



Better Beginnings For Boys

The Unlikely Lads

A Case Study in offering enhanced opportunities for developing positive dispositions towards learning in boys.

Supported by the



Introduction

This research introduces you to the work of the Unlikely Lads; Chris Warren and Rob Fackrell and the development of the project

Better Beginnings for Boys



The purpose of this initiative is to provide targeted learning through the acquisition and development of a range of physical skills, over the course of an academic year. It targets boys who are identified as needing additional opportunities to support their physical development or are falling behind in areas of communication, confidence and behaviour. It encourages children and staff to make use of the outdoor environment on a daily basis in a purposeful way. It enables children to progress in all three prime areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2012) and supports the acquisition of positive dispositions for learning (DCSF 2007; Blandford and Knowles, 2009, p.163).

Who are the Unlikely Lads?



Chris began working for Growing Places in 2005, initially in the After School Clubs but moved to the Pre-School in 2009. Chris completed his level 3 training and found that he really enjoyed working within the Pre-School, especially when he had chance to use his sports science knowledge and skills. Chris found that boys responded best to physical activities and so he planned increasing opportunities for these to happen. He achieved the prestigious Practitioner of the year award from Children's links in 2012 following the success of this. Chris has particular empathy for the fact that some children can appear to be labelled for bad behaviour, when perhaps they just struggle

with aspects such as attention. His empathy grows from his own school days and has meant he is passionate about providing learning experiences that meet the needs of the child in facilitating development opportunities.

Rob moved to Portsmouth to study at the University in 1998 after finishing school in Birmingham. After completing his degree he trained as a teacher and began working with his first class in 2002. Rob was a teacher for nine years during which time he taught every age group from Year 1 to Year 6. Rob always enjoyed working with the challenging children in schools and has found since starting at Growing Places that being part of the project has given him the opportunity to develop physical learning opportunities that benefit many boys and give them a firm foundation for starting school.



History and ethos of project

Year 1 (2010 – 2011)

The project started in 2010 to meet the needs of a boy who presented with challenging behaviour and emerged as a way of encouraging and supporting children's dispositions to learning helping them develop a desire and motivation to fulfil their potential on their journey through life. Chris was aware that these first few years are the most important in making any changes to attitudes and dispositions and he wanted all children to be able to look back at their time in nursery with a smile remembering lots of happy memories and fun! It also reflects the understanding of the importance of movement 'as central to development and learning' (Stevens, 2013 p.11).

The child who started this thinking was two years old and had challenging behaviour that had caused lots of problems in his previous Nursery. His Mum was anxious as she explained about his behaviour from the beginning. He started in the Toddler room who found his behaviour difficult to manage as he did not interact well with the other children, always wanted his own way and would push and hurt the other children if they got in his way or frustrated him in any way.



However observations of this child showed that he enjoyed being physical and trying to build and construct and that he demonstrated an interest in the book *The Gruffalo* (Donaldson and Scheffler 1999) and would read this out loud to groups of others. Using this interest as a starting point offered opportunities in other areas of learning such as creativity. Chris then decided to look at the physical opportunities that were being offered to the boys as he thought that the acquisition of some basic physical skills would help all children, but particularly boys, in other areas of their development and learning. His study had shown him that boys muscles develop slower and they may find it difficult to sit still for prolonged periods.



He gained permission to trial physical skills training with a group of four boys, developing activities to improve skills such as lifting, pushing, throwing and catching. These skills helped develop upper body strength, balance, coordination and hand eye coordination. He noticed that the development of confidence in this area had a positive effect on other areas of learning; creating confidence and self-esteem to try new things as well.

What this first year demonstrated was that many aspects of the curriculum can be accessed through physical activities, but also that some boys needed help to develop those physical skills. Additionally the wider curriculum could be supported through the physical activities, for example skills of turn taking, essential to good communication, and personal and social development were emerging through the team games played. Maths could be supported through counting and comparing the number of players in each team and mark making through writing names and scores.



