

'And... action!'

Digital technology has helped to increase sedentary behaviour among children, but it can also be used to encourage physical activity, says *Dr Lala Manners*

Most children are surrounded by varying forms of digital technology from birth onwards. Both at home and in settings they are well used to being filmed and monitored as they play and learn. They are familiar with a range of apps that they download and use independently, making their own choices and decisions as to how and when to be entertained.

Children are taking an ever-increasing role in determining and curating their own experiences, deciding on their level and style of engagement with people and the environment. They expect to be active participants in their learning – and are having an increasing impact on approaches to parenting.

Early years and physical development specialists have been reluctant to embrace ICT practice – although it has been used successfully in a range of sports, dance and gymnastics training for many years. Immediate experience and engagement with the environment has always been one of our fundamental principles, but it is

time we found a way to match children's innate need and enjoyment of physical activity with their interest in and ability to use digital technology.

Fact Digital technology has had a significant impact on the rising levels of sedentary behaviour among children and consequent obesity issues. Ninety per cent of young children are not physically active enough to support their overall health and development. One-fifth of five-year-olds are now classified as overweight/obese.

Question Could the positive aspects of ICT and digital technology be used to promote and encourage physical activity in settings, to engage practitioners and parents more fully in their children's physical experiences and development, and to ensure children's ongoing interest and participation in physical activity?

PILOT SESSION

Matt Smith, a sports coach with nursery chain Active Learning, took his class of 15 three-and-a-half to four-and-a-half-year-olds for a 30-minute activity session outside on a cold damp afternoon. Two practitioners supported. Two VTech children's camcorders



Children expect to be active participants in their learning; Active Learning got children to film an activity session (below)

were used. Footage gained was viewed by the whole group in a ten-minute reflective session afterwards.

Reaction

Mr Smith says, 'I had no expectations, and I decided just to do a normal session and see what panned out. Two children at a time filmed whatever they wanted. This was really hard for me initially as I had to hand over control to them, and trust in their

judgements. What really surprised me was their total engagement with the session. The energy level was quite different and there was a much higher level of continuous movement among the children – even the quiet ones were way more interested and involved. The staff also seemed keener to join in and definitely picked up on the children's enthusiasm. There was no whingeing about the cold either. We were focusing on running and speed, direction and stopping in time.'

Reflection

The group sat down and watched the footage together on an interactive whiteboard. Matt says, 'This was the most useful and interesting part of the session. The children really enjoyed this and asked loads of questions. They looked closely at what they did and seemed more aware of themselves and the environment. It was interesting to see what they chose to film: the sky, the wall, pigeons, the leaves on my trainers... not just the activities.'

'The discussion went in all sorts of directions: Why can't we fly? Why is the sky that colour? Why someone "did it wrong". Why can we run fast? What animals can't run and why?'

'Talking to the staff, they were interested in the children's total engagement with the session, and how communal viewing of the footage had generated such a wide range of questions. It gave them a much clearer idea of the children's interest in physical skills and how they could build on this to link into other areas of the curriculum. Our science specialist viewed it independently and picked up some new ideas for his project on height.'

'The children recognised themselves immediately – "That's me because I'm wearing my red wellies"; "I am a really good runner"; "She always does that" [spin around]; "I'm standing on the grass."'

Implications for practice

Giving children autonomy to film what they wanted provoked a higher level of engagement

MORE INFORMATION

- *Early Movers: helping under 5s live active and healthy lives*, British Heart Foundation, www.bhf.org.uk/publications

- *Learning Reimagined: how the connected society is transforming learning* by Graham Brown-Martin, www.grahambrownmartin.com/shop/learning-reimagined-limited-edition

- *The App Generation: how today's youth navigate identity, intimacy, and imagination in a digital world* by Howard Gardner and Katie Davis, Yale University Press

level of engagement with the practical session and the later reflective period. It proved a stimulating source for discussion and encouraged children to use relevant and meaningful language to describe their experience.

- Visual data could be shared with other sites/settings to promote physical activity and encourage practitioners to be involved, also creating links to other areas of the curriculum, particularly language development and communication.
- Parents were very supportive of this initiative. They suggested they could repeat some of the activities at home, film on their mobiles and submit, then a montage be put together that could be shared.

Future plans

Use the camcorders at least once a month – this will provide a visual record of the children's development and a continual source of discussion.

- Plan around specific physical skills, for example, jumping, catching and running or behaviours, such as collaborating, delegating and decision-making.
- Include practitioners more actively, encourage their interest and engagement by making clear the link between physical development and learning and find them manageable/meaningful roles.
- Build on parental interest and engagement – critical for children's long-term enjoyment and participation in activities.

POTENTIAL OF ICT

Digital technology has enormous potential to encourage and support children's physical activity both at home and in settings. Using it combines very effectively children's innate interest in skill acquisition and personal physical development with their daily involvement in the digital world. Children may initiate, instigate and source materials to support physical development initiatives, organising data to create environments where physical activity is valued.

Using ICT to support physical activity is an approach that could well be adopted by all settings in time. It has the potential to involve children more meaningfully in their personal physical development and to use technology in more collaborative and communal learning experiences. ■

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