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Laying the foundations for a physically active lifestyle

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Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) is a lifelong neuro-difference which can impact on social interaction skills and repetitive behaviour patterns, resulting in motor and communication difficulties (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 2013). In the United Kingdom, an increasing number of children are being diagnosed with ASC, with the latest available data indicating that 1.8% of all pupils in England have an autism diagnosis (DHSC, 2021).

In comparison to their neurotypical peers, autistic children are at increased risk of non-communicable diseases, obesity and mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety) over the course of their lifetime (NHS England, 2022). Within the literature, physical activity has been identified as an intervention that can mitigate these poor health outcomes (Luymes and Redquest, 2022).

The significance of an inclusive PE curriculum is highlighted by the following professional bodies:

- The Department of Health and Social Care (2021), which aims to ensure all children have their strengths and needs identified as early as possible and have positive experiences of physical activity within educational settings.
- The SEND review (2022), which seeks to establish partnerships, bringing together education and communities to produce a local inclusion plan including physically active opportunities.

- Sport England's 2021 strategy, which aims to increase the level of physical activity amongst autistic individuals.

As a result of this guidance, at Venturers' Academy we have developed a pilot project between occupation therapy and the PE department.

The aim of the initiative is to:

- improve the foundational motor skills for all children in key stage 1 and 2
- increase children's self-esteem and motivation for physical activity
- prepare students for sports-specific learning and lifelong activity and exercise.

The objectives of the project are to:

- identify the specific motor strengths and deficits of all children in key stage 1 and 2
- implement motor programmes designed to target specific motor deficits.

Methodology

We initially planned to create the screening tool in line with our students EHCPs. We identified, however, that there were still significant gaps and areas in need of specific physical development. Therefore, we designed a tailored screening tool that breaks down the key fundamental movement skills into three areas: body awareness, balance and ball skills. The ECHPs gave us a fantastic starting block and helped aid our decisions when compiling the screening activities. However, the need for a more in depth understanding of our students' all-round physical ability was prevalent.



This year we trialled the screening process with three different primary classes within our school. Each class varied depending on age and ability. It was clear that the screening tool implemented was hugely successful, however, it was also apparent that we need to implement a second screening tool aimed for older, more able students to ensure those who had mastered foundational motor skills were provided with adequate differentiation and challenge.

From the screening tool, the motor strengths and weaknesses of each child were reviewed. This then allowed for the PE and OT teams to implement a suitable Fizzy Programme that targeted individuals' motor deficits. The Fizzy programme has been developed by Occupational therapists for use in schools to improve motor skills. This programme was selected for its accessibility and easy-to-read format. It is simple to follow, with visuals to support the child's and facilitator's understanding. As part of the lesson warm up, each child works in a small group, led by a teaching assistant. Each small group follows one of the Fizzy Programmes as directed by the occupational therapist to address specific areas of motor needs that were identified by the screening.

Barriers

As with any new initiative, especially in education, the biggest barrier is often time: time to formulate the idea into an evidence-based project; time to develop the resources and upskill staff and time to liaise with teaching staff to ensure they are on board with the initiative. By allocating protected time as part of the academic calendar, it may be possible to support innovative ideas, underpinned by a strong evidence base, to be developed.

The implementation of the screening tools may also be seen as a barrier as these were delivered by different members of the PE team. This led to minor inconsistencies with some of the screening results.

Moving forward, we aim to implement a 'screening day' twice a year, which can be overseen by senior staff members.

Outcomes

While the project is in its infancy, it has already proved an asset for the PE team when lesson planning as we have been able to embed relevant provision outlined within a child's EHCP into the PE curriculum. This enables lessons to be adapted for everyone, targeting their specific motor

strengths and needs. Additionally, it has highlighted the children who have secured their foundational motor skills and require more 'stretch and challenge opportunities'.

Limitations

Evidence-based practice is critical to ensure the most efficient provision is being used to improve health, wellbeing and educational outcomes (DoE, 2017). Yet there is currently a dearth of research related to improving motor skills using an integrated OT and PE approach within schools. Further research in this area would add to the evidence base available and ensure results from our pilot project are replicable in other settings. This would go some way to addressing the global economic burden of physical inactivity for individuals with disabilities (WHO, 2022).

As a child's core environments are typically the home and school, background research has highlighted the importance of supporting parents to increase physical activity within their child's daily routine (Arnell et al., 2020). While the school is able to implement programmes to improve a child's motor skills, it is only through regular repetition that these skills can become secure, thereby promoting a physically active lifestyle. Moving forwards, the project aims to offer workshops and courses to support parents to recognise the importance of foundational motor skills and offer strategies on how to include these as part of their daily/weekly routine with their child.

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