The positive effect these activities had in contributing to learning dispositions were reinforced on follow up visits to schools where the acquisition of physical skills continued to support the boys in their development of writing, problem solving, reading, listening, and perseverance. Teachers confirmed that the boys continued to show positive dispositions to learning and that there were no behaviour concerns. Additionally

the boys were prepared even for the more formal aspects of school such as sitting cross legged.

Year 2 (2011 – 2012)

In year two Rob joined Chris and they began to work together planning for two groups of boys in two settings. At the end of the year they became convinced the foundations of physical skills learning were an important part of the overall success of the way in which boys were able to access the wider curriculum and that it was important that the children were having opportunities to practice these regularly. A list of the important skills was developed drawing upon their own detailed understanding of child development, the order of acquisition of skills and related to goals in the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2012). Alongside the skills, team games and activities were employed that would help promote development in the two other prime areas of the curriculum.



Year 3 (2012 – 2013)

At the start of the third year a partnership with the University of Portsmouth was initiated to help support the research and evaluation of the project and the dissemination of the findings. Additionally the project was due to be delivered in five settings, so the Unlikely Lads needed support to implement the programme of activities they had developed. This led to the identification of ***Physical Development Leads*** in the settings who could work on a daily basis with the children. Programmes of activities and the relevant resources were made available to each setting and the Physical Development Leads were supported and mentored by weekly visits from the Unlikely Lads. The uniqueness of each setting allowed for variations in approaches and ownership by children and staff of the games and activities. The culmination of the year was when all the boys' came together for a sports day shared with parents and friends.



Five Physical Leads on Sports Day

How does the project work?

At the beginning of the year managers in the settings identify boys who are likely to need some additional support to that provided by the continuous provision within the nursery in the three Prime areas of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)(DfE, 2012); Communication and Language, Physical Development and Personal, Social and Emotional Development. The EYFS states that although

All areas of learning and development are important and inter-connected... *The three prime* ... areas are particularly crucial for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning, and for building their capacity to learn, form relationships and thrive (DfE, 2012 p4).

It is important therefore to ensure children have opportunity to succeed in these areas. This project also reinforces the now widely recognised understanding that there are significant benefits to children being physically active in the first five years of their life (British Heart Foundation, 2011).

The first weeks of the year are spent getting to know the boys and building up relationships as it is recognised that good relationships between adults and children are important for effective learning. This approach also allows time for initial observations and a baseline assessment to occur of what skills the boys already have in the areas planned for development. This is important as the EYFS indicates ongoing or formative assessment is a vital part of effective practice (DfE, 2012).

The first part of the year is focused on establishing a routine for each session. There is an emphasis on adults modelling and demonstrating activities. However it is the children that determine the length of the game or session by their interest or involvement. The element of routine and consistency is one of the important aspects of **Better Beginnings for Boys** as it is believed this characteristic helps build the confidence and self-esteem of the children (Lindon, 2000).

What does a session consist of?

Each session consists of a warm up, some team games, some skills practice and a warm down.

Warm Up – Each session begins with a warm up that involves a small amount of activity but also encourages the children to think about their bodies, like feeling for their heart beats and if they feel warmer. The warm up can also be a chance to address specific skills like hopping for example.



Team Games –

In the autumn term, the sessions involve the children playing games that will help them learn key skills. Initially in the first term the children will learn 'movement' skills like running, skipping and jumping. Children will get opportunities to develop spatial awareness, balance and have opportunities for communication and Personal Social and Emotional Development (PSED) through turn taking.

The spring term is when the children will have chance to learn and develop specific skills like throwing and catching. The skill is taught through modelling to the children and then opportunities for the children to explore and develop the skills. Children have more opportunities to work in pairs or in groups to practice kicking, throwing and catching.

In the summer term, the children will apply their skills. The movement games become the warm up and the children are taught how to play specific team games. They are shown how to work in teams and how to use their skills in order to play the games.

Warm Down - Each session then ends with a warm down and the children get to think again about their bodies and how they are feeling.

