

The headlines:

- The majority of participants enjoyed doing physical activity with their family (children – 99%, young people – 89% and adults – 95%)
- The largest gains in physical activity were seen in adults and children aged 5 to 7 years with nearly half increasing the amount of activity they did
- Activity increases in deprived areas: half of adults (50%) who lived in the 20% most deprived areas and who were inactive or fairly active at the start reported increased activity levels, compared with 42% of adults who lived elsewhere
- Greatest impact on physical literacy was seen in adults and young people (aged 8 to 17): for example 4 out of 5 adults felt they had more knowledge about how and where to be active as a family
- Projects are positively impacting on a range of outcomes for families: 9 out of 10 adults agreed that taking part in physical activity together had brought the family closer together, helped the family to enjoy spending time together and increased the amount of quality time they spent together.
- Young people are happier: a third reported an increase in their happiness scores

Why is it important to work with families?

Sport England's investment has been directed, through the Families Fund, to provide support to families on low incomes so that their children have positive experiences of being physically active. We're currently focusing on families from underrepresented groups, with a specific focus on lower socio-economic groups as several research studies show that children from these families are less active than those in higher socio-economic groups. However, many of the learnings apply to working with all types of families.

The evaluation of the Families Fund projects started in 2018 and is still on-going. During the COVID pandemic, many of the Families Fund projects changed their delivery to fit with guidance at the time. Positively, we have continued to see the continued impact of families being active together during this period.

Research tells us that families, in particular parents and caregivers, play a key role in shaping a child's attitudes and behaviours. This is also true for physical activity and sport. Parents and caregivers can:

- Provide support and encouragement – but they can also add pressure

- Share their sport and physical activity passions – but they can also share their fears
- Facilitate access to various opportunities to be active – but they can also limit options
- Model active behaviour by taking part with children – but can also model sedentary behaviour.

The Families Fund Projects

Underpinning our investment is the need to ensure experiences are fun, enjoyable and/or deliver value to children and their wider family. The aim of this investment was to give families inspiration and confidence to be active together, allowing for quality family time.

As of 12th May 2021, the Families Fund projects had:

- engaged 7,113 families (an average of 187 families per project),
- engaged 21,033 participants, of which 37% were adults, 18% were ‘children’ (defined as aged between 5 and 7) and 24% were ‘young people’ (defined as aged between 8 and 17)¹, and
- delivered 8,588 sessions with 90,243 attendances (an average of 10.5 participants per session).

Whilst the majority of the Families Fund projects have targeted lower socio-economic families, some have targeted other under-represented groups, such as children with a specific disability.

What have we learned and what has been the impact of our investment?

Enjoyment

Improving enjoyment of physical activity, one aspect of physical literacy, was an important ambition of this programme. Children were already overwhelmingly positive at baseline about their enjoyment of sport and physical activity. While the proportion of young people agreeing more strongly with the statement ‘I enjoy taking part in sport and physical activity’ after engaging with the project for 3 months was 25% of all young people, and 32% of young people who had also increased the amount of physical activity that they did. After 3 months of participation, 30% of adults agreed more strongly with the statement ‘I find sport and exercise enjoyable and satisfying’; rising to 43% of those who had also increased their physical activity.

Almost all children (99%), **95%** of adults and **89%** of young people agreed that they enjoyed doing physical activity with their family. Importantly, adults enjoying

¹ The remaining 21% of participants did not provide their gender

themselves often corresponded with them initiating activities with their children outside of sessions and potentially leading to a more sustained behaviour change.

Families with disabled children also reported enjoyment in engaging in activities together. For some families with disabled children this was a new experience of being able to engage together in physical activity. For these families they reported not only high enjoyment levels but also increased confidence in being active as a family as the parents / carers learnt new skills to support their child.

These are particularly positive findings because [Sport England's Attitudes towards Sport and Physical Activity research](#) found that enjoyment is the biggest attitudinal driver of activity among children and young people.

Impacts on attitudes and physical literacy

Encouragingly, both project representatives and family members have attested to the positive impacts of projects on participants' levels of physical literacy and attitudes.

Projects reflected that they saw an increase in parental **confidence** over the course of their engagement. By simply creating fun and safe environments for parents to engage and take part in activities it has helped to increase their confidence about being active. This is mirrored in young people with 24% agreeing more strongly with the statement 'I feel confident when I exercise and play sport' after 3 months. This rose to 26% amongst young people who also increased their physical activity.

In terms of **competence** more children reported finding sport easy at follow-up (67% vs. 73%). Again this is replicated among young people with 26% agreeing more strongly with the statement 'I find sport and exercise easy' after engaging in the project for 3 months. This increased to 33% amongst young people who also increased their physical activity.

After 3 months of engagement, 32% of adults agreed more strongly that it is important to do sport and physical activity regularly. This increases to 43% of adults who also increased their physical activity. This suggests that the projects have been successful at increasing adults **understanding** towards the benefits of being physically active and the value in prioritising activity.

Projects reported that individuals often felt motivated by seeing the benefits of physical activity and this in turn helped to motivate the rest of the family.

Projects reflected that by improving participant understanding of the benefits of physical activity they saw an increase in activity levels. Families who have experienced 'intensive' support through Families Fund projects explained in interviews how such approaches have helped them to change their understanding of physical activity.

Linked to this, providing families with the **knowledge** of how to be active together boosted activity levels, cited some projects. Data collected from young people shows that 27% agreed more strongly that they knew how to get involved and improve their skills after 3 months, which rose to 38% amongst those who had also increased their physical activity. While 83% of adults agreed that they now had more knowledge about how to be active as a family as result of attending the project. This highlights the importance of educating the parents about physical activity to help drive sustainable behaviour changes.

