



Active Across Ages: Evaluation Report

Produced by YST Research and peer reviewed by Professor Andy Jones (University of East Anglia)

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Introduction

What is Active Across Ages?

Active Across Ages was funded by Youth Sport Trust International and Sir John Beckwith Charitable Trust. It was delivered by the Youth Sport Trust (YST) and aimed to develop and deliver an action-based research project focussed on intergenerational activity, inspired and facilitated through the power of play and sport. The key aims of Active Across Ages were to:

- Facilitate social mixing to promote social wellbeing between young and older people
- Enhance physical and mental wellbeing between young and older people
- Boost social action and social capital
- Establish credible and impactful models of intergenerational activity for future use both in the UK and internationally

Project Context: The Challenge

Despite the clear evidence of health benefits of physical activity for both young people and older adults ¹, there is a paucity of academic research regarding the inclusion of and impacts on physical activity as part of an intergenerational project^{2,3}. Recent research has highlighted that population ageing is a global issue, **with the proportion of the world population aged over 60 expected to nearly double from 12% to 22% by 2050** ⁴.

Table 1: Key reasons why Active Across Ages is needed

	YOUNG PEOPLE	OLDER PEOPLE
1. Great Britain has become one of the most age segregated countries in the world ⁵	76% of under 18 year olds do not take up opportunities to mix socially with those from a different generation to themselves ⁶ .	65% of adults have all or more than half of their friends from the same age group ⁷
2. Loneliness is one of the most pressing public health issues ⁸	45% of children aged 10-15 years old are lonely 'some of the time' or 'often' ⁹	1.2 million chronically lonely older people within the UK ¹⁰
3. There is a high prevalence of mental health concerns	48% of young people are concerned about their mental health – the highest proportion recorded to date ¹¹	2 in 5 older people living in care homes are affected by depression ¹²
4. A significant proportion of people are inactive	57% of children and young people are not leading active lives ¹³	£92 million the cost of physical inactivity in later life to the NHS every year ¹⁴

Project Delivery and Resources

Active Across Ages ran from December 2018 to February 2020 and was delivered across five discrete geographical locations across the country: Dorset, Buckinghamshire, Derbyshire, Merseyside and Cheshire; with each location having a lead school and a partner school (total of ten schools). Schools identified at least one older person's setting to partner with for Active Across Ages - for example, a registered care home, day care centre, or older people's local community group.

The project commenced with a lead teacher briefing, followed by five local workshops that trained a cohort of young people from each school as 'Activity Buddies'. The Activity Buddies then worked with the older people to deliver activities, with a focus on physical activity that both the old and young could enjoy together. Four networking sessions were also delivered for the Activity Buddies at the interim stage of the project, along with a webinar that provided an opportunity for the lead practitioners to share project experiences and lessons to date. The project was also supported by a range of resources, including an Activity Buddy Log, Training resources and Safeguarding guidance.

Overview of Research

An evaluation of Active Across Ages was conducted by YST Research and peer reviewed by Professor Andy Jones at the University of East Anglia. The evaluation adopted a mixed method research approach. Surveys were used to collect quantitative evidence to capture measurable changes delivered by the project (e.g. self-reported wellbeing, perceptions of older people, physical activity levels). The surveys were accompanied by qualitative research via project visits (e.g. focus groups, one-to-one discussions and activity observations), which helped to generate a greater understanding of the quantitative evidence and factors that may have influenced any reported changes. This approach helped to build a comprehensive picture of what works, for who, and why.

The Active Across Ages research had the following overarching aims:

- provide evidence of the outcomes achieved
- draw out key lessons learnt to support ongoing development of the project
- establish credible and impactful models of intergenerational activity for future use.

Project Activities and Reach

By the end of the project, all ten schools had delivered activities with older people, with nine out of ten schools regularly delivering activities. The activities delivered were typically low-level physical activity, such as simple target games, skittles, beach ball tennis and dancing. Schools found that inclusion games, such as Boccia or New Age Kurling, were particularly popular. The programme of activities was designed by the young people in collaboration with the older people, and largely led by the young people themselves based on the project training they received. Older people were encouraged to share activities from their youth, and some led these for the whole group. The activities were continually adapted between sessions.

