



EXPERIENCING HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH SPORT



WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

Compulsory Relationships Education is being introduced into schools which means that young people will benefit from learning how to maintain healthy relationships through experience as part of the wider curriculum.

This resource shares our learning from the Make A Difference (M.A.D) Programme on how sport and mentoring can be used to support relationships education, with the aim of informing and inspiring future practice.

This learning is in keeping with 'The Principles of Excellence in Relationships Education', which are based on research and practice, endorsed by specialist relationship and relationships education organisations and can be found [here](http://www.fastn.org/relationships-education) or visit: www.fastn.org/relationships-education





WHAT IS OUR RESEARCH?

FASTN, Birmingham City University and Sport Birmingham worked together to understand how Sport Birmingham's Make A Difference (M.A.D) programme contributed to improved learning about relationships.

In Birmingham City University's research, young people reported:

- they learned about their own and others' emotions through relationships they experienced on the programme
- they transferred their learning on the programme into their relationships with family, friends and teachers

The learning was gathered through interviews with young people, administered by Birmingham City University, and conversations with those who run the M.A.D Programme.

WHAT IS THE M.A.D PROGRAMME?

The M.A.D programme engages 11 to 18 year-olds at risk of exclusion or already based at a pupil referral unit in six to eight weeks of personal development. It involves classroom learning being put into real-life situations through sport and physical activities. Mentors work closely with the young people and their teachers, parents or carers responding to the young people's needs and interests.

Research* confirms children and young people's developing brains are shaped from the relationships they experience. Relationships are a key factor in social, emotional, cognitive and academic development. The M.A.D programme gives young people the opportunity to experience positive relationships with their mentors and peers, to develop the skills they need for healthy and reliable relationships for life. These relationships are likely to protect against mental health difficulties and negative health behaviour as well as improve resilience and physical health outcomes.*

* Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2016). *From Best Practices to Breakthrough Impacts: A Science-Based Approach to Building a More Promising Future for Young Children and Families*. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>

WHAT LEARNING HAS COME FROM THE M.A.D PROGRAMME?

SPORT SUPPORTING RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Sport, when supervised by a trusted adult, is an ideal forum to reduce relational anxiety. Rhythmic, repetitive activities that can be completed with others reduce states of high alert that young people may experience around others as a result of previous relational experiences. This allowed young people to engage in meaningful connections and be better able to interpret tone of voice and facial gestures correctly and be less likely to perceive them as threatening.

It also allows young people to develop empathy for their peers and regulate emotions through wins and losses in competing against one another. Therefore, playing sport is associated with more positive social skills and increased self-esteem.

'The experience of the team has enabled our young people to benefit from an opportunity outside the normal school day... focusing on teamwork, leadership, resilience and responsibility.'

Teacher from participating school

GAINING NEW KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Creating a safe, non-judgemental environment where mentors treated young people firmly but fairly and communicated that they were there to help allowed young people to talk openly and freely. This helped young people regulate and understand their emotions, making them better able to cope with their environment.

Young people took more responsibility for their behaviour, understanding the consequences

of their actions. They developed their empathy and understanding of different perspectives, improving their problem solving and conflict resolution. And they had more respect for family members, teachers, their peers and themselves.

'The team offer a non-judgemental and genuine programme which supports change and offers a safe space to try out new skills.'

Teacher from participating school

RECOGNISING HEALTHY AND RELIABLE RELATIONSHIPS

Giving young people the opportunity to experience healthy and trusting relationships with mentors and peers in a safe environment helped them recognise the traits of positive relationships and start to nurture positive relationships in other parts of their lives. They also developed transferable relationship skills including confidence, communication, trust, respect, teamwork and empathy.

'I have learned that the state of the child's home plays a massive role in how they present them self to the world. Lack of nurturing and attention can lead to low self-esteem which impacts the child's performance in everyday life. M.A.D creates a safe space for this to be picked up and addressed effectively.'

M.A.D programme mentor

TRUSTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH MENTORS

The young people felt listened to and understood by their mentors and that mentors were trustworthy and non-judgemental. Mentors created this environment by actively listening to and empathising with young people, approaching problems as a team and supporting young people to improve regardless of their behaviour in the past. This allowed young people to access the 'thinking brain' rather than the 'emotional brain' to solve problems and regulate emotions.

Being close in age and sharing life experiences helped the young people and mentors understand and empathise with each other.

The young people reported that they didn't experience these types of relationships outside the programme, in school or at home.

'The mentors use slang language that I understand and they know the streets better than us because they have lived through our generation.'

M.A.D. programme participant

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS

The semi-structured environment gave young people the opportunity to gain confidence from building peer relationships.

The mix of ages meant young people learned from those who had previously been on the programme, and also supported those younger than them. Young people supported each other through the programme, building relationships

based on shared experiences, mutual trust and respect for one another.

'The mentor group has helped me to understand other people's views and respect them. I've felt that I can relate to most of what is said by the group and it gives me the opportunity to express my views and share past experiences.'

M.A.D programme participant

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM OUR LEARNING

Successful relationships education requires everyone role modelling and experiencing healthy and reliable relationships.

Creative approaches mean relationships education can be learned through many subjects and settings, including through sport which encourages teamwork and connections with peers.

Mentors who are close in age to the young people can encourage positive engagement in learning and development.

Trusted adults who demonstrate genuine interest in connecting with and listening to young people help young people to recognise healthy, caring relationships.

Recognising the young people's triggers and helping them understand and respond to them appropriately when they arise is an important skill for mentors.

Encouraging young people to support each other helps them practice and develop their relationship experiences and skills.

Effective mentors are supported to be consistent, reliable and non-judgemental.

Sport is a useful tool to calm relational anxiety and build relationship skills with young people who may otherwise struggle with relationships education.

Mentors seeing challenging behaviour as an opportunity to learn about young people's feelings and needs – responding firmly but fairly is beneficial to the trusting mentor relationship.

Giving young people memorable phrases helps them to act appropriately in situations where the mentors are not present.

Trusted adults encouraging young people to solve their problems as a team helps young people regulate their emotions and better problem solve.

Making learning fun through giving young people choice in activities and the opportunity to bond with their peers supports more effective relationships education.

Listening to, understanding and accepting young people helps them understand and develop the essential relationship skill of empathy.



Sport Birmingham is an independent charity that uses the power of sport and physical activity to improve lives. Uniquely positioned to work in partnership with a wide range of public, charitable and private sector organisations, Sport Birmingham brings inclusive and accessible activities to communities facing disadvantage by leveraging investment, building capacity, partnership working and local knowledge and insight.



FASTN champions healthy, nurturing and dependable family relationships for all and the development of relationship skills in childhood that sustain positive relationships for life. FASTN has co-ordinated the development of Principles of Excellence in Relationship Education, shared practitioner case studies to inspire excellence in relationships education, and works with youth organisations so that young people reflect on and discuss their relationship ambitions for life.



Dr Deborah Earnshaw and Dr Natalie Harrison are lecturers in psychology at Birmingham City University. Their areas of expertise cover identity, representation, aggression and young people. They aim to highlight the experiences of young people within Birmingham through conducting empirical research.

With thanks to:



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Lowry House
17 Marble Street
Manchester, M2 3AW

www.fastn.org
info@fastn.org
[@fastn_org](https://twitter.com/fastn_org)

www.sportbirmingham.org
info@sportbirmingham.org
[@sportbirmingham](https://twitter.com/sportbirmingham)

0121 296 5190