

# CHANGING CHILDREN'S LIFESTYLES

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Today's children are the least active generation in history. In fact, in the UK, only half of seven-year-olds regularly meet the Chief Medical Officers' recommended physical activity guidelines and this percentage decreases as children get older.

## INTRODUCTION

More than 24 years of teaching experience, working with both secondary and primary-age children, has shown me the impact of unhealthy lifestyles on young people's development. Fuelled by a desire to change this, I set up Shaw Control – a not-for-profit organisation – with the aim of providing innovative and effective methods to tackle rising obesity levels and improve young people's lifestyles. The company has now been in operation for nine years and offers free weight-management services for overweight young people.

Drawing on my experience as a full-time physical education (PE) teacher who also worked across a cluster of schools as a school sport co-ordinator (SSCo), I developed three schemes to support young people to move to healthier lifestyles. These are:

- Changing Lifestyle Club
- Weigh-in Project
- Health and Wellbeing Programme.

## CHANGING LIFESTYLE CLUB

The Changing Lifestyle Club is Shaw Control's most long-standing intervention and is aimed at overweight young people aged 11-16 years old. It is an out-of-school club that runs weekly, focusing on encouraging the participants to make small but significant changes to their habits and lifestyle. Having been out of operation for two years through lack of funding, the club was able to restart in 2016 thanks to funding from Leicestershire and Rutland Sports Partnership.

During a 12-week programme, the young people engage with healthy eating and physical activity through games, fun activities such as cookery sessions, and opportunities to try different sports, such as trampolining, climbing and boxing. The supportive environment encourages the participants to try new things and make improved lifestyle decisions, contributing to improved wellbeing, happiness and healthier weights. This is all achieved whilst having a lot of fun and learning important skills. "Things that I have really enjoyed are the climbing walls, obstacle course and the kangaroo boots. This is because you have fun with others and you communicate," said one participant.

Around 50 young people attend the club over a year and, on average, 40 per cent of these lose weight. Many continue to maintain their lifestyle changes and one participant managed to lose 11lbs within the 12 weeks. "With these life-changing experiences, I definitely want to continue my participation in this club," a 14-year-old participant said. "If I have changed this much from a 12-week session, then who knows how much I will change if I continue!"

As important as the physical benefits have been the benefits to the young people's self-confidence and mental wellbeing. They feel more empowered to confront their weight problems. "Now I feel like I have more control over my own body and I know how I affect it and the actions that do that in a positive way," said one young person, demonstrating the way in which the club helps the young people to change habits for the future. "I think I can maintain the changes I have made as I have developed a consciousness of my health."

To share their positive experiences with others, some of the students made a presentation to parents and health professionals. Others, who had attended a week-long lifestyle camp, were taken to an 'all you can eat' restaurant as a reward. I was incredibly proud of the positive choices they made!



## WEIGH-IN PROJECT

As an experienced PE teacher, I recognise that schools must play a role in improving their students' health and wellbeing. Therefore, at Moat Community College, I have also been working on a weigh-in project. Height, weight and waist measurements have been collected from all Year 7 students when they join the school. Parents are informed through a letter and, in the three years the project has been running, only three students have opted out. The results tell a familiar tale: the proportion of students who were found to be very overweight doubled between 2015 and 2016. In 2016, 52 per cent of students were deemed to be a healthy weight, while 16 per cent were overweight and 22 per cent were very overweight (out of 241 students). Across all three years of testing, boys were found to be more likely to be very overweight. Students in the overweight category were invited to join the Changing Lifestyle Club, with 29 per cent of the invited students attending. The number of young people deciding to attend the club has been increasing every year.

Conscious of the fact that the Changing Lifestyle Club can only reach a limited number of students, I also focus on healthy living within PE lessons. Food education and fun fitness programmes are part of this initiative, including a run for all students at the start of sessions, increasing in duration every week up to 12 minutes. This has received positive feedback from the students, who have reported feeling fitter and finding the run easier.

## HEALTH AND WELLBEING PROGRAMME

The study of Year 7 students confirmed that many unhealthy behaviours are already established by the time the young people reach secondary school. So, recognising the importance of interventions at primary school level, a Health and Wellbeing Programme that primary schools can buy into has been developed. The programme is aimed at children in Years 5 and 6 and focuses on improving health and emotional wellbeing, as well as acting as an obesity intervention scheme.

The ethos is like that of the Changing Lifestyle Club: over a 10-week period, children are educated about nutrition and exercise and encouraged to make small but successive changes to their lifestyles. This includes helping the children set realistic targets, such as 'exercise for 30 minutes each day this week' or 'only watch one hour of TV this evening', to engage them outside of school. The first results have been positive: at the end of the programme, 100 per cent of Year 6 pupils and 76 per cent of Year 5 pupils stated that they had made a change to their lifestyle in terms of activity and healthy eating choices.

## WHERE NEXT?

Like many similar initiatives, Shaw Control faces several challenges and uncertainty about its future. It relies heavily on external funding, from sources such as the local authority and Big Lottery, and, despite increasing recognition of the UK's inactivity and health problems, resources remain relatively scarce. Longer-term support will be required to ensure the organisation is financially sustainable and able to develop effectively.

Alongside financial security, I also want to try to guarantee sustainable outcomes for the participants. Although the young people are encouraged to join sports clubs when they leave the Changing Lifestyle Club, many don't feel confident enough to do so. Additional funding or support from other partners would allow Shaw Control to set up more physical activity clubs to create an exit route from the programme. This is particularly important as Moat Community College is probably one of the most ethnically mixed communities in the city of Leicester, with fewer than five per cent of students being White British and almost all the students speaking English as an additional language. This is the demographic that agencies such as Sport England are most keen to engage in sport and physical activity.



Aligned with this need to address under-representation of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups in sport (students are predominantly from Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Somali backgrounds) Shaw Control would also like to set up more interventions to work with the young people's families; this will support prevention and provide support for the young people when they leave the club. Attendance tends to drop off towards the end of the 12 weeks, with a particular dip over Ramadan. Educating parents is hugely important to help sustain the work outside of school and the club.

There is also potential to further develop these research-led health and wellbeing programmes in schools, especially primary schools. This could involve the introduction of a second Changing Lifestyles Club for children aged 7-10 years. Such interventions would support primary schools to achieve the desired outcomes of the Primary PE and Sport Premium.

Organisations like Shaw Control can play an important part in improving the future for young people. Through both curriculum PE and after-school activities, we can provide a series of integrated and effective weight-management and health interventions that can empower young people and their families to improve their lifestyle at home. In this way, young people achieving small and realistic goals can lead to a big difference in health outcomes.

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