

An Evaluation of Littlehampton Sure Start Aerobics: a Healthy Living Initiative

FINAL REPORT

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Introduction

The Aerobics Class is one of Littlehampton Sure Start's healthy living initiatives which has been set up to help achieve the Public Service Agreement target set by the Government to 'Improve the Health' of parents and young children living in areas of disadvantage. It is held weekly on Tuesdays from 1 p.m. to 2.45 p.m. The aerobics class developed from the 'Watch your Weight' class which ran at Chilgrove, as parents had expressed a desire to become fitter and lose weight. The Community Nursery Nurse wanted to offer support to mothers which was both 'fun and healthy... we were looking at a healthy heart and how exercise can promote increase energy, helps weight-loss and generally improves self-esteem.'

The aerobics class began in early January 2003 at the Scout Hall in the Wick area of Littlehampton Sure Start. The venue which was chosen to hold the group, was done so because it was 'relatively cheap' and it has a hall which is large enough to accommodate both the class and a creche for the children. However, as the hall is in use during the mornings, sessions had to be scheduled for the afternoon which initially caused concern as parents might find it difficult to fit the time in between lunch and picking up older children from school. Despite this concern, the group has been running successfully and is well attended both by Sure Start Parents, who pay the reduced fee of £1.50 and non Sure Start members who pay £2.50. There is also an additional cost of 50 pence for the Watch Your Weight class.

Initially, there was some difficulty in finding an aerobics teacher who had the appropriate insurance as many such teachers work in commercial settings have insurance cover paid by their employers. The aerobics instructor who was eventually chosen, is a local parent who was one of the Nursery Nurse's clients at the local GP surgery. She had full insurance for teaching aerobics and was very enthusiastic about working for Sure Start

In order to run the class, it was necessary to set up a crèche for young children and this takes place in the same hall as the class. There are four or five crèche workers at any one session who cater for a maximum of 20 children aged between 0-5 years. Places in the crèche can be booked in advance. However, preference is given to Sure Start parents but, should the need arise, there is a bank of childminders on whom they can call to help out in the crèche as they '*never turn parents away*' .

The crèche, which is free, is set up prior to the class beginning so that it is welcoming and exciting for the children to come into . As the toys are not able to be stored on the premises, however, they have to be collected up from various venues and conveyed by car to each session and this has sometimes caused problems in terms of timing.

When parents arrive, they pay the appropriate fee (as already mentioned) which includes the 'Watch your Weight' session and the Aerobics class. They are weighed and at The Watch your Weight session, they discuss their food diary in which they record their weekly food intake. They discuss any problems that have arisen during the week with the aerobics instructor who then offers them encouragement and advice. The actual aerobics session lasts approximately 1 hour.

The aim of the aerobics instructor is to encourage a healthy life-style and not to promote any particular diet: *'I'm just trying to get people to think about what they're eating..to re-educate people to change their ways and for it to be fun.'*

Methodology

The aim of the evaluation was to evaluate to what extent the aims of the Aerobics class are being met : i.e. are parents changing their habits, enjoying the class and is there anything they think that could be done to improve the sessions.

In particular the evaluation addresses a number of questions:

The parents were asked questions concerning:

- Changes they have made since coming to the class
- Benefits coming to the group has had on their family and friends
- Differences in self-perception

The facilitators (including the crèche workers) were asked questions concerning:

- Getting the group established
- How they perceive the group's progress
- Future plans/development

The evaluation was carried out during November 2003 using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The views of parents, crèche workers, Aerobics instructor and the Community Nursery Nurse were all obtained by various means as described below. In addition, quantitative data was obtained from 11 members for the group from the Littlehampton User Survey and monitoring data was also obtained.

The quantitative data gathered from the Aerobics group during the User Survey (see Appendix1) was analysed which gave numerical data with regard to parental views regarding aspects of the Aerobics class and categorisation concerning feelings about what they felt they had gained through their attendance attendance. In addition, the monitoring data was used to look at the attendance rates since the class began in January 2003.

The Parents Focus Group

As 'parental involvement' is central to the Sure Start philosophy, it was felt that it would be appropriate to train a parent to facilitate a Focus Group consisting of parent members of the Aerobics Class in order to provide qualitative data to support the evaluation. Discussions took place regarding whether or not this parent-researcher should, herself be a member of the Aerobics Class or not. In the event, it was agreed that this would be an advantage in that other parents would probably feel more comfortable and willing to share their views than had a non-parent member been used. A parent member of the group, and who is on the Sure Start Partnership Board, volunteered to facilitate the Focus Group and was also keen to carry out interviews with the Creche Workers, the Community Nursery Nurse who had set up the group, and the Aerobics Instructor.