Sport England's hypothesis is that improving the physical literacy of parents will lead to improvements in children's physical activity behaviours and attitudes; and if children are physical active and have positive attitudes towards physical activity this will result in an active lifestyle into adulthood. However, it is too early to interpret any conclusions on this potential impact so we will continue to monitor the outcome.

Impacts on physical activity levels

Projects are largely confident they are increasing family members' levels of physical activity which is backed up by the management data. Three in ten adults (29%) increased their physical activity category after 3 months of engagement.

However, some projects suspect they are having a lesser impact on young people. This is supported by programme management data that shows that whilst 46% of previously inactive/fairly active adults and children increased their activity level after 3 months, this was true of only a quarter (26%) of young people. There are some early indications that a greater proportion of young people may improve their physical activity level over a longer period, but this is subject to further validation.

Positively, projects appear to be making the biggest difference to audiences that have traditionally had lower activity levels. Programme management data indicates that a greater impact is being made on the activity levels of families living in high areas of deprivation compared with those who live elsewhere. Half of adults (50%) who lived in the top 20% most deprived areas and who were inactive or fairly active at the start reported increased activity levels after engaging with the projects, compared with 42% of respondents who lived elsewhere.

Impacts on mental well-being

There was an increase in adults who reported improvements in their happiness scores with 41% reporting an improvement in their level of happiness after 3 months, rising to 56% of adults who had also increased their physical activity. There was a similar rise for young people in happiness scores with a third (35%) of young people improving their level of happiness after 3 months. For adults and young people who had increased their physical activity were more likely to report increases in personal and social wellbeing levels.

Project representatives and family members in interviews explained how projects have helped participants improve their mental health, wellbeing, confidence and feelings of trust and connectedness. The opportunity to use activities to switch off from the daily stresses of life has been perceived to be valuable, particularly by families living in crowded accommodation.

Impacts on social trust

Nearly a third (29%) of adults reported an improvement in their level of social trust after 3 months of engagement. Similarly, a quarter of young people (25%) also saw an improvement in their level of social trust.

Some projects have reduced division and created unity between families from different areas or with different cultures, backgrounds or beliefs.

By participating in activities together, some families that wouldn't have otherwise interacted were able to establish new connections. Friendships developed and as a result, families felt more connected with their local areas and developed a stronger sense of belonging. This is important because lower socio-economic families can often be isolated and without social networks. Families commented on the sustaining influence this has all had on the outcomes delivered by projects.

The influence of parent's behaviour

Parents can help model positive behaviours and attitudes. Management data shows that 53% of families with an active child or young person also had an active adult. This shows that families with an active adult are more likely to have active children indicating how influential parents behaviour can be on children's behaviour.

Role models in a family are important to help maintain motivation, change behaviour and ensure that physical activity continues. By participating in activities, parents can become more of a role model figure and change perceptions their children have of them. Parents may sometimes not realise the

impact they can have on their children and can feel disempowered. However, leading in activities can help them to understand that they are teachers and role models.

Impact on family communication and relationships

Evidence from project lead and family interviews indicates that projects are succeeding in delivering a range of positive outcomes for families. Programme management data found that nine out of ten adults agreed that taking part in physical activity increased the amount of quality time spent together (94%), had brought the family closer together (93%), and helped the family to enjoy being together (93%). While eight out of ten adults also agreed that being physically active had helped the family to support each other more (80%), and seven out of ten felt it had helped them to be more open and honest when talking to one another (68%). Similar findings were also seen from the young people's data. Projects reflected on the importance of providing enjoyable experiences for families which had been a key driver in the improvement of these outcomes.

This is supported by qualitative evidence with families noting an improvement in communication and relationships following attendance of projects. Parents reported speaking and listening to their children more and offering more encouragement. This in turn helped to strengthen/build connections, break down relationship difficulties and reduce animosity.

Similarly, parents also cited that since attending activities they have become more aware of each other's strengths, skills, and behaviour, and this has led to better perceptions of one another. By being physically active together families have created a sense of trust and improved bonds with family members.

In addition, projects have helped some parents improve communication with their disabled children. For example, the setup of a sailing activity meant a mother and her autistic child were unable to maintain eye-contact in their interactions. The parent learned that this dynamic made it easier to have difficult conversations. Since then, the mother has reported that she no longer looks her child in the eye when having potentially uncomfortable discussions.

A potential unintended consequence was that parents have reported feeling more confident in their parenting skills. While some who said that they previously avoided going out with their child due to the stress of trying to manage their behaviour reported more of a willingness to do so after the project. Finally, parents reported learning more about how physical activity can be used to tackle issues such as low confidence and obesity. Positively, children commented on feeling more included within the family.

Optimistically, it appears that these positive family outcomes may result in sustained behaviour change with an overwhelming proportion of families reporting that they wish to remain physically active together after their engagement with projects ceases. We will look to monitor this on a longer-term basis.

Research and evaluation

Since conception in 2018, Sport England has commissioned Substance, an external research agency, to evaluate the Families Fund projects. The quantitative results are from a collection of programme management data and feedback surveys up to May 2021. Data from the baseline surveys (collected at the start of engagement) and the first follow-up survey (collected 3 months after the start of engagement) have been used in this report. Currently, follow-up survey numbers are small in comparison to the number of participants (N=3,837), the projects are prioritising this data collection moving forward to ensure robustness of our findings. The qualitative findings are from a variety of interviews, project reports and discussions with the Families Fund projects.