School Engagement

- 10 teachers trained
- 10 schools participating

Older People Engagement

- 11 Older people's settings participating
- 164 older people participating

Young People Engagement

- 127 Activity Buddies trained
- 2082 hours of social action undertaken
- 118 Activity Buddies taking part
 - 58% female, 27% SEND, 6% BAME

(Source: Lead practitioner final survey, N=11)

“Young people have the power to implement change and create a lasting legacy of inclusion within their communities.” (Lead Practitioner, Derbyshire)

“People of all generations can learn values and skills from each other. If our community is to move forward it is vital that generations work together.” (Senior School Leader, The Wirral)

Summary of Key Findings

The following evidence is drawn from multiple sources, including the Activity Buddy Baseline (N=133) and Final (N=95) Survey, Older Person Final Survey (N=25), Lead Practitioner Baseline (N=10) and Final (N=11) Survey, alongside qualitative research collected by the YST Research team.

Young People

Skills: Improved skills is one of the biggest benefits for young people taking part in Active Across Ages

- **94%** of young people felt that their **communication skills** improved after being involved in Active Across Ages
- **92%** of young people felt that their **teamwork skills** improved after being involved in Active Across Ages
- **87%** of young people felt that their **leadership skills** improved after being involved in Active Across Ages

Qualitative research supported these findings with improved communication skills being cited most frequently as a key benefit. Active Across Ages provided young people with the opportunity to communicate with new and different people - not just the older people, but new peers, teachers and adults that worked in the settings. Many of the young people had not regularly interacted with the older generation prior to Active Across Ages; therefore, this project provided the young people with the opportunity to develop their confidence and ability to communicate with others.

“From a personal view I have gained more confidence when speaking to people I don’t know. If I am sat with someone from the care home, I can start a conversation with them a lot easier than I would have been able to at the start of this project.” (Activity Buddy, Cheshire)

Attitudes: Young people have better perceptions of older people and feel more empathetic towards them

- **95%** of young people felt that they had a **better view of older people** after being involved in Active Across Ages
- **94%** of young people felt they had better **empathy** after being involved in Active Across Ages

Active Across Ages has helped the vast majority of young people to spend more time with older people. It challenged their perceptions of what older people were like and the things they liked to do, and for many broadened their understanding.

“It’s helped us see how they see things and what they think about everything because we didn’t know that before, we were quite single-minded.” (Activity Buddy, Cheshire)

“I know more how older people think and have grown to respect them more.” (Activity Buddy, Derbyshire)

Mental wellbeing: Young people improve their confidence and self esteem

- **91%** of young people felt that their **resilience** improved after being involved in Active Across Ages
- **88%** of young people felt that their **confidence** had improved after being involved in Active Across Ages

Active Across Ages has provided young people with the opportunity to feel valued, feel that they are doing something of worth, and give back to their community. The impact on young people's confidence and self-esteem were also key benefits that emerged from the qualitative research, reported by lead practitioners and young people themselves.

"The Activity Buddies have seen them [older people] engaged and having fun in simple games and activities that they've helped plan and deliver, this has increased their self-confidence with public speaking and given them a sense of pride." (Lead Practitioner, Derbyshire)

Social wellbeing: Young people have improved their social confidence and made new friends through Active Across Ages

- **86%** of young people felt happier with their friendships

After being involved in Active Across Ages, many young people felt that they developed relationships with both their peers and older people, especially where young people had to work together to plan and deliver the activities. This has been particularly effective when Activity Buddies have worked together between schools and has supported school transition as a result. Practitioners also reported that young people's social confidence had increased as a result.

"It's a massive positive for the Year 6s [working with the high school]. Just knowing faces of older kids when you first come into school makes a massive difference. The fact that they have been here, and been around the teachers helps with the transition, particularly when you are coming from a school which is a lot smaller." (Lead practitioner, Cheshire)

Oscar's story

Oscar has autism, which means that he does not always come across as friendly in social situations. He has been involved in six Active Across Ages sessions at the older person setting and has delivered inclusive activities such as Boccia and New Age Kurling. He left all the sessions with a smile on his face and he no longer put his headphones back on for the bus journey home. His progress has been added to his enrichment profile around his annual review and transition to college.

