



Good sport Bad Sport and Childrens Mental Health

Crispin Andrews reports on the growing recognition of the role sport can play in improving children's mental health - if the focus of the activity changes.

In 2014, the Coalition government unveiled a £2m scheme designed to get people with mental health issues playing more sport. Run by Sport England, and mental health charity, Mind; the initiative saw a wide range of sports being offered to help people with their mental health.

The scheme, *Get Set to Go*, now runs across eight areas in London, West Midlands, the North West and the North East. Areas were chosen for their relatively high levels of inactivity and people with mental health issues. The projects are led by local Mind offices.

Experts are saying that schools, too, could use sport and physical activity to help deal with the mental health problems faced by their students.

Department of Health figures show that one in four people in the UK will suffer from mental health problems, in their lifetime. One in six at any given time. That's neurotic mental health issues such as anxiety, addiction, obsession, phobia, depression. And clinical problems like bipolar disorder, personality disorder, schizophrenia, eating disorders.

'The horrible thing about mental health issues is they can strike indiscriminately,' says Alex Welsh, Chief Executive of the London Playing Fields Foundation. Welsh, who set up the Coping through Football project in Waltham Forest seven years ago, to

help people with their mental health problems. 'People go through life and all of a sudden something happens. Some cope better than others.'

Welsh, also a Tottenham Hotspur Community coach, adds: 'Suicide is the biggest killer of 25-28 year old men, next to road traffic accidents. He believes that there's an over-reliance on medication as a treatment for mental health problems. The best way to help a person with mental health issues, he thinks, is to give them the support they need before the problem becomes too acute. That's where sport comes in. And schools.

Over the last few years there have been plenty of stories about famous sports players and former players, suffering from mental illness. Frank Bruno, Dame Kelly Holmes, Gary Speed, Jonathan Trott to name a few. Sport is about highs and lows, long periods away from home, pressure to perform to maintain a place in the team, and with it, a living, the expectation of team mates, bosses, fans and the media, fear of injury, anxiety about what to do after retirement. Playing sport, for fun, with friends in the community or at school is a different matter.

Chris Wright, Head of Health and Wellbeing at the Youth Sport Trust says there is a direct link between doing more high quality physical activity and improving children and young people's emotional and mental and physical health.



He says that there are 850,000 5-16 year olds in the UK with a diagnosable mental illness. 'This manifests in bullying, cyber bullying, self-harm,' he says and puts this figure down to changes in society, the fact that children are under more pressure to succeed at school.

'The education system is set up so that children have to perform at one moment in time,' he says. 'They know that how they do will determine their future, whether they go to University, find employment. Young people less access to support and

services that address some of the issues raised by this.'

Chris Wright believes there is a vital role for sport and physical activity to play here. 'Sport helps people feel better about themselves,' he says. 'We've noticed, for instance, that teenage girls who do sport become more confident about how they look and feel more positive about themselves in general.'

According to Mind, research shows that outdoor exercise can reduce depression and anxiety. The charity hopes that the *Get Set Go* project will encourage more people living with mental health problems to take up sport. 'Structured physical activity programmes can help people recover from a mental health problem, and stay well long term,' says Paul Farmer, Mind's Chief Executive.

Mind's information manager, Sam Challis, adds that for a person with mild depression or anxiety, physical activity gets the endorphins going and can lift their mood almost immediately. 'Just being outdoors can help people,' he says. 'There's



light, you're surrounded by nature, away from those more bustling environments which may hold negative associations.'

Sport gives people exercise, but it also has additional benefits. Rules and conventions govern play. People perform as individuals and as part of a team. They learn, apply and develop skills, knowledge and strategies. It's structured activity that requires participants to think about what's going on around them. There's always something to focus your mind on and no time to think about your problems.

Sport also teaches the sort of life skills that help people with mental health issues reintegrate into society. They can learn to ignore external distractions and concentrate on the task at hand. They work towards short-term individual targets. With team mates, they also work towards longer term targets. By taking action and shutting out negative external and internal influences, they can begin moulding their future by reacting to everyday occurrences in a way that brings them what they want.

Chris Wright explains that the main challenge for schools is providing the right sporting and physical activity offer. One that encourages as many children as possible to get involved and stay involved. While curriculum time PE is essential for developing children's fundamental movement skills, children must have access to a wide range of sport and physical activity opportunities outside of formal PE — before, during and after school.

