

Preliminary Report on the Active Downside Playranger Project



Overview

Active Downside was a Children's Links play project designed to show the levels of physical activity for children engaged in free play opportunities in Downside in Dunstable, South Bedfordshire. Dunstable is a priority area for local obesity officers because of its high levels of childhood obesity and low levels of weekly physical activity. The National Heart Foundation states that only one third of children aged 2-11 are reaching the recommended daily levels of physical activity.

In April 2010 children from the area attended free Playranger sessions and wore pedometers provided by NHS Bedfordshire to gauge the amount of exercise children were getting from the sessions. The results were startling in that over the course of a 2 hour play session containing no organised sport of any kind several children did over 12000 steps which equates to an approximate distance travelled of over 6 miles.

Traditionally funds have been targeted at sport sessions to try to engage children in physical activity. Whilst the standard of sports coach is often excellent, for a variety of reasons many children do not take part. In particular children who are overweight or with varying degrees of obesity, children with dyspraxia, children lacking in confidence and children who have a disinclination towards sport are often not engaging with sport based physical activity.

The aim of this small scale study was to show the degree of physical activity children achieve through a free play session with no organised sports element. It was also to make the assertion that unlike sport which currently engages with around 30% of children in physical activity, free play sessions can engage with up to 100% of children, including those with issues detailed above.

With future funding in doubt this study is a vital piece of evidence to support Playranger projects as a priority service when increasing levels of physical activity in children.

Parameters



The Active Downside project was a small scale project targeting 46 children in Downside. The findings of the project are indicators only but as a pilot project this study will inform future similar projects which will make up a much larger and more valuable body of evidence. It will be demonstrated however that even from this small scale pilot the results are a startling endorsement of play as a motivator for physical activity. The children were asked to wear pedometers whilst attending 2 hour play sessions run by Children's Links, South Bedfordshire Playrangers. These sessions were in almost every way identical to the normal Playranger sessions with an emphasis on freely chosen play.

Target Group

The target group was children who live near to Downside Lower School aged 5-14 although one 3 year old did join in with the project. There was a high proportion of girls attending the session. Girls are identified as a priority target for Physical Activity by local obesity officers and the National Heart Foundation.

The group was a varied cross section of the local community with a variety of different ability levels with regards to physical activity. Several of the children would be seen as overweight, one had dyspraxia and several more would admit to having a disinclination towards sport preferring video and computer games to physical activity.



Method

During a two hour play session children were given a pedometer to wear and then encouraged to join in with a wide range of freely chosen play activities. Once the children had a pedometer on they joined in with the active play opportunities facilitated by Playrangers or engaged in free play opportunities using assorted loose parts play kit. The running total was recorded at intervals, usually during a lull in the activities when children were taking a breather, and at approximately 40 minute intervals.

A base line indicator study was also carried out where children took pedometers home with them on a day where there was no playranger session and wore them for 2 hours at approximately the time when their weekly play ranger sessions would take place but on a different day of the week.

The emphasis of the play activities was to engage in physical activity through fun rather than through competitive sport. The idea being that children would exercise far more if they didn't realise they were exercising. A prime example of this was the water slide. Children would take a long run up and slide down the tarpaulin. Some children were taking a 30 metre run up just to slide down a 10 metre slide. Every single one of the children engaged in this activity regardless of physical fitness, sporting ability, age or disability.



