-rural populations with a diverse social class catchment. The response rate was 90%.

- The main findings were:
  - 15% of parents reported their 8 year old to be ‘fat’ or ‘very fat’
  - Parents identified environment and diet as major childhood health issues

- Worrying trends relating to eating family meals together were noted, with 30% of young children eating breakfast separately on a daily basis
- One-third of families reported eating weekday meals while watching TV

- Families tended to prefer sedentary pastimes rather than more vigorous exercise, going to the cinema was the most common, followed by red the favourite children’s comic

Table 1. Family Pastimes Enjoyed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cinema</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playground</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bowling</td>
<td>24%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Movie</td>
<td>23%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Football</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bike</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Randal</td>
<td>18%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Discussion Points:

Study 1 portrayed a picture of modern day families. The family preferences are not upper-middle class and time is not spent eating together at the table as a family. The role of the back environment in the development of childhood obesity has been recognised for a long time.

There is clear evidence internationally that patterns of behaviour and of obesity are well established by the time a child reaches 12 years of age. Eating family meals has been shown in several studies to be associated with healthy dietary intake patterns. Many families undoubtedly experience early morning as a rush period which is not always conducive to healthy eating habits.

Several studies have reported an association between obesity and high levels of TV viewing, and between obesity and low cognitive stimulation. The study pointed to the worrying pattern of eating dinner while watching TV, a habit reported by a third of respondents.

Parents have a strong influence on their children’s activity both by direct mechanisms (practical support, equipment, transport etc.) and by indirect means such as modelling and family activity.

The feeding of parent influence seems to be a crucial factor in that there is a stronger association between parental and child activity behaviours than between parental and adolescent health.