Source: Lead practitioner survey

Older People

Social wellbeing: The biggest benefit to older people has been improvements to their social wellbeing

- **84%** of older people felt that their feelings of **companionship** improved after being involved in Active Across Ages
- **90%** of older people felt that their **perceptions of young people** had improved after being involved in Active Across Ages

The biggest observed benefit for the older people participating in Active Across Ages has been an increase in their social wellbeing. The project has enabled older people to form new relationships and connections both with the Activity Buddies and with other older people in their respective setting. This was especially observed in Hartington Primary School, where each Activity Buddy was paired up with a 'Silver Sport', with clear evidence that the intergenerational mixing has led to improved social wellbeing in both young and older people. For older people in residential settings, a key benefit is the impact of simply having someone who wants to come and visit. Older people have been observed engaging more frequently in conversation with each other as Active Across Ages provides a stimulus for conversation.

"The big thing is the smiles on their faces and expression of warmth to our kids. Now when they go in you can see them smile, light up. That's the big thing for them - it puts a smile on their face and look forward to something. Have someone to talk to, feel less isolated – just happier really. And that's the relationship you create and build every week!" (Lead practitioner, Cheshire)

"We have such fun, we laugh lots, they say laughter is the best medicine" (Older person, Derbyshire)

Mental wellbeing: Active Across Ages has contributed to improved happiness among older people

- **86%** of older participants felt that their happiness levels had increased

The benefit of Active Across Ages on the older people's mental wellbeing was regularly reported by older people themselves, staff and lead practitioners. Specifically, older people were reported to display positive changes in their demeanour during the sessions, showing to be a lot calmer and more engaged in conversations and the physical activities.

"I was down when I first came here [...] and as the weeks go on, you meet different people and you join in with all their [activities] and it bucks you up. It does honestly, it bucks you up." (Older person, Buckinghamshire)

"When she was there it was like she was a completely different lady she was engaging in different conversations, she was a lot more chilled, relaxed." (Care manager, The Wirral)

Physical wellbeing: Active Across Ages has contributed to increased physical confidence among older people

- **62%** of older participants reported that their confidence to be physically active had increased

Although the levels of physical activity involved in the sessions varied by setting, there were some emerging findings that Active Across Ages had a positive benefit on older people's confidence to be active. Older people were more willing to physically engage in the activities, which consequently improved their social confidence between each other.

"I had a lot of old ladies here and now I've got ladies who want an exercise room." (Care Home Manager, Derbyshire)

"Jo has grown in confidence, she used to want to go home throughout the session but now she really enjoys it. Today she was standing up to bowl!" (Care Manager, Buckinghamshire)

CASE STUDY - LINDA AND ANN

Linda's mum, Ann was particularly interested in the Active Across Ages sessions as she enjoys being around younger children, it helps her to feel young again and lifts her mood! Apart from these sessions, Ann doesn't have many opportunities to be around young people as all her family have grown up. Ann also has limited mobility.

Ann has loved being part of the Active Across Ages sessions. She enjoys being around the young people and finds them incredibly funny and full of life. The young people are effective at motivating the residents to engage with the activities and to try their best, but in a non-judgemental and relaxed atmosphere.

The sessions have altered Ann's outlook on being physically active and encouraged her to feel as though she can be more active. Linda has seen the impacts first-hand of her mothers' increased activity levels as Ann is now stronger and able to be a bit more independent, for example in simple tasks like doing up her bra. Ann and Linda value that the younger people do not make the residents feel 'old', they treat them with respect and interact with them as they would anyone else.



Practitioners and Schools

School profile: Active Across Ages has helped to raise the profile of schools in their local community

- 10 out of 11 practitioners felt that Active Across Ages increased the profile of their school in the local community

At the start of the project, the importance of working with the local community and building a greater sense of cohesion was a key motivational factor to undertake the project within each respective school. Lead practitioners most commonly cited funding (e.g. for resources, events, project delivery) as the primary factor required to help support young people to get involved in social action in their community. This emphasises the value of Active Across Ages in kick-starting such social action amongst young people, supported by schools.

Raising the profile of the school within each community was commonly cited by lead practitioners as being one of the biggest benefits of Active Across Ages. Through the new partnership working within their local community, Active Across Ages has increased the awareness of both the school and the types of activities they are involved with.