Prior to the Focus Group being held, the parent-researcher met with the Sure Start Researcher and the Research Midwife at Littlehampton Sure Start, to discuss the purpose of the evaluation and to help decide on questions which needed to be

asked. In addition, the Research Midwife met with the parent-researcher, at a later date, to give her some basic training in running a focus group (see Appendix 2) and in using a tape recording equipment.

Members of the Aerobics Group were informed as to the purpose of the evaluation and given the opportunity to decide whether or not they wished to be involved in the Focus Group. In the event, six people (all living in the Sure Start area) volunteered to take part. The Focus Group was held in the hall, at the end of an aerobics session and lasted for approximately 30 minutes. The parent-researcher was supported throughout the session, by the Research Midwife, who made the introductions. The questions asked (See Appendix 3) concerned life changes with regard to the individual and their close family. Permission was sought from the parents to tape the session. The tape was later transcribed and the parent-researcher, the Research Midwife and the Sure Start Researcher met to analyse the content.

Further qualitative data was obtained from a Focus Group of non-users of Sure Start Services, which was facilitated by the Health Team Leader. Similar questions were asked and the answers recorded and analysed.

The Interviews with the Instructor and Community Nursery Nurse

Following some basic training on interview techniques, the parent-researcher carried out two separate semi-structured interviews, one with the Aerobics Instructor and the other with the Community Nursery Nurse. The Sure Start Researcher was present at both these interviews in order to offer support to the parent-researcher. Permission to tape the interviews was sought from the interviewees and this was later transcribed. The questions focussed on the reasons for setting up the group and how it is run, professional roles, the aims, barriers, achievements and expectations for the future. (See Appendix 4)

The Interview with the Crèche Workers

The parent-researcher, carried out a joint interview with three of the four crèche workers to obtain their views about the crèche which they provide for the children whose parents are attending the Aerobics Class. The researcher was present at both these interviews in order to offer support to the parent. Again, permission was obtained to record the interview, which was later transcribed. The questions concerned the running of the crèche and its appropriateness in terms of its location. (See Appendix 5)

Results
(1) The User Survey

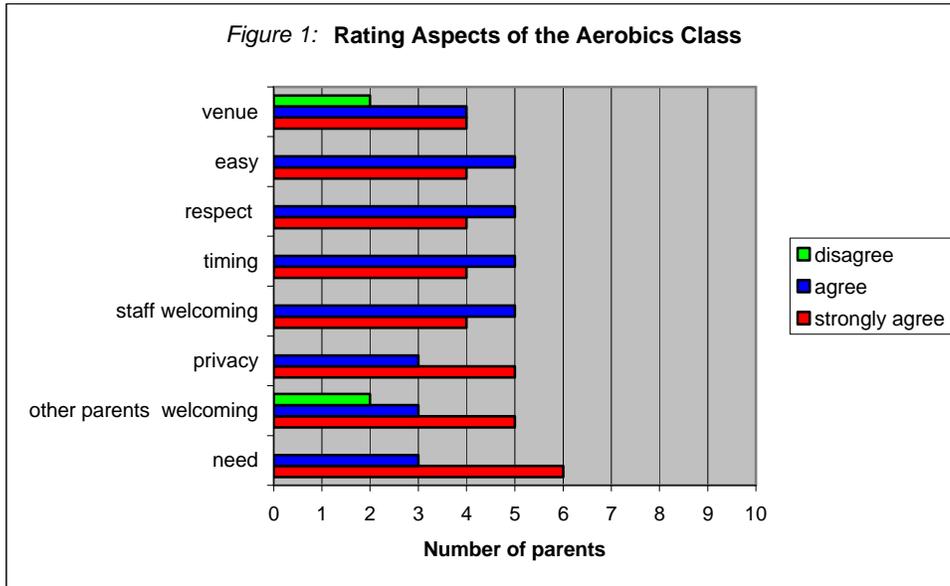
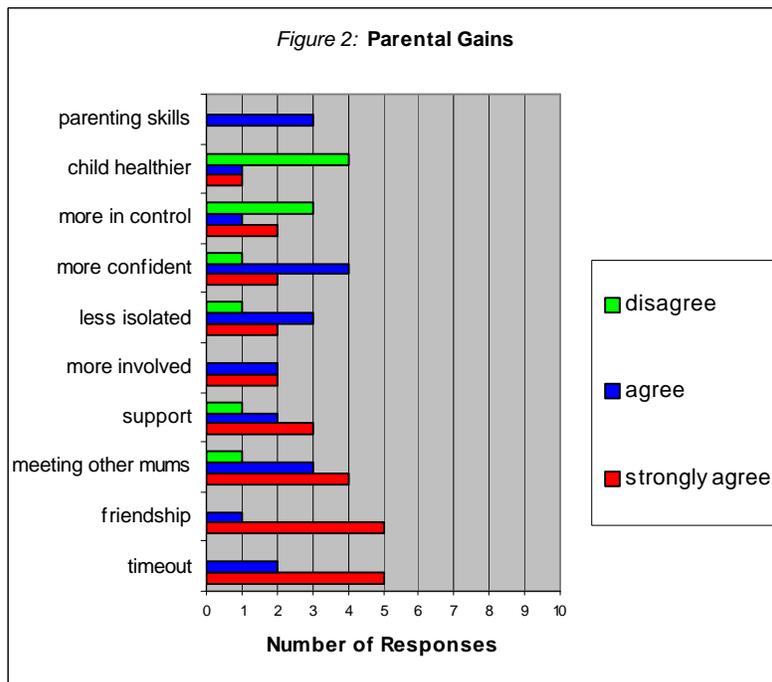
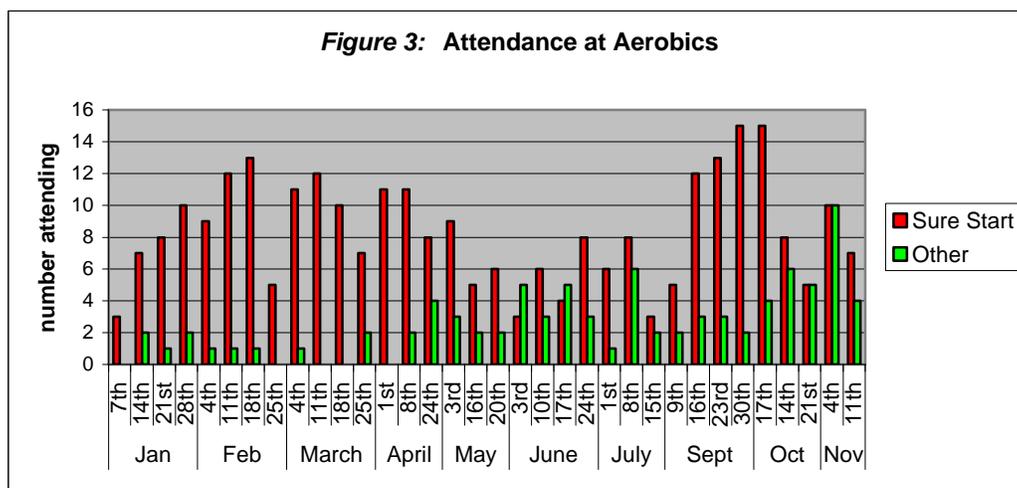


