



Families

Working with families to be physically active together



Working with families

Why work with families?

There are seven million children aged five to 15 in England, and nearly four in five are not doing the recommended daily amount of exercise.

Our research tells us that families, and in particular parents and caregivers, play a key role in shaping a child's attitudes and behaviours.

Working with families can provide inspiration and confidence to take part together, allowing for quality family time by ensuring their experiences are fun and enjoyable.

Sport England insight informs us that there is a general shortage of provision for families to be active together. Activities are often designed for children to participate with one another, leaving adults on the sidelines. We hope this report will help organisations to think about any more inclusive opportunities they could offer.

Who have we worked with?

Sport England has partnered with a wide range of organisations, including local authorities, national children's charities and local community sector organisations to support families to be active together.

Many projects are focused on engaging specific 'types' of families, from those with specific physical or mental health difficulties, to families that have experienced domestic violence. All are working to engage families in lower socio-economic groups, and, more specifically, those living in areas defined as having high levels of multiple deprivation.

How to use this document:

Navigate in slide show mode
then click on the menu above.



Working with families

What is covered in this report?

This report uses the learning from the Families Fund projects. We want to share what the projects have learnt about engaging families to help other organisations think about how they could better support families.

The report covers:

- Engaging families: understanding their needs, how best to communicate with families and supporting families to take ownership
- Attitudes: attitudes towards physical activity play an important role in behaviour. We've learnt how important physical literacy is to changing attitudes, and how motivation can work in a family unit.
- Practical considerations: there is a wealth of learning about some of the more practical things that projects needed to consider these included space & place, delivery, workforce and partners.

What has the impact been of these projects?

We have also collected impact data. If you want to see what difference working at a family level has made then please see the [Impact of the Families Fund](#).

Engaging Families

Critical to success is the ability to engage families and keep them engaged. We've found, that engagement work needs to come first before being able to work with families (particularly lower socio-economic families) on issues like physical activity.

We've learnt about how to do this and the importance of why it helps:

UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF THE FAMILIES



COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES

SUPPORTING FAMILIES TO TAKE OWNERSHIP





Engaging Families

Understanding the needs of the families

Understanding the families that are being targeted and building their trust are two of the most important steps in supporting families to become more active.

To achieve this:

- Build in creative engagement and co-production strategies to the design and development of your project.
- Understand each family's needs and learn from them by taking an individualised, family-centred approach- reasons for inactivity are likely to vary by family.
- Explore the activities that appeal to each family, their cultural practices, routines and how you can help them overcome barriers. Weekend sessions can work better for Muslim families as children often attend Mardrash after school.

- Work with partners who are embedded into the local community to help you to better understand the needs of your families.
- Make sure your workforce has enough time, resource and the right skills (as engagement work requires specific skills) to do this work

You may find that engagement is slow or inconsistent. Families tend to prioritise physical activity when there are fewer issues occurring in their lives (e.g. financial concerns, children with additional needs, poor mental health). When these issues surface being active becomes deprioritised. Therefore,

- Where parts of the community aren't engaging, understand what is causing the disconnect so that this can be addressed.
- Be willing to accept that the starting points for each family will differ.



Engaging Families

Communicating with Families

Projects reported a variety of ways of communicating about their project to engage families, including:

- Marketing sessions as something other than physical activity, as this can lead to higher attendance rates – find an informal hook that will engage families e.g. an opportunity to socialise.
 - Clearly communicating that activities are for the whole family and that they “can do” them– this can help to alleviate concerns about capability.
 - Emotional rewards such as spending time together, bonding, improved relationships and increased confidence of children has led to families continuing to engage with activities – so consider framing messaging around these benefits.
 - Having existing participants introduce or accompany families to sessions can encourage those that are unsure to join. Offering taster sessions for specific activities can also persuade attendance.
 - Working with schools to engage families and promote the activities.
- It can take families time to be convinced about the merits of projects, so continue to raise awareness and don't be deterred if initial uptake is low. For any particularly hard to engage groups, existing community groups can be approached to engage specific audiences.