'Ideally there would be enough time on the curriculum for teachers to design a curriculum that all young people want to take part in. This would give children the opportunity to gain all the benefits,' he says. 'At primary school kids tend to take up lots of different activities. At secondary school, when they start making choices about their path, they'll opt out of sport if they don't think it's relevant to their chosen lifestyle.'

Wright adds that many young people, don't play sport to compete or to improve their skills. 'They also take part to be with friends, to connect with others and to feel part of something,' he says. 'Traditionally there has been too much emphasis on teaching skills required to play sports. There needs to be more focus on what young people are learning through playing sport. That's how PE and sport teaching will adapt to modern times, become relevant to today's young people.'

A sports session for a person with mental health issues is not about training a team, promoting a sport. Nor is it about learning skills and improving performance. All that can create pressure to do well, to be better than someone else, and to win. That means more stress and anxiety.

There is, actually, only one aim. That the individuals who come along to the sessions, will come back the following week,



so they can continue to benefit from the activity. 'This activity is supposed to be therapeutic, to make people feel better,' Sam Challis says. 'You don't want the teacher or coach shouting at people to do that little bit extra. The coach needs to have an understanding of why the people are there and what they need.'

Alex Welsh agrees. 'You're not looking for sporting outcomes,' he says 'If the coach shouts anything it'll be 'well done,' or 'good effort' and it will be targeted at building up an individual's self-esteem.'

It can be very difficult for someone who has a mental health issue to even turn up to a sports activity. Sam Challis says this is because a person may have had a bad experience, when they were younger, or be worried that they don't have the skills to do as well as they want to. Or it might just be because they haven't done it before.

'Everyone has to feel welcome, however good they are at sport,' Alex Welsh adds. 'You need the same coach or teacher there each week to build relationships. If the adult running the session is different each week, some people might not turn up.'

Welsh continues that people with mental health issues also need consistent delivery. Ideally, that's an extended warm up, some skills work based on individual success, rather than comparative, or performance based criteria and some small sided games. 'You start with what the person can do, rather than what they can't,' he says.

When working with people with mental health issues, the coach or teacher's interpersonal skills matter more than their ability to teach technique or train teams. 'Coaches need to be aware of the affect a person's issues might have on the individuals they are working with,' Alex Welsh says.

That doesn't mean an in-depth knowledge of the ins and outs of every person's life, or a medical practitioner's knowledge of various conditions. An awareness that people will occasionally have a bad day, is useful, though. And that their state of mind will influence how they are, during the session. Medication affects different people in different ways. Some might be hyperactive, others might need a break from time to time.

Dawn Mitchell, from Street Games, a charity that works with disadvantaged young people, believes that sports coaches and teachers can have an impact on people's wellbeing if they teach sport well. 'A lot of young people who come to our sessions have poor body image, are self-harming or suffering from depression,' she says. 'Young people with problems are more likely to tell their youth leaders if they're unhappy or having problems than they are to go and see a GP, and we want to give coaches the confidence to handle these types of conversations.'

Mitchell doesn't want to see coaches and PE teachers become mental health workers, 'just to give them enough knowledge and understanding so they aren't out of their depth if such a conversation arises, and that they notice these red flag situations and can help the person get the help they need.'

Alex Welsh wants to see teachers and coaches who can help people to become more confident as a result of doing sport. 'Sport can be something that can help people with mental health issues live more independently,' he says.

Sounds different to the average PE lesson or after school sports club, but outside schools, all this is nothing new. For many years, many community sports groups have used sport to teach life skills to young people with a wide range of different problems.

The Change Foundation, a charity that use sport to help young people change their lives, see sport as the hook that motivates and inspires the young people to take part. Their programmes, however, are all about the individuals themselves. 'We want to provide opportunities young people to learn about and play sport, but also to equip them for life by building their confidence and helping them access the skills and training they need to go back into their communities and achieve their potential,' says Change Foundation coach, Donovan Miller.

The Foundation runs a Cricket Academy for 16-24 year olds. Some are excluded from school, others are former offenders. There are gang members and Afghan

refugees on the project. Young people struggling to find their way in life, who without assistance, might never fulfil their true potential.

During their first year at the Academy, the youngsters work with coaches on a personal development plan that aims to help them become more employable. They get visits from local employers and careers advisers, whose staff talk to the young people about job hunting, CVs, courses and aspirations. They also take a cricket coaching course, and in year two, will coach their own community teams.

When they do play cricket, coaches focus on how aspects of the game apply to wider life. Decision making, communication, leadership and cooperation take precedence over technique training. 'It's how and when you apply your skills that makes the difference,' Donovan Miller says.

