USING THE BLUE GYM

BY JACKIE CRESSWELL

One phase of a Cornish pilot project to tackle childhood obesity, has experimented in encouraging an increase in physical activity by tempting young people outdoors through the Blue Gym and Green Gym concepts. This article looks at the project and also describes the national Blue Gym project.

KEEP IT IN THE FAMILY

Keep it in the Family is a project designed and developed by Exhale™ a Community Interest Company in Cornwall. Its primary aims are to halt and help reduce the rise in childhood obesity in Cornwall by utilising the local facilities, coast and moorland. Families are either medically referred or self-refer and commit to a six month programme which includes a 10 week MEND programme. The project has a family approach and tackles obesity on a number of fronts. These include exercise, increasing self-esteem, understanding nutrition, healthy wholesome cooking and improving motivation.

Measurable outcomes include increased self-esteem, improved diet, increased levels of physical activity and reduced body mass index leading to sustainable lifestyle change.

The project has three phases:

Phase 1

- 10 week MEND programme for two hours a week.

Phase 2

- Continue with at least one session of led activity per week, plus additional activity fortnightly and monthly for another three months (total of six month to fit in with school term dates). The emphasis at this phase is engaging the families with their natural environment to encourage more physical activity.

Phase 3

- Supported integration into community leisure/activity provision where families are provided with leisure centre family swim passes to enable free swimming and concession passes to access reduced rate leisure facility-based and/or local adventure activities.

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION

The pilot was situated in the Wadebridge/Padstow/Bodmin children's community network area. Bodmin is one of the most deprived areas within the country. Funding for the pilot was provided from North Cornwall District council, Cornwall sports partnership and from the Youth Sport Trust through the Poltair specialist sports college.

Using the outdoors

The programme put an emphasis on providing a range of bespoke physical activity interventions using the local natural environment including a reintroduction to local beaches and utilising the blue gym (surfing, body boarding, coasteering) and also the green gym through orienteering, countryside walks, trail-based cycling and park or moorland pursuits such as kite flying. Using the natural environment was included as Exhale felt it would inspire the young people to be more physically active and engage more by using the natural resources on their doorstep. This part of the programme led to a number of unforeseen beneficial outcomes (see next page).

Recruitment

Ten families signed up, one family did not attend again post-registration. One family dipped in and out of the programme on a regular basis over the six months. The other eight families completed the six months duration. This involved 25 people at six months.

Some results

Height, weight and waist circumferences were measured as a baseline and repeated at two to three months interval and at six months. After the MEND programme (10 weeks) there was a small reduction in:

- BMI from 23.8 to 23
- Waist circumference from 75.4 to 75.3
- There was marked improvement of increase in days with more than 60 mins of moderate physical activity from 2.4 hours per week before the programme to 4.3 hours after six months of the full programme.

Programme changes

Adaptations were made taking account of recorded comments at baseline level

> "THE PROJECT HAS A FAMILY APPROACH AND TACKLES OBESITY ON A NUMBER OF FRONTS"

made by clients as barriers to lifestyle change these included:

- A greater emphasis being placed on a peer-led approach to stimulate a positive sense of community or team 'we're in this together' achieving mutual goals.
- A greater emphasis being placed on providing encouragement and improving views on body images to the extent that the group on a number of occasions changed on a beach into a 'body hugging' wetsuit in order to take up surfing. This highlighted a significant change in attitude as the programme progressed.
- The project showed an improved self-esteem among participants.

Unexpected outcomes

There were a number of unexpected outcomes mainly associated with encouraging physical activity outdoors, especially by the water (the *Blue Gym*). This manifested itself by weight loss and increased self-esteem by the parents reflected in families asking for more activities.

Another outcome was the factor of 'risk taking' by parents and children during activities such as coasteering in a water-based environment and the subsequent positive effect this had on self-esteem and the propensity to take up further activity. Coasteering is a series of coastal activities such as jumping from cliffs, diving, exploring sea caves, climbing rocks and traversing. Participants wear a wetsuit, a buoyancy aid and crash helmet.

The evaluation showed that personal challenges were achieved, in a high-perceived risk environment and with a high level of peer support to undertake risks, such as a jumping off a ledge eight to 10 feet above water level. This furthered the feelings of accomplishment and an increased propensity to take lower level risk closer to home such as go for a bike ride regularly (see comments).

The evaluation states: "In terms of satisfaction levels on final evaluation the results showed that clients had felt that they had made sustainable positive changes to their lives. There was a strong indication that the programme length (six months) had a very strong impact on helping to form new habits. . . Exposure to new activities particularly those with high (perceived) risk had also made a considerable difference to confidence levels and were felt to be very transferable into everyday life with a fresh attitude of 'it can be done'."

There was a high level of rapport between families on the project that seemed to indicate that this would be extended beyond the project cycle and be a key driver in sustaining lifestyle change, as families continue to reach mutual goals of a healthier lifestyle.

For more information see www.exhale.org.uk/current.htm

Comments from parents

"I have been scared of the sea since I was small, not least of which having lost several relatives at sea too over the years. As a result I swim very badly, never submerge my head and had never even tried on a wetsuit. Following the project surf lessons I was happy to be dunked, fall over, be submerged, stand on a board briefly and head out willingly into terrifyingly angry grey waves and lie down as they hit me; none of which I have ever done or wished to do before. A minor miracle! I now enjoy the ocean and feel healthier for it."

"I've lived in Cornwall all my life, had a bit of a go at body boarding when I got to 40, but I was introduced to a Malibu on the Keep it project at 44 yrs, and haven't looked back, we just can't wait for spring! ... as well as all the other benefits, you feel good about yourself, feel younger, and I'm getting fitter and healthier. I've realised that surfing is not just a sport for the select few, with the sea on our doorstep it's an all year round family playground."

THE BLUE GYM

A recent initiative, *The Blue Gym,* sets out to encourage people to engage with the UK's watery heritage.

The benefits

Those behind the *Blue Gym* initiative believe that by engaging with the natural environment a number of benefits accrue including:

- Reduction in stress
- Increased physical activity
- Stronger communities
- An increased appreciation of the value of the natural environment.

What is it?

The *Blue Gym* initiative aims to promote physical activity in coastal areas and inland lakes, rivers and waterways to enhance health and well being. The manifesto of the *Blue Gym* states: "Understanding the value of the outdoor environment as a place to get fit brings with it a chance to adopt a healthier lifestyle with a low carbon footprint."

The main portal of the *Blue Gym* is a website with networking opportunities for those with similar interests.

The who

The *Blue Gym* is a Peninsula Medical School initiative supported by the Environment Agency, Natural England and the Department of Health. Dr William Bird, part time GP, strategic health adviser to Natural England and one of the founders of the *Blue Gym* said: "The *Blue Gym* is a chance to learn about new sports, activities and interests. It also gives you the chance to meet like-minded people, join groups or clubs and find and share videos, pictures and thoughts around anything to do with water. For those who already take part in a sport or activity it can be a great chance to encourage and teach others and to pass on some of that feel good factor that you get from the water."

Online: www.bluegym.org.uk

THE ENJOYING WATER STRATEGY

The *Blue Gym* has been incorporated into a wider *Enjoying Water* strategy that has been developed for the South West region of England. It aims to get more people swimming outdoors or taking part in water sports as part of tackling obesity and improving mental health. Measures include creating inland beaches on reservoirs, more access to waterways for canoeists or fishermen, webcams on rivers to check conditions, more outdoor swimming clubs, improved facilities and lifeguards on beaches and opening water for swimming and sports around the country. http://bit.ly/dii5PK