



CHARMING

Choosing active role models to inspire girls

Developing and sustaining community partnerships as part of a novel physical activity intervention in primary schools

Written by Jordan Van Godwin and Dr Kelly Morgan, with thanks to Dr Alison Fildes and Dr Kirsty Darwent for their assistance

Physical activity is a modifiable lifestyle factor, which can improve physiological, psycho-social and cognitive health. The [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#) recommends that children should complete 60 minutes or more of moderate to vigorous physical activity ([MVPA](#)) every day in order to promote and improve health. [Statistics](#) reveal that 64% of children, aged 4-15 years, are not currently reaching recommended levels of physical activity, with girls at greater risk of being inactive. [Recent research](#) has shown physical activity levels begin to fall during the pre-adolescence phase (from age 7), with similar declines seen among boys and girls.

Both [international](#) and [national](#) guidelines highlight the importance of providing role models for girls in order to promote participation in physical activity. Although there is [some evidence](#) to suggest that ‘role models’ could provide a mechanism for inspiring young girls to become active, this area of research is still very much in its infancy.

Given the international championing of the use of role models, the CHARMING study explored the development of a school-based ‘role-model’ intervention to promote sustained changes in physical activity and increase awareness of healthy lifestyle behaviours in girls aged 9-11. Key objectives of the project included:

- Identification of active ‘role models’;
- sourcing of role-models to deliver taster sessions for a variety of sports and activities;
- identification of local community-based physical activity opportunities for preadolescent girls;



- assessing the feasibility and efficacy of providing a variety of role-model delivered active sessions in primary schools.

It was important to recruit role models who could both deliver taster sessions in schools *and* who had links to local community activities (e.g. sports clubs) in order to provide opportunities for long-term and sustained change in children's physical activity. A key aspect of this project was to identify current provision of physical activities in local communities. This article provides a reflection on this process as well as considering how our findings could impact on future research.

The first step was to recruit two primary schools to take part in the project.

Recruiting primary schools

Two primary schools in South Wales were recruited, one based in a rural area and the other in an urban area. Both schools were located in areas of deprivation (both in the bottom 50% of [deprived areas](#)), and reported a large number of pupils receiving Free School Meals (25-48%). The city school also reported that the majority of pupils were from a BME background.

With the schools recruited, the next step was to identify local community physical activity providers in each area.

Identifying community partners

The research team established partnerships with national and community groups involved with the provision of sport and physical activity; these included [Sports Wales](#), [Sport Caerphilly](#) and [Sports Cardiff](#). These groups were identified as key providers of sport and physical activity, as well as having links with other providers across Wales. Through developing working relationships with these groups, we aimed to accurately identify the sport and physical activities opportunities available near each school.



A number current community programmes that seek to engage women and girls in sport and physical activity were identified, these included:

- [Girls Together](#): “aims to provide the women and girls of Cardiff with an appropriate selection of locally based activities where participants can be sure to receive a friendly welcome and get active with other like-minded females.”
- [US Girls](#): an initiative across the UK that is “designed to increase and sustain young women's participation in sport and physical activity within some of the nation’s most disadvantaged communities.”
- [What moves you?](#) Sport Wales campaign that aims to change attitudes to sport and give women confidence to get back into sport.
- [This Girl Can](#): a campaign based in England “to get women and girls moving, regardless of shape, size and ability.”

Having identified relevant community partners, the next step was to explore what sports and physical activities the girls themselves wanted to take part in.

Identifying what the girls want to do

A number of focus groups were conducted with girls from years five and six (ages 9 to 11) in each of the schools. These group discussions helped identify the physical activities and sports girls were currently participating in and what they would like to try in the future. Discussions revealed many girls were not currently involved in structured sport, or physical activity teams or clubs in the community. While some girls did participate in after-school community clubs, there seemed to be a limited range of clubs available in the local areas. Popular activities the girls expressed an interest in trying included a range of team based and individual sports such as swimming, football, gymnastics, netball and golf.

We also held group and individual meetings with community partners, parents and teachers to explore a variety of perspectives on physical activity provision within each local area.

Challenges facing community physical activity

It became clear from our meetings that both schools faced a number of challenges in accessing physical activity in the community. Parents and community partners stated that the costs associated with participating in local clubs and teams acted as a barrier preventing girls from taking part. Parents and teachers in the rural school also described their geographic location as a key barrier to physical activity and sport participation, suggesting that there were limited options available within a reasonable distance to the local community.

Teachers highlighted some of the challenges schools faced in providing sport and physical activity for young girls. Challenges included a lack of school resources, such as the availability of teaching staff and facilities. The costs associated with organising and running sporting and physical activity clubs within schools were also seen as barrier. Teachers also discussed the limited links with local sports clubs and the difficulties they faced accessing external providers to deliver active sessions in their school. Community partners also discussed the limited links between schools and clubs and that there were no current resources to raise awareness of physical activity and sport in the community. In the rural school, teachers believed that school was the primary provider of structured physical activity for their girls.

Other community challenges identified by partners included the lack of awareness of opportunities and the availability and cost of facilities. Partners also discussed the challenges of developing sustainable physical activity opportunities. New teams were described as emerging on an ad-hoc basis and not lasting long, lacking the benefit provided from endorsement by community providers such as Sport Caerphilly and Sport Cardiff. The rise and demise of 'pop-up' clubs was linked to the limited availability of funding and support to promote and develop sport and physical activity opportunities which included the time available to organisers, the cost and the reliance on volunteers. Where teams and projects managed to run for an extended period, community partners discussed and described the need to link up and coordinate PA and sport provision. The availability of community grants to help develop and sustain the availability of activities was highlighted as a potential solution for local providers. Although changes to, and closures of, youth services and leisure centres were also underlined as negatively impacting on physical activity opportunities.

