

## It's a Pod life

***This a report by Marc Boyd, PE & Sport Development Officer, following the first-year partnership between Guernsey Sports Commission and The Pod at La Mare de Carteret Primary school.***



## What is the Pod

'The Pod is an island wide provision for children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs (SEMH).

The purpose of the Pod is to provide a high quality, full time education to any child between Year 1 and 4 with specific social, emotional and mental health needs within a small, bespoke and nurturing environment, with access to mainstream peers through either class, playtime or both.

For some children within the Pod, we will encourage and support them back into mainstream education at La Mare De Carteret where appropriate using a phased approach. For others, the Pod provides an opportunity for children to access mainstream education before moving to Les Voies in year 5.' (Taken from - *Pod purpose, Pod information, La Mare de Carteret Primary School*)

## Why the Pod and how did this come about

During the first lockdown in March 2020, most primary schools were in a position that they needed to close their doors, and only provided a skeleton service to vulnerable children. The schools that I was involved with at the time were no longer in need of my support during this time, so I sought out other schools/provisions that I could support during this.

La Mare de Carteret was one of these schools and after a brief visit, I was offered a unique opportunity to support a team of teachers and LSAs in The Pod.

I immediately saw an incredible opportunity to work in a very specialised environment that would not only develop my skills as a coach and teacher, but also help develop a programme that provides physical learning opportunities, not only in PE but also in literacy and numeracy to support the children's learning.



## What are the positive effects of physical activity in the Pod?

Many of the children that I work with have unique needs that require specific strategies/techniques to help them regulate. However, all the children benefit greatly from physical activities and interventions.

These interventions are used for a variety of reasons, ranging from strength and movement skill development, increasing their understanding of physical literacy and promoting positive social behaviours and teamwork. But it is also used as a positive learning platform for Maths, Phonics and Literacy, themed activities on weekly topics and personal and generic targets.

One of the main benefits that we are using physical activity for is helping the children to regulate. We use regulating, rhythmic and low energy-controlled activities to help the children control their heart rates. There is a correlation that when unregulated the children's heart rates will increase considerably, and they find it hard to slow their heart rates down.

This can be regulated and controlled by slower paced activities, particularly those that are rhythmic, allowing them to learn how to control their heart rates and self-regulate.

Exercise also releases endorphins which act as a relaxant creating 'a feel good' for the children. This along with the repetitive nature of the activities can help the children to regulate.

So, as mentioned already, most of the activities that we use with the children are designed to be low energy, rhythmic and based on patterns. For example, using a trampoline to bounce on to help them count during an active Maths activity, or bouncing a ball for similar reasons or using the trampoline to bounce balls off, developing their accuracy and controlling power in a throw. Other examples would be teaching the children to work in pairs in playing a game, this helps their ability to take turns and support each other.

Physical activity is also an area that the children feel they can participate with some level of success. This allows them to also access areas of the curriculum, particularly during active literacy and numeracy activities and challenges their internal narrative that they are not successful at school. This can be a very positive outcome for the children, particularly with transition.

Additional positive gains for physical activity is familiarising the children with movement skills learnt in mainstream PE. This in turn helps build competence and confidence and aids transition back into their classes, which is one of our main aims in the Pod. Through these sessions we have also seen children having the confidence to access school and external clubs, again giving us the evidence that it has a positive effect on the children we work with. Therefore, PE and physical learning activities can be a positive transitional platform for the children and their classroom teachers.

## First year observations

The first year has been a learning rollercoaster for me. Initially I needed to learn and understand the needs of the children, how best to support them emotionally during learning, and be a positive role model.

This required not only a hands-on approach to my development, working alongside experienced teachers and LSAs, learning techniques, strategies and how to manage situations through experience and observing, but also formal courses such as Team Teach and Autism training.



Following this, the Pod was eager to use my experience to support a physical development programme that also supported the children's learning in and out of the classroom. I was able to use these opportunities to identify some areas that the children and staff would benefit from moving forwards.

- Core fundamental skills. The introduction of Fundamental Movement Skills would benefit the children's learning as well as the physical development of the children. A structured learning programme would also help them to access mainstream activities, familiarising them with those skills being taught in the curriculum and promoting opportunities to learn alongside their peers.
- Child observations showed that core strength was also lacking. This was evident in their abilities to sit upright during floor-based activities, control movement skills, and access activities. We identified these through balance, coordination activities and within mainstream activities. This had an additional effect on their confidence, leading to some children becoming dysregulated.
- There was limited equipment and facility/ area available to provide the activities that we wanted to provide for the children, however we were able to creative with what there was. A key area for this was balance, coordination and strength and a secure area that we could play in.
- Understanding patterns, repetition, regularity tasks and progressive developmental techniques was also key to providing a bespoke program for these children, each with individual needs and linking these to learning opportunities, particularly FMS and physical education.
- Some children and families found it hard to access clubs externally. This was for various reasons, of which some were behavioural needs, so it was imperative that we could help provide the skills and opportunities to allow this to become an opportunity.



## Moving forward

Over the last few months, Nicola Lewis (The Pod manager and teacher) and I have identified the main developmental areas for the next few years. These will be ongoing targets as we developed the Pod and its provisional services.

- Equipment order. Following the extension of the Pod garden, it was essential that we were now able to provide a physical developmental program. This order has now been agreed with additional funding and support from GSC
- Deliver a CPD programme to the teachers and LSAs on FMS and use of equipment. This will allow the Pod to become self-sufficient over time, with all staff able to deliver activities from the curriculum long term plan and physical learning program.



- Long Term plan based on the mainstream curriculum and FMS development. This will be linked to the Year 2 - 4 PE curriculum plan so that the same skills will be taught to the Pod children as the mainstream classes, familiarising them with the specific skills and making the classes more accessible.
- Phased learning programme to include a bespoke Fundamental Movement Skills passport, based on literacy and maths passports. Following in the footsteps of the bespoke literacy and Maths passport program, we are looking to provide a similar program for FMS. This will allow us to monitor and teach specific FMS to aid learning development.
- Develop a bank of activities that focus on gross and fine motor skills strength development, core strength development, regulating activities, social and teamwork activities, patterns and accessible play. These can be delivered by all staff working in or associated with the Pod. This may be supported by the Getset4PE program that GSC are already linked with.
- Provide an outreach programme to support the children and their families with accessing clubs and holiday programs. Staff members will provide the necessary support to children at school and external clubs. They will provide a friendly face and specific support depending on the child's needs.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been a valuable developmental opportunity for me this year. I have a greater understanding on how to work with children with SEMH needs and adapt activities to benefit their needs. I have also been able to provide experience in bringing some structure to physical education in the Pod, and practical learning provisions. This has also been of benefit to interventions that I provide to children in mainstream.

Inclusion is a driving force for us all and creating accessible opportunities to increase participation is very much of paramount importance.

The result of being involved with the Pod over this past year, has enabled us to identify key areas for development over the next few years. It is exciting prospect as we build and develop the Pod and its provision for its children and the staff who work there.

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