“Kudos within the community and a greater sense of place within it” (Lead Practitioner, Derbyshire)

“It broadens our connection with our local community and allows us to embed strong moral values and teach empathy in a practical and rewarding way. And it is fun! It has also strengthened links with the high school which supports transition for Year 6” (Lead Practitioner, The Wirral)

Increased understanding of the value of social action and intergenerational work

- All 11 practitioners reported that they were likely to continue delivering intergenerational volunteering opportunities for their school
- 10 out of 11 practitioners reported that Active Across Ages had increased their schools understanding of the value of intergenerational volunteering opportunities

Prior to the Active Across Ages project, 50% of lead practitioners reported that they had supported young people to undertake social action on a weekly or monthly basis. However, 40% had not supported young people to undertake activities with older people, which highlights the need for such work through the Active Across Ages project.

Lead practitioners that were interviewed reported how being involved with Active Across Ages had given them an opportunity to witness the benefits and potential impact of intergenerational projects first-hand; they have since bought into the concept and fully understand the potential impacts that such work can have.

“This is a genuinely innovative social action project that has taught our school and others how to become involved in intergenerational work.” (Lead practitioner, The Wirral)

“This is now part of our annual offer. Children have heard about the project through assemblies and other children talking about it and children in younger years want to be part of the project as they get older.” (Lead Practitioner, Dorset)

Confidence of lead practitioners: Active Across Ages has increased the confidence and competence and of lead practitioners

- All 11 practitioners reported increased confidence and competence to support intergenerational volunteering projects

Practitioner interviews reinforced the value in experiencing intergenerational work to increase this confidence, competence and motivation. For many, now they have experienced how simple it can be, they are more likely to continue with similar work. Being part of the pilot has inspired them to embed intergenerational work into their school.

“I have loved this project and now I have the confidence to deliver this kind of project for school and I want to do more of it in the future” (Lead Practitioner, The Wirral)

Review of Project Delivery

Key Strengths of Active Across Ages

Unique Offer

Active Across Ages provides the unique opportunity to bring people together of different ages and generations using physical activity as the vehicle. A key strength of Active Across Ages is that it can be simple, low-cost and adapted to the needs of the local community. Specifically, both teachers and care managers cited that the improved physical and social wellbeing in older people was built upon the unique factor of activities run specifically by younger people. Furthermore, the combination of training, resources and ongoing support from a programme manager provides a unique package and is key to the success of the project.

Flexible

Key to the project's success is its flexibility in how schools and settings approach the project, how they recruit their Activity Buddies and how they work with other schools and older people settings. The training delivered for young people at the outset of the project was effective, Activity Buddies felt that it supported them to be able to deliver effective sessions. Similarly, the autonomy that each school was provided with allowed them to tailor their approach to their respective, setting, group, or community to maximise the success of the project.

Sustainable

After being involved in Active Across Ages, many schools have now successfully embedded the intergenerational activities within their annual offer. For all schools, the training, resources, and learning acquired from the project means that this intergenerational action can have a long-term, sustainable impact which can be shared across multiple school year groups and developed on a wider scale at the discretion of each school. For older people's settings, the project is simple to run and sustains itself after the relationship with the school has been established.

Key Challenges of Active Across Ages

Physical vs. Social wellbeing

For some practitioners, increasing physical activity across generations provided an impetus for the activity sessions to happen, but they did not feel it was the main focus or benefit. Instead, many schools used the activities to improve the social wellbeing of older people. Most schools worked with older people who were less physically able than expected at the outset of the project, especially those who partnered with residential settings. Consequently, Activity Buddies explored different ways to encourage the older people to be active and frequently adapted the activities to focus on those that could be done from a chair.

Recruitment

Some schools found it took longer to recruit the settings than initially expected; therefore, a key learning is the time it takes to engage and set up a relationship between settings. However, once the relationship had been set up, practitioners reported it was straightforward to work with the settings.

Location

Some challenges in engaging the older people occurred when the activities took the older people out of their typical setting and therefore their comfort zone. For example, activities that were held at the

school site or outside of the residential setting often had less up take from the older people, whether that was in engagement or attendance.

The Six Core Principles

The YST Research team have identified that a successful physical activity intergenerational project will include the following six aspects.