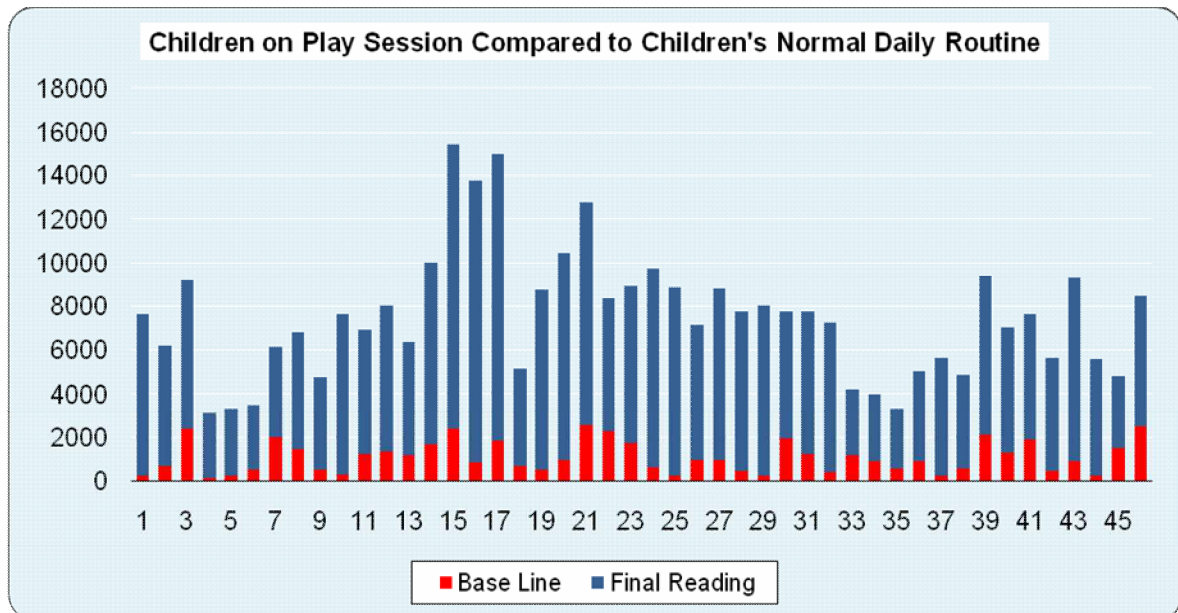
Results



Average Steps on Play Session :	6429
Average Steps when no play session :	1092
Highest distance travelled in session:	6.14 miles
Highest distance when no session:	1.16 miles
Total Number of Steps:	295746
Total Distance:	138 miles
Average individual increase in Physical Activity:	992%

The results from the study were impressive. We expected a high degree of engagement from the target group and were confident that every child would be more active when unaware that they were exercising but the number of steps and approximate distance covered were much higher than we had anticipated.

Of 46 children who took part in the study all showed a significant increase in physical activity when compared to their normal routine for that time of day. The average increase in physical activity was an incredible 992% ranging from 221% to a staggering 3929% increase for one six year old boy. The average number of steps for children during the sessions was 6429 with three children exceeding 13000 steps. This equates to an approximate average distance travelled in a two hour session of 3 miles with some children travelling over 6 miles in one play session.



Conclusion

This pilot study has shown that on this small scale project play sessions can go a long way towards meeting government targets on obesity and physical activity. The results clearly show a huge increase in physical activity across the wide range of abilities and ages with both girls and boys benefitting from these increases. As a targeted provision Playranger sessions have a profound effect on local communities and have the potential to make permanent improvements to a community's overall physical and mental wellbeing. With even the lowest percentage increase in physical activity being over 220% the study is an overwhelming indicator of the value of these sessions in terms of combating childhood obesity.

The Future

In order to expand on this work many more similar sessions are planned across the UK to build up a strong body of evidence to support play as a key motivator for physical activity. This evidence will endorse the assertion made in this study that Playranger sessions can achieve greater levels of physical activity for children across an entire spectrum of abilities than any other type of provision and should be prioritised accordingly. Over the coming months Children's Links will be repeating this study and in addition will be providing active play sessions for parents to help them engage in active play with their own children.



Jump for joy! - local PCSO Richard Alleyne helps out with the sessions.

Children's Links would like to thank the NHS Senior Health Improvement Specialist, Daniel Gill for supporting this project and providing pedometers. Children's Links would also like to thank local Police Officers Richard, Tina and Paul for joining in with the activities and getting a little exercise themselves.

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