Miller's coaching style is more youth worker than school teacher. The young people thrive on the responsibility he affords them. As practice matches play out on Cricket 4 Change's Plough Lane cricket ground, the youngsters take time for a laugh and a joke, to chill out while they're waiting to bat and engage each other with a bit of good nature banter. When the game starts, however, they're watching, thinking, making decisions about how to best get the upper hand. 'Through cricket young people learn discipline, responsibility and how to set goals,' Miller says. 'We use what happens in the games to show young people the consequences of their actions, and



how what they do affects others.'

Chris Wright believes that sports provision targeted at health and wellbeing needs, would not just help students with diagnosable mental health issues, or people from poorer communities. 'It could also be talented, high achieving students who have a high level of expectation around them, either from parents, teachers and peers, who suffer from mental health problems,' he says.

Wright adds that schools need to redefine the purpose of PE and sport, working out how best to use it to teach life skills. 'For school leadership this is a cultural issue,' he says, 'to do with the emphasis schools place on the role of PE and the time they give to it. Schools are under pressure to devote more of their time, and their pupils' time, to academia and testing. This determines how staff are performance managed and how schools are funded.'



Schools, today, seem to have less belief in how PE can help them perform better. In a briefing paper to MPs before the recent election, the YST explained that less than one in five children meet the current recommended minimum physical activity guidelines. To combat this, they want schools to engage the least active through specialist provision.

YST wants to see physical activity opportunities embedded into every school day. Every school, the charity believes, should have targeted programmes to engage the least active, while also looking at ways to increase the activity levels of all children. Evidence, they say, shows that increasing the physical activity levels of the least active produces the greatest reduction in chronic disease.

YST would also like to see a stronger role for Ofsted in ensuring health and wellbeing provision in schools remains high profile. Current guidance should be strengthened, the Trust argues, and additional measures added, so inspectors can measure explicitly, pupils' all-round physical and emotional wellbeing. This, the charity says, should be included in school league tables alongside other accountability measures.

The Youth Sport Trust also wants the government

to include children's physical activity indications in the Public Health Outcomes Framework (PHOF) The PHOF, produced by the Department of Health, sets out a vision for public health with desired outcomes and indicators. The current framework measures and provides targets for adult levels of physical activity, but not children's. The Government, YST believes, should introduce a physical activity outcome measuring the percentage of children, by gender, socio-economic status, disability and ethnicity, who are achieving the Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines.

'We want to challenge the perception of PE as a separate, not influential part of whole school, business,' Chris Wright says. 'If there is going to be a whole-school Health and Wellbeing Champion whole as part of a school's senior leadership team, we believe that this person should be from the PE department.'

According to the 2013 Sport and Recreation Alliance report, the Game of Life, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder reduces life expectancy by sixteen to twenty five years. People with depression are twice as likely to develop heart disease, and 58% more likely to become obese.

In November 2014, Public Health England, the government's health watchdog, released a report that stressed the link between health, attainment and physical activity.

The report, entitled, *the link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment - a briefing for head teachers, governors and staff in education settings* said that promoting the health and wellbeing of pupils and students has the potential to improve their educational outcomes and their health and wellbeing outcomes.

According to the report, the intensity and duration of children's exercise are linked to improved academic performance. The report also stated that children who do more physical activity behave better in class, get on with their peers and are less likely to disrupt lessons. Also that participation in extra-curricular activities also has a positive effect on attainment.

The researchers explained that studies show promising associations between diet and academic attainment, but admit that it is difficult to attribute a causal link between diet and attainment because of the range of other factors in the school environment that also affect academic attainment. There is evidence, however, that eating breakfast, compared to skipping it, has a positive influence on short-term cognition and memory.

The report's findings are based in part on an a 2014 study in the British Journal of Sports Medicine that identified that the amount of moderate to vigorous physical activity pupils engaged with at age eleven had an effect on academic performance across English, maths and science at age 11. This was also found to be the case during their final GCSE exams.

The study, *Associations between objectively measured physical activity and academic attainment in adolescents from a UK cohort*, by J Booth et al, also stated that the more time girls spent in moderate to vigorous physical activity at age 11 were predicted increased science scores at 11 and 16.

The Public Health England report also drew on further studies that found that pupils engaging in self-development activities, including sport, physical activity, achieved 10-20% higher GCSEs. And that a whole-school approach to healthy school meals, universally implemented for all pupils, has shown improvements in academic attainment at key stages 1 and 2, especially for pupils with lower prior attainment.

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