

In 2008 we decided to take on Healthy Schools Plus to extend the work that we already do in Healthy Schools. After much deliberation the focus that we decided on was reducing childhood obesity. Many of our teachers had concerns about children that were overweight or finding physical activity hard due to weight problems. We were also aware of children that had low self-esteem due to weight issues and this in turn affected their learning.

As we did not want to offend or upset anyone I sent a letter home to *all* parents informing them of my intentions and asking them for any ideas or advice that they might have. Feedback was good and very positive. Next I asked parents if they felt that their child might benefit from the sort of club we were offering to reply. I explained that the club would be essentially to teach children the benefits of a healthy lifestyle and would include daily physical activity and support with emotional wellbeing.

53 parents replied saying that their children were interested. These included all but 2 of the children that had been raised as a concern by their teachers, I approached these parents individually and soon had these children signed up too. From these replies I initially choose 22 children, these included 2 mentors that I felt could support the other children as role models and give advice when necessary.

Once I had drawn up the time-tables and 'recruited' staff, I invited the parents to meeting explain the aims of the club and the role that they would play in it. I also gave them information on the Change For Life programme and explained that we would be following this closely.

We have now been successfully running the club for 5 months and I have been stunned by the great results. The children have enjoyed the club immensely. Feedback from the parents shows that they feel that their children are making healthier choices, choosing to exercise and feeling more positive about themselves.

A letter from one parent said;

'A is more positive about herself; she seems happier and more motivated. She has learned what helps her to keep healthy, regarding food and exercise. The best thing is that A felt as though she was part of a team. Everything was well organised and activities always took place (no cancellations) Thanks for the chance to be part of it. Every child in school could benefit from this club, I have heard so many saying that they wish they could be part of it. It is a shame there is no way of opening it up to larger numbers of children.'

One Y4 child said to me

'Miss, it is so nice because I was struggling to get into clothes that were aged 12- 13, now because of the exercise I do I can fit in clothes for children my age!'

It has been a great success and the group have suggested some excellent improvements for next year although one boy wrote when asked what improvements could be made to the club

'It is as best as it can get!!!'

This year we selected a further 20 children. Again we choose from children that had asked to be part of the group. We also choose 3 children from the previous group to become mentors and role models for the new group.

The children had heard a lot about Looking After Me and were keen to join so, as before, I had to turn some children away. I tried to ensure that any children that were turned away were younger children that could join next year.

As with the previous year we drew up a timetable and met with parents, most of whom had heard about Looking After Me and were really pleased that their children had got into the group.

One parent said 'I had my fingers crossed – we have had a really difficult year as a family and I have become increasingly concerned about E's relationship with food. We need ideas and a kick start to a new healthier family lifestyle.'

The children were keen to start their new activities straight away. This year we added a skipping group and a Wake Up and Shake day to the list of activities. Again we used the Change 4 Life materials as a starter for each weekly session. We used our Thursday after school session to focus on emotional health and well-being, looking at body image issues and raising self-esteem. These sessions could be pretty heartfelt so we had a circle-time code of confidentiality within the group which also helped the group to bond. The children supported each other and gave suggestions to help each other. Each week they used their journals to record their feelings, they could then share these if they wanted to.

As well as their weekly Let's Get Cooking sessions we have also had a variety of taster sessions looking at different aspects of healthy eating. One week we looked at low fat snacks, another we looked at products containing less salt or less sugar.

'We always buy low salt, low sugar ketchup now' said one Dad, 'It's a small change but we were really surprised because K says he actually prefers it!'

One session was spent looking at the nutritional information on food packets. We found that some supermarket brands actually contained less sugar/salt than named brands and they were also the cheaper option.

Bread tasting was also really popular; two of the children had never tasted anything but white sliced bread before.

One of the highlights this year was that we were able to use some of the funding to enable us to go out to lunch. My aim was to show the children that eating out is not all about fast food but that the children could choose from a healthy organic menu and enjoy really tasty food. We decided to book a table at Fodders Restaurant in Truro. The food provided there is all organic and locally produced. We had a fantastic time – many of the children had not had this kind of experience before. We were lucky enough

to take our Healthy Schools co-ordinators along too. I was extremely proud as the children made good choices from a lovely selection, they ranged from homemade soup, to jacket potatoes and salad bowls!

'It was excellent,' reported one girl, 'I am definitely coming back with my Mum and Granny, we sometimes go to Truro but we always go to Pizza Hut. This food was much nicer and there was much more choice!'

Another child said 'I wish the whole class could do this, it was the best day yet.'

Healthy Schools Plus has allowed us to ensure the children have experienced all sorts of different physical activities and exercise that they may never have experienced otherwise. We were able to take them ice skating, trampolining, to fun parks and hill climbing, they have tried climbing walls and dance mats, monkey bars and cross trainers, we have played rounders on the beach and walked miles through the woods. The children have truly learned that keeping active can be fun.

At the end of each school year we run a sports day in school. The events are run as more of a festival of sport, however, at the end there is an optional long distance race, many children choose not to join in this race. This year I was really pleased to see that all of the Looking After Me children attempted the race. I was even more delighted when I congratulated them later and one of them said to me,

'I wouldn't have tried before as I would have been too embarrassed but now I know it is all about having fun and being healthy and I feel really proud of myself for having a go!'

A Walpole

(July 2010)