Parent Partnerships

It is recognised that it is important to involve parents in the learning and development of their children while at nursery (Blandford and Knowles, 2009 p.41), so clear communication with the parents is seen as a regular part of the project starting from the initial introduction and explanation. To help parents understand the project and continue to support children at home the provision of activities, opportunities to play the games or practice skills there is a system which includes a 'physical bag' which the parents can take home and use with the children.

Chris and Rob are happy to talk to parents on Open Evenings and to answer any questions raised throughout the year. Additionally the year ends with a Sports Day to which family members are invited to celebrate the year's achievements.



How the project supports learning across the EYFS

The project focuses on the three prime areas of the EYFS (Physical Development, Communication and Language, Personal and Social Emotional Development) whilst developing and extending additional curriculum learning opportunities through exploring children's interests and providing extended physical play opportunities.

Communication- One of the boys started off the year with communication as an issue. By the end of the year he was running the session. He was getting the children to line up and then to take part in a warm up that he led. He then got the children ready to run and jump the hurdles, which he then praised them for with phrases such as "Wow, that was brilliant!" and "Well done!" This is because he saw the routine of the sessions and then listened to how the language was being modelled and this then meant he used positive language and helped him build relationships with his peers.

Mathematics – Counting and numbers happen throughout the sessions, e.g. "How many star jumps shall we do?" One setting had boys who liked throwing so tyres were set up so the boys could throw the balls into them and it was decided this could be a way of scoring points. Numbers were written on the tyres and then the boys threw their ball and wrote down the score they got for doing this. This developed to throwing into buckets and to different versions of the game continuing in the setting.



One child liked to sort the equipment to ensure each team had the correct equipment. He counted the sticks and saw that one team had seven and the other team had five so to make it equal he took one away from the seven and swapped it to the other team.



Mark Making – When teaching the children how to do the long jump, they were encouraged to record where they landed. The children used large chalk and drew a line where they landed, they were then encouraged to write their name to show it is their line. This helped the children learn the initial sounds of their name and recognised their name and the letters that made up their name.

Mark making was built into the way in which sessions were run. The children had an opportunity to record the games they played and write names on sheets as part of the physical session. This benefitted the boys by developing their confidence and eagerness to attempt writing.

Construction – Children were taught how to use tools and how to do this effectively. One boy in particular loved using the screwdriver and was happy to show the others how to use it correctly. He used all the modelled language and then in order to apply the skills, the setting removed his coat peg so that he had to fix it back on in the morning.

Construction activities are regular part of activities on offer to children. The boys were able to look at pictures of buildings and then try to recreate their own using a variety of materials.





Imagination – One of the games involved the children pretending they were fish and swimming. One boy refused to be a fish and insisted he was a human. He would ‘jump’ off the island and then would hold his nose as he swam around. This developed to him taking a big breathe before he jumped and then swimming round before getting back to the island where he would take lots of deep breathes to help him recover! This game was extremely good at letting the children express their imagination; some of the fish became “Sting Ray Volcano Fish”.

Results and Findings

During the year anecdotal evidence was collected through observations and key person findings in order to be able to analyse the progress of the boys. “Expected” progress in the nurseries is seen as what happens to the children naturally, although this view is very simplistic and many factors will affect each individual child’s development in a unique way.

Each child started with a baseline assessment of where they were in terms of development when they started the project and where they were at the end. This assessment also took into account the age of the child and so the age expected stage was duly altered.

The table below shows the findings and is based on a study of 39 boys across five settings.

Area Of Learning	% of children at age expected level or above– Oct 2012 (start)	% of children at age expected level or above – Jul 2013 (finish)
Physical Development	51% (20 Children)	69% (27 Children)
Communication and Language	21% (8 Children)	67% (26 Children)
Personal, Social and Emotional Development	18% (7 Children)	59% (23 Children)
All Prime Areas	13% (5 Children)	56% (24 Children)

This data demonstrates that the boys made better than expected progress in all areas of learning but especially the areas of Communication and Language and PSED.

