Chris Caws, YST Development Manager for the south-west, talks here about the biggest challenges facing early years and school readiness in West Somerset.

The government’s social mobility action plan ‘Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential’ identifies the importance of language and speech in supporting young people in areas of deprivation to achieve school readiness and fulfil their potential. Its publication in December 2017 was followed by the announcement of investment through Opportunity Area funding.

**EVIDENCE LINKING PHYSICAL LITERACY AND ACTIVE PLAY**

The link between physical activity in the early years and improvements in achieving early learning goals is well established. We know that children who are more active with better wellbeing will achieve more. Despite this, only 10% of under-fives achieve the Chief Medical Officer’s recommended activity levels of 180 minutes per day.

Physical activity is fundamental in the early years of a child’s life. It helps children to acquire a range of new skills such as language and numeracy, it develops their brains and establishes the building blocks for an active and healthy life.

In addition, early language, social and emotional skills and cognitive skills are all built upon a solid foundation of motor and sensory stimulation acquired through physical activity in infancy and early childhood. The prime areas of personal, social and emotional development, communication and physical development are essential foundations for children’s lives, learning and success.

**WEST SOMERSET OPPORTUNITY**

West Somerset is one of 12 Opportunity Areas across the UK. It is ranked the lowest in government’s Social Mobility Index, which measures the chances that a child from a disadvantaged background will do well at school and gain employment.

The West Somerset Opportunity Area has received funding through the Department for Education, with Somerset County Council commissioning YST to deliver an ‘early years physical literacy and social mobility project’. This project will ensure that every child in the area gets the opportunity to achieve a good level of physical development linked to their language and literacy skills. In doing so, it will increase children’s self-esteem and wellbeing, develop agility, balance and co-ordination, which all help children gain a better start in life.

YST Learning Academy tutors are assisting each early years setting in delivering Stay and Play Clubs for children and their parents / carers to play and be active together. They are developing, mentoring and supporting practitioners in each to up-skill them to deliver the Youth Sport Trust Healthy Movers programme. This sustainable delivery model enables these identified practitioners, called Healthy Movers Champions, to develop their key skills, competence and confidence in nurturing physical development.

It also allows them to cascade their learning to colleagues alongside the Learning Academy tutors who are modelling, coaching, advising and observing other staff when delivering sessions. This approach is supported through the suite of Healthy Movers resources which take a holistic approach to child development, physical themes and developing literacy and language.

For more information about Healthy Movers: www.youthsporttrust.org/healthymovers
EARLY IMPACT

From the initial Healthy Movers training, Healthy Movers Champions reported a high level of satisfaction. All colleagues rated the training as ‘good’, with most rating their overall experience as ‘very good’. They also reported that the training had helped to make them feel more confident, competent and motivated in their role.

Within the first two months of the programme early years settings are valuing the programme as ‘so much more than a physical learning tool’ and they can see the difference it is making to the health and wellbeing of the children. Numerous settings feel that the “gem” of this project is the monthly visits, as the tutors really understand the unique strengths and challenges of each individual setting.

Jennie Rawle, Nursery Assistant at Dunkery Pre-school, Minehead, said:

The programme has been key to helping children’s cognitive development skills and is unlike any other initiative the nursery setting has tried.

We have been part of other initiatives, but this programme is different because of its approach to physical activity. The fact that it is offering us continual support over a period of two years is something we have never had. It is fantastic – we really need that guidance.

One of our children who has disabilities is now really confident and finding his feet thanks to being able to take part in the activities and this programme… a key thing that we find important about this programme is its intent to educate parents and help them to see the importance of activity in learning other life skills.”

With the children reacting well to the programme the nursery decided to show Ofsted the programme in action. Jennie said: “It was a bit of a risk as we hadn’t been using the programme that long but the difference we have seen in the children at nursery since using the activities has been brilliant. They can sit still for longer, they’re more focused and they are learning from the activities how to relate them to everyday life. It paid off because Ofsted absolutely loved it and we came away with a ‘Good’ rating.”

Frances Nicholson, Somerset’s Lead Member for Children’s Services said: “I am delighted that the Youth Sport Trust is joining the West Somerset Opportunity Group and working in communities across the whole of the district. It is so important that young children learn to move and play at an early age and supports their future development to become the best they can be.”

4 Start Active Stay Active - Chief Medical Officers report on physical activity (2011)
5 Zigler, E and Bishop-Josef - Play under siege. A historical perspective in Zero to Three, National Centre for Infants, Toddlers and families, Washington DC (2009)