1. **Young People:** the intergenerational aspect of this project is key, young people are at the heart of the project and are a key success factor. When recruiting young people, carefully consider their motivations for taking part and select those who will commit to the project given the opportunity.
2. **Physical Activity - gradual, but regular:** gradually introduce physical activities, focusing on social wellbeing alongside physical wellbeing. Build the participants' confidence to engage with the activities and increase their physical activity accordingly. Deliver activities on a regular basis to maintain momentum.
3. **Fun:** have fun, be positive and celebrate achievements. Creating a fun atmosphere for both the young people and older people will maintain engagement and increase the impact of the project.
4. **Flexibility:** be flexible to ensure the activities are delivered and embedded within the local context and developed over time in line with the needs of the local context.
5. **Strong Relationships:** a good working relationship with a consistent older people's gatekeeper is key. Identify key stakeholders and involve them with the project from the outset.
6. **Training:** prepare the young people to deliver activities which are tailored to suit the young people attending and the types of older people they intend to work with. Support young people to feel empowered throughout the project and equip them with the confidence, skills and knowledge to adapt activities to suit participants interests and abilities.

Conclusions

Funding from Youth Sport Trust International and Sir John Beckwith Charitable Trust has enabled the Youth Sport Trust to pilot a new project that tests the effectiveness and impact of delivering intergenerational work that has physical activity at its core. The role of young people in delivering activities for older people is considered as one of the biggest success factors of the project. Similarly, its versatility and inclusive nature has been a real strength, meaning that a wide range of people from multiple generations can participate in the project. While the focus on physical activities has worked, the project has highlighted that a gradual introduction of physical activities is required and activities need to be carefully selected, adapted and tailored to the abilities of the respective participants.

Facilitating social mixing and promoting social wellbeing have been at the forefront of the benefits reported by all individuals involved in the project. Changes to physical wellbeing have varied across the geographical locations, with improvements often more limited for the young people due to the lower intensity of physical activities being delivered; however, there was evidence that older people had increased their confidence to participate in more physical activity. The volunteering opportunities created through Active Across Ages for young people has helped to enhance their life skills, which will be valuable in supporting them in their next stage, whether it is transitioning from primary to secondary school or into employment beyond secondary school.

The vast majority of lead practitioners reported that none of their Activity Buddies would have been involved in other intergenerational opportunities or activities through school outside of the project, and data has shown that Active Across Ages has increased, rather than displaced, any other volunteering undertaken by the young people involved. Positively, there is a real appetite from those involved in the pilot to continue the work of Active Across Ages beyond the lifetime of the project. Furthermore, all organisations involved in Active Across Ages have embraced the fact that the project is a pilot and have continually adapted their delivery. Through the research activities, six core outcomes have been identified to inform a credible and impactful model for future delivery, whether within the UK or internationally.

Recommendations

With age segregation, loneliness and declining mental health on the increase worldwide, it is vital to deliver projects and services which can address these in ways which are enjoyable and sustainable for all. Active Across Ages offers such a solution and through a detailed evaluation has proven to be effective for young people, older adults, schools and communities.

The commonly held desire of schools for better community engagement, alongside the need for increased social interaction and physical activity among older people means there is considerable potential for expanding the project to more areas. The flexibility and scalability of the Active Across Ages Model makes this achievable.

It is recommended that funding should be sought to expand the Active Across Ages programme to further areas, in particular those with highest levels of deprivation and age segregation where loneliness, lack of intergenerational interaction and physical inactivity are most prevalent.

Acknowledgements

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- Amanda Vernalls - Head of Research and Insight, Youth Sport Trust
- Helen Vost - Managing Director, Youth Sport Trust International
- Viv Holt – Head of International Operations, Youth Sport Trust International
- Stephen Burke - Director, United for All Ages and Good Care Guide
- Liz Jones - Policy Director, National Care Forum
- Sophy Proctor - Head of Funding, The National Lottery Community Fund
- Ian Donaghy - Fundraiser, trainer, speaker and author with particular interests in dementia awareness and combatting loneliness
- Debbie Lye – Youth Sport Trust International Board Member and Former CEO of Spirit 2012
- Nia Ward - Volunteer advisor on funding partnerships
- Lynne Wealleans - Director of Policy and Engagement, Beth Johnson Foundation

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