Partners emphasised the importance of community leaders and influential members of the community who can uniquely facilitate the family involvement with sport and physical activity. It was suggested that engaging with these individuals could negate many potential barriers associated with reaching families including overcoming potential cultural or societal challenges.

After exploring the views of partners, girls, parents and teachers on community provision, the next step was to identify local role models who could deliver a sport or physical activity and signpost to opportunities available within the community.

Identifying role models & local clubs

In order to identify role models to deliver taster sessions, a stakeholder meeting was held with key community partners from local authorities as well as representatives from national organisations. During this meeting stakeholders were asked:

- What is the best approach to sourcing role models?
- What is the most effective way to identify community opportunities for physical activity?
- What is the best way to share information about community physical activity opportunities with girls and their families?

In the first instance, community partners emphasised the importance of utilising existing community resources such as establishing links with local clubs and facilities. Through our community contacts at Sport Cardiff and Sport Caerphilly and online searches we identified and contacted a range of grassroots to elite level sport clubs and physical activity providers local to the two primary schools. The recruitment of role models for the city school was primarily supported by Sport Cardiff and utilised existing 'role models' associated with Girls Together campaign. The recruitment of role models in the rural area was supported by Sport Caerphilly & the Caerphilly Healthy Schools Coordinator.

There were a number of challenges in identifying role models to deliver the sessions and local facilities the girls could be signposted towards in order to promote sustained involvement in physical activity.

Reflections & considerations for the future

This study has provided opportunities to reflect on the current challenges facing school and community sport and physical activity in South Wales as well as offering some important considerations for future research.

One of the key findings is the importance of involving local sports providers from the outset, through to the completion of the project. Recruitment was guided by stakeholders such as Sport Cardiff and Sport Caerphilly who provided invaluable support in identifying role models for the delivery of the programme. Both these groups were instrumental in the success of the intervention and in some cases their staff stepped in to deliver physical activity sessions themselves.

Community partners also experienced challenges, with one sport development officer from Sport Cardiff citing their late introduction into the project:

“In terms of the project, it was obviously a bit of a last minute one for me in terms of providing the role models and activities and moving forwards it is the type of project I would like to support more in future and hopefully be able to give added value to future sessions.”

Despite engaging with Sport Cardiff early in the project, the sport development officer who ultimately provided the role models and the activities for most of the city school’s sessions did not become involved until later in the project. This highlights the importance of identifying dedicated key contacts within relevant organisations.

From working with these schools, it is apparent that the provision of structured sport and physical activity opportunities for girls (aged 9-11) in these communities is limited. Many of the local teams and clubs did not provide sessions for girls aged 9-11. One of the most challenging aspects of the project was identifying local opportunities that the girls could be

signposted towards. There appears to be a lack of national and local resources for developing and maintaining community opportunities and recent reports of a local leisure centre closure will only serve to further decrease physical activity opportunities. Evident barriers for accessing local sports providers are outdated resources which do not provide current contact details, or club gatekeepers who do not respond to emails or phone calls. This gives an indication of the difficulties faced in terms of accessing local physical activity providers and reflects some of the challenges parents would also experience should they try to access sport and physical activity providers themselves.

Although we faced many challenges throughout the project, one of our community partners was keen to highlight the potential benefits the project could offer:

“In terms of physical activity for females I think this project provided a valuable opportunity for young girls to get started with a physical activity journey. It delivered a range of activities for children to try with appropriate exit routes to enable activities to be continued into the future.”

Given the early stage of this research it is encouraging to think about the potential benefits the project can offer and there are a number of ways it can be developed in the future. Firstly, it would be useful to identify local clubs and teams and create a directory of opportunities prior to any meetings with parents and girls taking place. Establishing links with local athletes, secondary schools, colleges and universities, many of whom be involved in community engagement schemes, would also help identify potential activity providers and promote sustainable physical activity participation. This could also reduce the cost of providing a role model programme as many of these schemes are voluntary. The sports development officer for Sports Cardiff also suggested another means of developing the project:

“I think a future benefit to the programme would be to link it with the girls mothers/female guardians in the hope that they could be more active together. This is something that the Girls Together campaign particularly promotes.”

Establishing sustained participation in physical activity is an emerging area of social interest, with a growing number of campaigns specifically targeting women and girls. It is therefore

vital that research continues to explore how best to promote and maintain physical activity participation throughout childhood, adolescence and into adulthood.

The next steps for the project

We are currently in the process of developing national links with other research groups and enhancing existing community collaborations. We will also be publishing academic papers based on the project and exploring future funding options.

Keep an eye on our [website](#) as we will be providing updates on the project in the coming months.

Funders & Researchers Information

This [Cancer Research UK](#) funded project was led by DECIPHer's [Dr Kelly Morgan](#) of Cardiff University, and ran from December 2015 to December 2016. For further information on the project, please contact either Kelly (029) 20 870 296 / morgank22@cardiff.ac.uk or Jordan on (029)22510091 / vangodwinj1@cardiff.ac.uk.

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