The activity behind children’s activity...

M ore and more primary school children are being inspired to take part in sport with the help and encouragement of the Oldham sports development team. Activity development workers take PE lessons in local primary schools while specialist coaches offer a range of activities, including fencing, archery, gymnastics and orienteering as well as the more traditional sports such as football and basketball.

They also offer before-school, lunchtime and after-school sessions and even tailor-made programmes to suit the school involved.

The service was set up around 40 years ago and today the team reaches more than 12,000 children a week in three quarters of Oldham’s primary schools.

“We’re proud of the service we provide,” said sport development manager Anna Shells. “We’re encouraging children to be regularly active, and our highly-skilled team makes a difference to lots of pupils every week.

Our surveys show that all schools say we provide value for money, have had a positive impact on attainment and 97% of them felt our coaches have good relationships with students and staff.”

Schools report that with the team’s assistance, a culture exists in their school in which children want to participate in PE lessons and enjoy school clubs. As well as the school coaching programme, sports development provides dance classes in 30 schools, including secondary schools, and arranges competitions. Staff also train teachers in the preparation of sports sessions for their pupils, and more recently they have developed a health-oriented initiative, for which staff promote regular health messages and specially-targeted teaching sessions. Even more recently the group launched the FRESHT programme, in which nutrition is taught in conjunction with physical activity. Subjects include portion sizes and understanding the labelling of processed foods.

Sport is introduced even to under-fives, through the team’s SPEAV programme, which prepares children for PE lessons at primary school. There is also a Playmaker scheme, aimed at children up to 11. This leadership programme shows pupils how to organise games and activities for their lunchtime and holiday breaks, and as well as promoting physical activity helps to develop organisation, leadership and teamwork skills.

Lauran Whaley, the team’s development officer for health and physical activity recently got involved with mums and friends taking children to and from Richmond Academy.

The school gate project encouraged them to take part in their own physical activity sessions, several of the activities previously not attempted by the women co-ordinated, such as swimming and cycling.

Lauren is now working with the women to ensure they know where local sports halls and leisure centres are, so they can remain active.

Teaching assistant Carla Airsworth and teacher Daney Wright talk to Lilly Garrett (left) and Freya Brennan

Alongside the sports development team is a group of children working as Health Champions in Oldham primaries. The pupils offer help and advice on healthy eating and activity to their classmates.

The champions recently attended their second workshop (above and left) when 80 children from 37 schools gathered to develop action plans and swap ideas.

The champions’ role is to promote messages on healthy living, eating well and being active to other pupils, both by offering advice and by acting as role models for their fellow pupils.

When the children became health champions earlier this year they were issued guidelines and advice from the sports development team as they set about preparing their action plans.

This included how to promote their role as health champions at assemblies or through the school council.

To promote health messages they were advised to prepare “eat well” plates, promote healthy lunch boxes and discuss topics such as water intake, sugar, fats, cooking, mental health and reading food labels.

To promote physical activity it was suggested that they organise junior parkruns and provide walking maps, to highlight active travel, to champion walking, running and cycling, organise classroom challenges and set up the Daily Mile (see page 34) in school.

At the workshop they heard from Fullsworthy boss Danny The Wolf Wright, who has just turned professional sportsman.

Danny’s boxing CV is packed with prestigious achievements, including national junior ABA title wins, a Juno Great Britain title, three international tournament victories and seven appearances (with six wins) for England.

Danny explained how he adopted a healthy lifestyle to help make a success of his career.

“You’re lucky to be healthy,” he told the youngsters.

“You have to make the most of it and continue to be active, to eat well and pursue a healthy lifestyle.”

Danny said one of the ways he stayed healthy was on a diet with chicken and vegetables – lots of vegetables!

Another veg fan was Jeyavqali Riddel (10) from Broadfield Primary.

She and Rahimah Noor (9) are health champions at their school.

It’s good being healthy,” said Jeyavqali.

“As a sports leader I play football with the reception class. It is important to get children active at a young age. And I eat lots of fruit and vegetables.”

Rahimah also pays attention to her diet and enjoys rice and salads.

“It’s important to promote healthy lifestyles to everyone,” she said.

Broadfield’s learning mentor, Elaine Jolley, commented: “The health champions scheme is brilliant because the healthy lifestyle messages come from the children themselves, which has more impact than from an adult.

“Vit’s important to make children more aware of the importance of healthy eating and taking exercise because children today come from a sedentary generation – not many of them even walk to school anymore.”

The two girls have given class assemblies on healthy living, talked to staff about their results and have launched an action plan, which focuses on healthy eating and taking regular exercise and the long term effect this will have on them.

The girls are confident about delivering the message and active in school,” Elaine suggested.

After listening to Danny, the children practiced what they preached to their classmates by joining in a dance and exercise session (above).

During the workshop, the children posted notes about their proudest achievements on a notice board. Comments mentioned being more active with after-school clubs, introducing the Daily Mile into school, that their messages seemed to be understood and followed by their friends and that they have even started lunchtime exercise classes.

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