

Whitstone Head School

Healthy Schools Plus case study

Background

Whitstone Head School is a small, co-educational, non-maintained special school for children with emotional, social and behavioural difficulties. The school is registered to take up to thirty-seven pupils aged from ten to sixteen and is approved by the Secretary of State to meet the education, care, health, mental health and wellbeing needs of children and young people who are "emotionally fragile and vulnerable and who may have associated complex difficulties".

Priority areas

The school chose to work on physical activity, seeking to continue to ensure the whole school population's access to a minimum two hours physical activity per week, to analyse the intensity level of physical activity more accurately, to increase the percentage of time spent doing at least moderate activity and where appropriate, to increase the amount of time spent on vigorous activity. The children in challenging circumstances were those that the school identified as being resistant to physical activity and those who were overweight or showed signs of becoming overweight.

The work

In response to pupils' interest the school established a Fitness Room, equipped it with a treadmill, two rowing machines and a weights machine and made it available to the whole school population. The school also bought a Wii and installed it in the Fitness Room. To monitor the intensity level of pupils' physical activity, the school purchased four wrist heart-rate monitors and created Pupil Fitness Profiles with logs to record students' progress. Students' participation, attendance, pulse rates and attitudes were monitored.

What difference has the work made?

The Wii made the Fitness Room a comfortable place for the group who had been resistant to physical activity or were at risk of being or becoming overweight. Their curiosity about the other machines in the room resulted in an increase in their confidence and knowledge. All of them improved their engagement and the intensity of their activity and their newly-found confidence transferred to other PE activities that they had previously been resistant to. The outcome has led to significant health awareness for each member of the group and significant health improvements across the group. The sense of personal importance of engaging in physical activity has been sustained and has led to their active engagement in an

additional strand focused on 'diet and nutrition' (to support physical activity and reduce the risk of becoming overweight).

All pupils enjoy using the Fitness Room and are keen to improve personal bests and maintain pulse rate readings. Looking at the data, moderate intensity durations suggest that there is a way to go before increasing to vigorous. (Unintended consequences of the introduction of the Wii were that some pupils developed intricate knowledge of the rules of baseball and others improved their numeracy through bowling scoring.)

The words of those who took part

"I feel happier in the gym as I like doing PE in the Fitness Room."

"I like being set personal challenges and records to beat."

"I love playing Tanks and sometimes Wii Fit."

Where next?

The school, strongly supported by Cornwall Healthy Schools, is developing new approaches and resources to respond to the demands resulting from increased participation levels by all pupils. Children are enthusiastically engaging in a wide range of indoor and outdoor physical activities that incorporate incremental increases in intensity and duration levels.

Observable key outcomes that act as strong motivators seem to be:

- increases in self-confidence
- reduction in anxieties about self-image
- improved co-operation and assertiveness skills in group-based activity
- significant developmental gains in friendship, complex interaction and socialisation skills
- sense of achievement gained from reaching personal physical activity and/or fitness goals
- identification of enjoyable physical activities to engage in
- enjoyment from participating successfully in physical activity and/or feeling fit/fitter

The school is finding new ways to use these factors to 'personalise' motivational strategies for individual pupils (including identifying personal aspirations in terms of outcomes/gains they would like to achieve). Pupils are also actively involved in exploring new ways to further expand physical activity choices. These are key aspects for sustaining long-term participation and responding to any signs of diminishing interest.