The games and activities that were planned were aimed at developing the children physically and building on their next steps. There is evidence to indicate that the boys also improved their skills in the other areas of learning because opportunities were including within the games for all areas of learning.

Many of the children that we worked with were very physical. Their starting point for this area of development was, in many cases higher than the other areas of development. However the benefit to the boys meant that they had an outlet for their physical skills and showed this less through unwanted behaviours, like running and throwing.

The table also does not represent the level to which the boys exceeded their expected developmental level and as most of the evidence is anecdotal, it is not possible to effectively put figures to the amount of boys who participated in activities like mark making or to demonstrate their attitude towards learning.

It is very difficult to separate the different influences on a child's life. Parents, extended family and friends all impact on a child's development, as do nurseries and other childcare providers. Demonstrating which group has had the most influence and impact is difficult and not clear. However the Unlikely Lads are confident in knowing that the opportunities provided have made a difference to the boys, from the relationships they have built both with the parents and the boys themselves. They also believe that the good relationships with parents ensured that parents knew the importance of the activities and this supportive attitude at home ensured the children made good progress.

Case Study – Henry

During our first year as 'The Unlikely Lads', one of the boys we worked with was Henry. When we first met Henry, he was very quiet and shy. He also seemed to play outdoors at every available opportunity. We noticed that he showed particular enjoyment outdoors and doing physical activities such as running and football. He was quite happy to play independently and was confident in selecting his own activities and resources.

Henry showed a keen interest in being a part of the Boys Project from the beginning and was always the first to approach us on the 'Boys Days' when it was time for our physical sessions.



Whilst Henry often spent his time outdoors and following his interests, this meant that he would spend less time in other areas and would often show a lack of interest in trying activities that were not based on the things he enjoyed.

It was observed how through his participation in the 'Physical Boys' sessions Henry grew in confidence and became more vocal. He began to assist in leading the physical sessions and communicated

very clearly and confidently to the other children.

We also noticed Henry's attitude to learning began to change. He showed confidence in trying new activities and doing things he never really enjoyed previously.

Henry used the fine motor skills he had developed through physical play and in craft activities such as making a cardboard basketball net. He was also able to do mark making activities e.g. writing his name on a larger scale initially, before beginning to write it on a smaller scale as his physical skills developed.



When it was time for Henry to leave the nursery he had built very close relationships with both children and adults. He showed increasing skills such as confidence, making relationships, communication, mark-making and attitudes to learning.

Case Study - Connor

We started working with Connor when he was beginning to get labelled as challenging and difficult to work with. He found it hard to communicate with peers and adults and that impacted on his ability to form effective relationships. He would become easily frustrated with others and would show this through inappropriate behaviours.

It became clear to us quite quickly that Connor was not going to be a boy who really enjoyed the running and the jumping of the games and the activities, but Connor responded well to the other activities we provided and supported. Connor loved building and construction. He would happily build a range of towers and this was how he began to feel calm, however, if his tower was knocked over then he would instantly lose control of his emotions.



We spent time building a strong relationship with Connor and he learnt to create his own building space. Often we would be the barrier between Connor and others in order to allow him to build. Connor was happy with this but we noticed quickly that he liked to have challenge. We would find pictures of buildings and castles and encourage Connor to replicate them in his building,

all the time using the language of sharing and of turn taking. Gradually Connor would allow others to join in his play and needed the barrier less and less, allowing us to support other children with their building.

Connor didn't really enjoy playing the games but he did enjoy the responsibility. He would like to lead the games or help carry the equipment to the field and enjoyed the sessions in this way. This helped with his turn taking and his listening to others. Sometimes the others led the session and so Connor had to listen to them, a skill he found challenging but which he improved greatly throughout the year. Connor did enjoy the games which involved throwing and jumping as these had a mark making element to them.



Connor loved mark making and used this to develop his thinking in lots of other areas, especially Maths. Connor would happily write his name or write the score he had got, on some occasions even adding number bonds to 10. Connor could record his thinking and developed excellent fine motor skills.



