



FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PROJECT

CAERPHELLY

INTRODUCTION

The StreetGames Family Engagement Project (FEP) aims to engage with families who are inactive, isolated or who have challenging circumstances which may impact on their health and wellbeing. Funded by the Healthy and Active Fund (HAF), FEP operates in 7 Local Authorities in South Wales. A partnership between lead organisation Valleys Gymnastics Academy (VGA) and Upper Rhymer Primary School has established FEP in Caerphilly since January 2020.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

Ideas for project activities are always suggested by the communities, and as far as possible, their suggestions are put into practice by the project staff. The families initially wanted a walking group, with the opportunity to come back to the school base to have a healthy buffet and time to socialise. Although project staff felt that this might not be something that families would want to do for the long term, walking as a key project activity continues to be popular. The FEP has kickstarted a local walking group which has continued to operate throughout the past two years. Families have continued to participate and regularly engage with social media to share their involvement and pictures of themselves getting out and being active. Their URPS Family Walking Group on Facebook has 45 members and several family groups have joined and use Twitter to share photos of their walks.

Although locally the project staff and participants refer to it as a 'walking group', activity provision has been far broader. In the summer of 2021, outdoor multi-sports events were organised for children, and adult family members were able to gather and socialise. Pre-lockdown gymnastics activities were organised at the school by VGA. These were able to take place for a few weeks before restrictions affected provision.



"We're calling it a walking group, but I think it's a bit more than just a walking group, it's whatever they want really, they've expressed their opinions on what they wanted and we've done our best to try and give them these opportunities – the kids really wanted to do the gymnastics, so we could come into the school and deliver some basic gymnastics and they loved that".

These gymnastics sessions were well received and remain popular choices and in high demand. The offer is likely to be reintroduced when schools are able to re-open to external providers. Providing these kinds of opportunities in the heart of communities is known to be particularly important for families where parents may not drive and can't access sports clubs outside of school easily. VGA aims to remove this barrier by using the FEP to bring the club opportunity directly to them.

As a reward and recognition of all the activities the families have taken part in, during October half term families were taken on a day trip rock climbing at the Summit Centre, Merthyr Tydfil. This gave parents the opportunity to visit sports provision outside of their local area and try something new and different together. This was a real success and helped them develop 'activity know-how', allowing them to access alternative kinds of physical activity offers and creating a positive memory of a shared experience.

As the pandemic has stretched across two years, project staff have had to constantly think of new ideas as the variety is more likely to motivate and encourage family members to find something that appeals to them. Throughout the year, the project team organise many seasonal activities and have distributed Christmas and Easter packs with gifts for the children and activity ideas. Parents have sent many messages of thanks in return:

"Thank you all, you always go above and beyond for the children, (child's name) has loved each session and is hoping for more next year!"

"Thank you to you all for giving the children a fabulous time again with the games, crafts and for the filled stockings."

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OVERCOMING THE CHALLENGES

Virtual adaptations: Projects and programmes that have involved external providers accessing schools had their original plans disrupted due to Covid-19 restrictions. This continues to be the situation in early 2022. The FEP quickly adapted, maintaining its link with the primary school and its Family Liaison Officer and operated as a virtual walking group. The project team encouraged families to keep active independently by challenging them to get out for a daily walk. Throughout 2020 to 2022, the project challenged families to share their walking photos and organised prizes of sports vouchers for those who stayed active.

“It’s hard really ... obviously the schools are still a bit reluctant for us to go in there and start delivering some sessions so the past year we’ve been doing everything virtually and the families have been really really good with all their walks. They’re quite active as well on social media, they’ll post their walks daily.”

Despite the change to virtual provision, 14 families got involved with the challenge during 2020. These same families have continued to take part in activities through 2021- 2022, maintaining their participation levels and being active on a regular basis.

Community engagement - the right people: Working in partnership with the Family Liaison Officer at the primary school is a key factor. This key role can be a bridge, as the officer knows and understands the families’ needs and this has allowed positive relationships to develop. The trusted connection between VGA staff and the school gives families a good level of confidence in the people who are organising and delivering FEP activities. This continues to be one of the key success factors for the project. Linking with family liaison officers has advantages in that ‘consultation’ with families is ongoing and doesn’t have to be a formalised process done by ‘external’ providers.