Engaging Families

Communicating with Families

Projects also learnt some useful ways about how to communicate with families:

- Consider communication channels that are appropriate for your audience. For example, social media groups can be used to post reminders of different sessions and general activity suggestions; posting weekly schedules on Sundays has driven engagement. However, ensure social media is not the only platform of communication as some families may not have digital access.
- Visuals of families participating and local people taking part or helping with an activity can be used in printed materials or posted online to stimulate interest.
- Let families use recording devices and encourage them to share their own activities.
- Local organisations or social media groups can also be involved in sharing news about projects.
- Word of mouth can be a highly effective way of promoting sessions as people can be inclined to trust the opinions of other locals.
- Participants reported that regular engagement outside of projects is important to them. They informed us that praise and reassurance was valuable, and that frequent check-ins via phone or text enhanced their wellbeing as well as increased their engagement with the project.



Engaging Families

Communicating with Families

Additional methods of communication and engagement used successfully include:

- Having initial conversations with families to build relationships, not just drive recruitment.
- Having one main point of contact for all aspects of the project per family can also help with relationship management and make communication easier.
- Offering different weekly participation incentives. This can be particularly effective if the incentives are beneficial in the long term, e.g. cooking recipes, cycle maintenance skills etc.
- Engaging participants during sessions on an individual basis, not just at a family level. Thank each attendee at the end of the session and remind them about future activities.
- Seeking regular feedback to ensure that programmes and sessions meet the needs of families, and if necessary adapting according to the feedback
- Publishing blogs with information about upcoming opportunities on well-known and respected local websites
- Correlating sessions with the time of year, e.g. offering Christmas related prizes during December.

Engaging Families

Supporting families to take ownership

Supporting families to identify the assets and resources they already have access to and helping them to build on these to address problems helps to create engagement and make activity sustainable. For example:

- Involve families in shaping activities, creating tasks and games; leading activities and use peer support.
- Organise coffee mornings for families to discuss plans to shape the projects themselves

By having more ownership families felt empowered. This encouraged families to remain active outside of sessions and lead to improved bonding and relationships within families and across families.



Attitudes towards sport and physical activity

We know that attitudes towards sport and physical activity can play a major role in a person's subsequent behaviour. In this section we explore what we've learnt about improving a family's physical literacy and the importance of motivation to ensure continued engagement in the project and physical activity.

PHYSICAL LITERACY OF THE FAMILY



THE IMPORTANCE OF MOTIVATION





Attitudes towards sport and physical activity

Physical literacy of the family

Improving physical literacy ([enjoyment, competence, confidence, understanding and knowledge](#)) can help change attitudes towards exercise. For example, as perceived competence improved, participants noted increased enjoyment and a sense of achievement. This in turn led to improved motivation levels.

Some participants can have negative attitudes towards exercise, e.g. it is not for people like them or it is not important for them to exercise regularly. However, sessions can be used to challenge and change these perceptions.

Enjoyment

Understand what enjoyment looks like for the target families and use that insight to design sessions. Include variety in sessions so that there are aspects that appeal to all participants.

This can include a mixture of events, challenges, quizzes, loyalty schemes, games, competitions etc. A degree of flexibility is key as being overtly focused on structure can demotivate attendees.

Think about age appropriate options – this has been a challenge for the Families Fund projects, but when projects have successfully found activities that work for different age groups it has helped to increase enjoyment of all participants.

A few traditional activities participants have enjoyed but are not limited to are: rounders, boxing, netball and football. Both informal play and participant designed games have also been popular so encouraging creativity and unconventional thinking can lead to a sense of fun.



Attitudes towards sport and physical activity

Physical literacy of the family

Confidence & Competence

Start slow and provide activity demonstrations to create physical literacy.

To build confidence, set achievable targets within activities, acknowledge progression, and offer praise and encouragement.

Rewarding strong performance and progression can also boost confidence and drive engagement.

Building a family's confidence may need to be a managed process, with intensive support often required in the first instance before families have the confidence to attend more mainstream activities.

Knowledge & Understanding

Adults can lack knowledge on the importance of being active, as well as where to be active and how to be active.

This can result in adults not prioritising their own health and wellbeing. Parents often lacked knowledge about how much their children should be doing a day and how they can be more physically active as a family.

Educating parents and children in a fun and non-judgmental way about why they should be active; and where and how they can be more active is important, especially when considering any sustainable behaviour changes that you want to achieve through your project



Attitudes towards sport and physical activity

The importance of motivation

According to the COM-B model of behaviour, motivation is one of three factors that need to be addressed for there to be behaviour change.

Therefore, finding ways to motivate participants will be an important consideration.

What motivates families?