Evaluation of the project

The main evaluation of the project has occurred during the third year of implementation when five groups of children in five different settings were working with the materials and resources developed. Over this year detailed observations undertaken by Chris and Rob, and discussions with the Physical Development Leads have enabled the team to record progress of each targeted child against the relevant aspects of the EYFS, and show that all children made good progress in the areas being targeted. Using the sheets that were established in the early days of the project and continually revised, Chris and Rob have been able to identify the skills of the children and focus on their next steps. This has enabled them to work closely with the key person to ensure that everyone knows the next steps of the children.



While it is not being suggested that **Better Beginnings for Boys** is the only thing that contributed to this development, it is a good indicator that the provision of this resource has significantly supported some aspects for all children who engaged with it.

It is clear that children participating in **Better Beginnings for Boys** benefit from working in a group and this allows development of social skills and understanding of how to work with others. Children acquire the confidence to take turns and to wait for their own turn, they develop relationships with the other boys and with the adults involved. There is evidence to suggest engaging in the project improves concentration and attention span and is good for supporting development of communication skills.

One of the embedded outcomes of the project appears to be that the children are more ready for the transition to the more formal requirements of school.

In addition the support and mentoring of the physical development leads in each setting has led to growing understanding of the importance of the development of physical skills and growing confidence in the staff themselves in managing a group of boisterous boys. All staff undertaking this work complement the Unlikely Lads on the way **Better Beginnings for Boys** is organised and the way the weekly sessions and the support at the end of the phone has enabled them to gain confidence and understanding supporting physical development.



Making a difference

The formal evaluation demonstrates that children have improved across the areas of the EYFS targeted by observation, but everyone involved in **Better Beginnings for Boys** also thinks it makes a difference. Here are some of the things they say

What the parents say

"Since the introduction of the boys day, X confidence has grown, his coordination, concentration and interest in sports, learning, and being outside has increased tremendously. He always asks to take the dog to the woods, and wants to play football or ride his bike. It has also given him more focus- he knows exactly what he wants to do, and follows the task through to the end. "

"We are sure without these boys' days X would not have progressed so much this year..."

"He talks with confidence and excitement. He has been both mentally and physically challenged!"

"The Boys Project has given him a great starting point and we will be able to continue to use the things they have taught him and us to help him succeed."

"[His] confidence has grown, his co-ordination, concentration, and interest in sports, learning, and being outside has increased tremendously"

What the children say

"That was astounding" – Harvey after one of the Physical Sessions.

"Can we do Physical?" – Boys in the settings when they see The Unlikely Lads

What the practitioners say

"I do believe it's had an impact, it's had an influence on who they have become now"

"You can see the change in the boys, one child has slimmed down, is more willing to do things, he'll sit and listen for longer"

"It's been really fun for me to see the boys grow in different ways for each of them"

"I have increased confidence to look at the whole nursery now, to support other practitioners with physical development"

"Chris and Rob have helped us push ourselves as much as they have helped the children develop"

"One of my boys would not speak to any staff at the start of the year, he was very quiet, now he has his own group of friends, he will come in and talk to everybody, his confidence has gone up."



"In the beginning their attention span was so poor ... sticking to the routine and making sure the structure was there was incredibly important"



"They will tell the other children how to play ...and it's nice because they have ownership, it's their game and their session"

"It's giving them more confidence and self-belief "

FAQ

Why are there no girls in the project?

It is recognised that boys and girls learn differently even from a young age and that the gendered nature of the workforce sometimes means boys are not provided with a wide enough range of physical activities for extending learning opportunities across the curriculum. **Better Beginnings for Boys** was designed to meet that gap; however girls do ask to come along and are included where numbers and ratios allow. In one nursery there is a practitioner that takes boys out in the morning and girls in the afternoon.



Do the children have to do the activities every day?

Not all children come into nursery every day, but usually the **Better Beginnings for Boys** is part of the routine on the day they come in. However the children can choose whether they go out on a particular day, and usually once they have got into the habit of going they don't want to miss it. Other children can also get included in the activities if they choose and ratios allow for it.

References / further resources

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