Outdoor provision: When weather allows, outdoor multi-sports events and group walking sessions have been a safer environment for families to meet up and take part in activity and socialise when there have been limited opportunities for communities to gather. Weekly walks have taken part in parks and fun sessions for children have been organised. Outdoor provision has been an essential part of maintaining HAF delivery during the past two years, while indoor settings have been limited by caps on the number of adults allowed to mix and social distancing regulations.

Programme flexibility and funding extension: In July 2021, Welsh Government announced they would be extending HAF funding for another year to allow projects time to establish themselves after a year of severe disruption. The flexibility of the programme in making this extension and empowering local projects to adapt their original plans has been a key factor in helping projects to continue to engage with and support their target audiences.



SUSTAINABILITY PLANS

Developing leaders and volunteers: This had been the aim for 2021, but like with many HAF projects, the option to access to face to face training for volunteers and leaders has been delayed during the pandemic. Some of the parents are already helping out and promoting the project via social media and word of mouth. Key volunteer members of the group will be able to gain Walk and Run Leaders qualifications during 2022. **“... so they feel more involved as a community and can take themselves out when and where they want. We’ll still be involved but taking a step back.”** There are also plans to access Community Champions training and Five Ways to Wellbeing. Upskilling members of the group will help free up the time project staff spend on delivering activities to refocus on developing a broader offer. The aim is for community members to take ownership of their activities, lead their own walks and decide where and when activities will take place.

The project also works closely with young leaders through the gymnastics club, and the coaches have recently set up a Wellbeing Inclusion Group. Four young people aged 14 to 16 have become the club’s Wellbeing Ambassadors. They support local provision for the community and have been involved in connected activities such as Fit and Fed, SEND disability camps and have recently been involved with the Us Girls project. **“These are our next up and coming ambassadors.”** The team are aware that prospective young leaders can be shy and the fact they are in demand and recognised by StreetGames can help them feel more comfortable and develop confidence and skills through this role.

Supporting independent participation: Activity packs for families to take part in physical and wellbeing activities at home and outdoors have been a key part of FEP provision in the last two years. Packs have been distributed directly to people’s homes and have contained items such as footballs, hula hoops, skipping ropes, growing and planting equipment, home cooking activities and crafts. This has led to the creation of the VGA sports library, where, as restrictions were lifted, families could come and borrow equipment from the gymnastics centre to use at home, alongside activity ideas. This idea was shared within the FEP network group, and to date, has been utilised in other authorities.

Connectivity with other programmes. Consultation with the families showed that right from the outset of the FEP, food was an important element of what they wanted the experience to be like. Linking to Fit and Fed provision has been a natural fit and the two programmes complement each other, with nutrition and exercise offers going hand in hand with supporting communities in leading a healthy and active lifestyle. There is often overlap with the families involved and the network of locally trusted organisations involved. This is beneficial because it provides an opportunity to signpost and refer people across projects and programmes and to connect community members to other opportunities in the local area. Staff expertise and learning can also be shared across programmes.

Deputy Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing, Lynne Neagle, joined Caerphilly’s family walk to officially launch the extension to the programme. Members of the group spoke to the Deputy Minister about the positive differences they were seeing in being more active. of the programme and local projects.

A mum, whose children attend the sessions, said: **“This is the best thing that they’ve done, it’s important to have more activities outside of school. This has been going for a few years and the kids love it.”**

A participants mum said: **“He has really benefitted, especially after lockdown. They love being out with everyone.”**

<https://media.service.gov.wales/news/healthy-and-active-fund-extended-by-a-year-following-pandemic-1>

NEXT STEPS

Developing volunteers. The project staff aim to use money they have set aside for training to pay for parents to go on Walk Leaders courses and Community Champions training opportunities. Upskilling local community members will help the project to be sustainable and for the community to take ownership and steer the group. This will increase the likelihood of it becoming a regular part of community life and lessening the reliance on 'external' providers to run activities.

Embedding and broadening the FEP offer: Project staff feel that there is scope to expand the participant base with the new school intake every year. The project team have considered whether to expand the number of primary schools they engage with or whether to embed the work in one school. For 2022, the decision has been made to stay with the one school where a positive relationship has been established: ***"The parents we've got at the moment really good, really open and will come and talk to you... the connection (with the school) is really good and what we are hoping to do now is engage with a new influx of children coming through – those in Years 5 and 6 will introduce the activities to those in Years 3 and 4."*** Finally, there is potential for the FEP to be replicated in neighbouring Local Authorities. A longer-term aim is to introduce FEP via the development of new partnerships at VGA's brand-new gymnastics site at St. Tydfil's Gymnastics, Merthyr Tydfil.

