

The magazine for the
early-years sector

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Children's
Activities Week
takes flight



Feeding
help is at
hand



Join the active movement

How simple changes are making a big difference in early-years fitness



Movement to combat obesity

This will not be the first article you read that tells you British children are becoming more obese. It's not even the first one in this magazine, which illustrates the scale of the problem the nation faces. We find out about a project that aims to tackle lack of exercise, which combined with poor diet, is at the crux of the crisis

The National Child Measurement Programme records the health and weight of more than 1 million schoolchildren annually. The latest figures for 2016-17 revealed that one in four children (22%) were overweight or obese in reception year.

It's easy to believe that pre-school children rarely fall into the same category, but early eating habits start the problem. An All Party Parliamentary Group on health patterns for healthy families stated that; "over 90% of excess weight gained by girls, and over 70% gained by boys, is acquired before school age". For many of these children, it is weight they will retain for the rest of their life.

So early-years intervention is crucial. As the World Health Organisation stresses "the early years of life are crucial in influencing a range of health and social outcomes across the life course...Investment in early childhood is the most powerful investment a country can make, with returns over the life course many times the amount of the original investment."

For early-years practitioners the task is very much one of finding ways to encourage children to be more active. This is not just a matter of providing opportunities for physical exercise, but trying to create a more active lifestyle in every way.

The Old School House Day Nursery in Cambridgeshire has been taking part in an innovative programme involving the Active Movement organisation. This project has highlighted the potential opportunities open to nurseries to affect the lives of not just the children in their care, but nursery staff as well. The aim is to encourage everyone to adopt a less sedentary lifestyle by making simple alterations in activity levels. Although the programme is suitable for all age groups, the early-years sector is regarded as particularly important because changes in behaviour, lifestyle and attitudes towards exercise which take place at this age, will continue to influence the children as they grow up and move into adulthood.

Active intervention

The Active Movement programme was set up by Dr Mike Loosemore, a pioneer in promoting the role of exercise in health. As lead sports physician at the Institute of Sport, Exercise & Health at University College London he is involved in the health and welfare of the general public as well as looking after the health of many top athletes. As a not-for-profit organisation, Active Movement offers bespoke, practical programmes to improve fitness and achieve behavioural changes towards an active lifestyle. It seeks to encourage children to choose low-level activity automatically within their home and school lives.



Active movers from The Old School House take their elderly friends for a walk

Loosemore explains: "Inactivity and obesity in the young will not be countered by fashionable fads and political short-termism but by embedding in all children from an early age the power of even low-level activity to protect their long-term well-being. That is why Active Movement is different. Our focus is not on exercise regimens and diet, but on establishing a behaviour and mindset that will last every child a lifetime."

In order to ensure the message is passed correctly to children, nursery staff, are encouraged to participate in an allied programme of activities designed to increase the amount of activity they undertake on a daily basis. This helps improve their own health, as well as giving them experience that will help them understand how to support the children's programme.

The first nursery to be involved was The Old School House Nursery, after managing director Linda Baston-Pitt heard details of the initiative on the radio and made contact. She is an advocate of healthy living and has been involved in other projects to reduce child obesity. The potential impact on children, staff and parents, she believes, is particularly valuable.

"We were contacted by The Old School House offering us the opportunity to do a pilot scheme," Loosemore says. "It was very successful. The kids enjoyed it, learned a lot about physical activity as did nursery staff and parents. We even saw children taking elderly people from a local residential home out for a walk. It has been over two years since the pilot but children are still following the ideas and being active in simple ways."

The Old School House is now a case study showing just how an Active Movement programme can be embedded into every aspect of a nursery's work. Physical activity is traditionally taken to mean sports and physical education. Although not all children are interested in team sports, of course, Active Movement has demonstrated that even low-level activity can make a difference.

Instead of sitting down to do every activity, children were encouraged to stand and move around. Nursery staff were encouraged to walk to the bin furthest away, use a toilet on a different floor, or simply to move with a child if a child was upset and crying. They wore pedometers to measure how active they were during their working day.

Assessments were made relating to normal activities, whether they were undertaken sitting or standing or whether there were areas to do both in. Many regular activities such as role-play, writing and numeracy, art and messy play, musical instruments and singing could be carried out both sitting and standing. The aim was to encourage children to stand up and move around more.

Character building

The Active Movement team created two characters to show the different levels of movement. These characters were: Stan (who stands) and his dog Max, and Sid (who sits) and his cat Tiggy. A wide range of materials were used within the programme including posters, books, voiceovers, nursery rhymes, role play and cartoon images. There was even a visit from Stan and Sid to the nursery sports day. The two characters became extremely popular, with

children choosing to link them into their play and creative activities.