Motivations varied by family, by family member and over time. However, parents were more likely to participate in activities if they felt it would benefit their children. Therefore, to help motivate parents demonstrate how joint participation helps their child. Giving parents leadership roles or making them 'team captain' can also encourage participation from the offset.

As per Sport England's [research](#), children are driven by having fun. While adults who enjoyed activities were more likely to initiate activity with their children outside of sessions. Making sessions fun and engaging for everyone will be important to ensuring their continued motivation.

Similarly try to create a social element within activities including opportunities to build family-to-family friendships as this can also be motivational.

Motivated families were able to sustain each other's physical activity, as the motivation of one person rubbed off on others. This worked within families, and in some cases across families where close social connections had been made through the project or already existed.



Attitudes towards sport and physical activity

The importance of motivation

Who motivates who?

This varies from family to family and over time. For some families a child might be the motivator ensuring that everyone attends sessions and joins in. While in other families an adult may have taken on this role.

Understanding who the motivator is in the family and supporting them can help drive the continued participation of other family members.

Individuals will motivate others in the family if they themselves are benefiting from the activity. Understanding what drives this motivation in different participants will help ensure they can continue to drive participation for other family members.

If a parent/carer lacks motivation their child is also more likely to have the same attitude. However, support and opportunities can create shifts in attitudes. For example, parents can feel disempowered, but offering them the chance to lead activities can help them to understand that they are teachers and role models.

Being active as a family helped to increase motivation. Taking part as a family helped to improve family relationships and provide opportunities for quality family time together. This can help increase motivation to engage.

Creating the right offer

We've also learnt about some important practical considerations that projects needed to consider when developing their offer to families, including:

SPACE & PLACE

DELIVERY

WORKFORCE

PARTNERS





Creating the right offer

Space & Place

Where and when you provide your activities can be critical to increasing engagement:

- Try to organise activities in environments that families are likely to already visit e.g. schools, as the need to travel far can deter participation.
- Think about the time of your session – understand what time things happen in the community and plan around that.
- Families may not know where local facilities or green spaces are, especially if new to an area, and some may not feel safe while travelling. Therefore, if appropriate, offer families an individual support plan to help them reach the activity locations.
- Grouping families into “teams” that are geographically close or have things in common e.g. children attending the same schools etc., can help build connections and rapport.
- Encourage them to be active in their own home or outdoor space but providing them with activity packs and resources with ideas of activity the family can do anywhere.

Creating the right offer

Delivery

Projects told us that families are more inclined to take part together when the number of participants is lower, and they have the flexibility to skip some days. Therefore, create a maximum capacity for each session and make attendance non-mandatory.

Make venues comfortable for parents and create a non-judgmental fun space where families can participate in activities that are realistic and achievable for them at their own pace.

Some families cited “finding it hard to find the time to fit activity in” outside of sessions. Therefore, organise a structured plan to try build routine and habit. Consider including discussions on general health and wellbeing at sessions; and stay connected between sessions via social media or whats app to encourage activity.





Creating the right offer

Workforce

A workforce with the right values, skills and behaviours is a necessity to running high quality sessions and driving engagement.

Having staff that are friendly and enthusiastic, capable of building rapport, trust, and relationships and honest and confident with families is essential.

Recruit project leads that are reflective of the families they are engaging with. This can be beneficial because they are more likely to understand local perspectives and challenges.

Families tended to relate more with leaders who wore casual, non-sporting clothing and avoided positioning themselves as a “coach”. This is likely because it created a more informal and comforting environment.

It can be difficult to run activities for a broad age range as many deliverers are only familiar with working with specific audiences. To build deliverer confidence and capability offer training on how to engage families, e.g. positive parenting techniques, making sessions fun for both adults and children etc. Where necessary, deliverers should also be upskilled on how to facilitate connections between different families.

Workforce consistency was important to participants. The person who initially engages a family should be at the sessions to help build trust and encourage engagement.

Recruiting a workforce that is prepared to work unsociable hours will help you engage and deliver your project to families.

Creating the right offer

Partners

Successful partnerships are key to successful delivery. Understanding your audience can help you to also identify trusted people in that community who can help to connect you to families and recruit participants. Partners can increase reach through referrals.

Collaborating with partners can also create opportunities for new activities by providing access to equipment, facilities and training.

Collaborating with social work and health partners has been particularly valuable, especially where they have had complimentary initiatives with similar objectives.



How we define physical literacy

