



Making Strides in Schools symposium



In September 2016, the National Centre for Sport and Exercise Medicine (NCSEM) hosted a one-day symposium to draw upon the growing interest and exposure of running programmes in primary schools across the UK and bring together key stakeholders from across sport, health, education and academic sectors.

Aim of the symposium

Sharing of collective knowledge and expertise about what works both in terms of expected outputs and implementation of running programmes in schools and what the future directions/needs are for effective roll-out and sustained implementation.

Attendees

Participants included teachers, representatives from various running programmes (including Marathon Kids, The Daily Mile), government bodies (including Sport England, Public Health England and Department for Education) as well as academics involved in children's physical activity research and evaluation.

Summary of the day

The symposium started with an introduction to some of the more well-known UK school-based running programmes, including the Daily Mile and Marathon Kids, and some early evaluation work of these initiatives was presented.

Following this there were presentations and discussions covering a variety of relevant topics, including how to work with academics/policy, technology's role in running programmes, the link between running and cognition and measuring physical fitness. The day finished with a think-tank session covering what we know, gaps in our understanding and identifying the next 'steps'.

The outcomes of the discussion are summarised below.

What we know

- Running programmes hold much public appeal/interest and are being widely implemented across primary schools in a ‘grass roots’ style movement.
- Anecdotal reports from both deliverers (schools and teachers) and pupils support the great potential of running programmes for providing schools with additional opportunities for regular physical activity.
- There is ample evidence proving the positive health (physical and mental) benefits of physical activity in children and adolescents, but not necessarily within school-based running programmes.
- Balancing autonomy with guidance permits schools flexibility to implement a running programme in a way that fits with needs and circumstances but provides them with ownership opportunities. It is likely that no one-size-fits-all approach exists.
- The main perceived advantage of existing running programmes, in particular The Daily Mile, is simplicity, but they also must be safe.
- The initiative needs to be attractive to the school. Gaining head teacher buy-in is crucial as they are the key change agents and decision makers within the school, although parental support and awareness is also important.
- Implementing a running programme in secondary schools may pose significant logistical challenges and potentially unique barriers.



Gaps in our understanding

- At present there is no coordinated surveillance approach in the UK to understand how many schools are using running programmes (i.e. uptake) and/or how they are being used (i.e. implementation). Understanding whether variety in choice of deliverers is a facilitator or barrier to uptake of schools needs to be understood.
- Establishing the core principles for school based running programmes is needed. For example, understanding the impact of mandated vs optional implementation and the role of goal setting, and considering the long term effectiveness of each approach.
- Insight into the sustainability of school based running programmes and/or the physical activity behaviour beyond the first year of implementation is required. Do schools drop out of these programmes and if so why?
- The contribution of running programmes to overall physical activity and whether or not there is a compensation effect (i.e. activity outside of school/during break/lunchtime reducing; replacing quality PE time).
- The influence of the home/family context and environment and if the benefits of such programmes translate to children from diverse backgrounds and their families.
- Understanding the impact of season and/or weather on participation in and implementation of school based running programmes.
- Understanding whether running programmes positively influence enjoyment of running and motivation to be active, and whether this is sustained over time.
- Where the balance lies between optimising schools autonomy to alter delivery and providing national/regional programmes to boost interest and spread participation.
- Whether and how technology can be used to enhance running programmes as it may be antagonistic to keeping it simple. However, technology may have an important role in improving the administration (e.g. RFiD for counting laps) or allowing outcomes to be incorporated into lessons (e.g. distance run used in maths or geography).

- What the ‘critical outcomes’ to measure success are. There was a general feeling that cardiorespiratory fitness and physical competence (such as fundamental motor skills) would be more appropriate outcomes compared with body mass index. From a long-term participation perspective, predisposing outcomes (such as physical activity, enjoyment and self-efficacy) were also identified as important.

- Work towards a consistent message which can be shared with head teachers, schools and communities.
- To understand whether these programmes are feasible, acceptable and effective in disengaged/unmotivated or inactive/low active groups.
- Efforts should capitalise on the current momentum and concentrate on increasing adoption among primary schools, and understand the feasibility of implementation in secondary schools.
- Research is urgently required in terms of understanding the effectiveness of running programmes in improving physical and/or psychological health. However, of even higher priority is understanding how best to implement programmes in to schools.
- It is essential, from an advocacy point of view, to understand better the effects of regular physical activity during the school day on the processes that contribute to summative attainment levels (e.g. time on task, concentration and pupil behaviour and wellbeing).



More information

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