They quickly grasped the key elements of the programme, recognising that Stan and Sid were not only promoting activity, but also health and nutrition.

Feedback comments from staff noted that: "Before Active Movement, a lot of children would ask for a chair if there wasn't one by the table where they wanted to do something, but now the ones who have most taken to Stan and Sid are unlikely to ask because they are happy standing to do it – 'I'm Stan' they say." Another staff member said: "Amazingly, the children see a wider connection with health. When asked 'how should we celebrate Stan's birthday,' one child said 'go running' while another said 'we should eat fruit and veg' – even though we never made those connections."

Inspired by the programme, nursery staff began to take up new activities such as joining a gym, or taking dance lessons while some members even entered an organised run for the first time. Baston-Pitt says: "People have commented that they have more energy

and feel more creative as a result. No one felt pressured, as all the suggestions were simple and easy to try.

"They realise that they can engineer physical exercise into their daily norms and that simple things can make a large difference. There have been a variety of different pedometer challenges, for example, as well as many posters on the walls about standing instead of sitting – there is also a standing desk in the staff room for IT use."

She adds: "People came to me to tell me of successes, such as taking part in a 10k run for the first time, stopping smoking and being more conscious of the types of food they eat. They are more aware and understand the important role they play in modeling positive behaviors to the children in their care and they are very happy to support and mentor others to get them more involved. The nursery now runs its own allotment and involves local senior citizens in supporting school projects to educate both the children and staff on growing their own food. This has encouraged some of the younger staff to be more involved in growing their own."

The Old School House also participated in an exchange visit to Sweden to see how health and wellbeing for staff and children operates in tandem, making it a normal part of every working day rather than an additional activity.

The success of the scheme led to The Old School House being one of the first organisations in the country to achieve the national IIP Health and Wellbeing award in September 2015. Baston-Pitt has become so convinced by the Active Movement concept that she has joined the Active Movement board as an advisory member and now participates in annual conferences.

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Getting to know Stan and Sid



Toby shows how he has been active at home



Linda Baston-Pitt (in pink) and her staff at The Old School House

Expansive thinking

Active Movement is now working with a host of other schools and early-years settings including primary schools with nurseries in the London borough of Haringey, LEYF's Marks Gate Nursery in Dagenham, Winchcombe School Nursery in Berkshire, a major project in Slough with seven schools and a children's centre, through London Sport five more schools were due to launch in January 2018 and alongside One Life Suffolk, three more schools are set to join the programme later in the Spring.

Peter Savage co-ordination director at Active Movement says that by the end of January 2018, 17 different schools and nurseries will be running the programme at the same time: "It is really taking hold," he said. "Active Movement is also changing the way staff look at their own health and they are reducing their sitting times via their own staff programme on sedentary behaviour. And it has other effects too as children see the staff doing it and are able to articulate it to parents."

With the children's centre in Slough, Savage and his team are working on a bespoke programme for parents with their children. And the programme's work in the town is effectively creating an Active Movement community with walks between primary and secondary schools and connections that aid a child's transition when they move on from one setting to the next in their education.

"It can be difficult to encourage people to be more active. It is not a matter of running a mile, but trying to be more physically active and change their behavior," says Loosemore. "It is small steps; stand up more often, walk around more, go upstairs to the toilet rather than

use the nearest one. People are inspired when they feel the results, they feel more comfortable and a habit develops to be more active.

"People do everything on smartphones and computers whereas before they might have got up to switch the television off, gone out to answer a phone call, written a letter and taken it to the post box. The 20th century was about the creation of labour-saving devices and it has been too successful, with the unintended consequence that we are no longer active and are not getting enough exercise.

"Doing simple things makes a difference. Simple exercise can be part of everyday life. Getting young children accustomed to simple exercise will benefit them all their lives."

Savage adds: "The aims of Active Movement are substantial. It is our belief that the programme has validity across all settings with qualitative and quantitative research indicating a positive affect across all age groups. The concept is designed to be transitional from one setting to another, thus maintaining the behavioral change throughout childhood.

The next steps are to build up more evidence from this research taking children's measurements, for example, and analyzing SATs results data and further developing the recently launched website www.activemovementschools.co.uk.

"In the long term," concludes Savage, "we want Active Movement to be an inherent part of school and daily life not for fitness today – but healthy behaviour tomorrow."