Figure 1 demonstrates that the majority of parents *'strongly agreed'* that their privacy was respected, that other parents are welcoming and that the class is what they need. All *'agreed'* or *'strongly agreed'* that the venue was easy to access, their individual needs were respected and that the timing of the sessions are appropriate. The majority *'agreed'* or, *'strongly agreed'* that the venue is fine. The two parents who *'disagreed'* did so because they felt that the crèche should not be held in the same room as the class and because of poor toilet facilities: *'the loos are not maintained, there's no paper and it's cold'*.



Looking at *Figure 2*, one can see that the largest gains for this group of users is that the majority 'strongly agree' that attending the aerobics groups offers them the opportunity for time out from their parenting responsibilities, the opportunity to make new friends, to meet with other mothers who have children of similar age and that it gives them support. Whilst all four who answered felt that it made them feel more involved in their community, and the majority felt less isolated, more confident, only three out of the six who responded thought they were more in control of their lives. Although the emphasis of the group was on parental needs regarding fitness and weight-loss, the data regarding the fact that it has given them greater awareness of their childrens' diet, is not borne out: four out of six who responded did not view their children as healthier, and only three thought that it had improved their parenting skills. It is interesting to note that although they did not think that their children were healthier, there were many comments made during the Focus Groups which would indicate that parents were much more aware of their child's diet.

(2) The Monitoring Data



N.B There were no classes held during the Summer holidays.

Looking at attendance across the time that the aerobics class has been running, one can see that, initially, nearly all those attending were parents living in the Sure Start area. However, as time has gone by and word has spread, membership by non-Sure Start parents has increased. Whilst membership by Sure Start parents, reached a peak during September, it has rather waned during October and up to the time of the evaluation.

The Focus Groups

Six parents (one of which was male) attended the Sure Start Focus Group and five parents attended the non-Sure Start Focus Group. They were asked to introduce themselves and to tell other members why they had decided to come and how long they had been attending the Aerobics class.

Four had been attending since September and two had been coming since the group started in January 2003.

The main reason for attending was that the parents wanted to get fit. The class gave the opportunity to take exercise which normally they would not have time to do. Few stated that they actually had come primarily to lose weight:

'...cos I've got 3 kids, I couldn't find time to exercise on my own, so I thought I would at least do it [exercise] once a week and then eventually do more.'

The one and only man attending was asked if he minded being the only 'bloke' but he said that he did not mind this. He and his partner attended because:

'We decided to come together because he needed to lose weight and I needed to get fit. So we came to support each other.'

Asked about feelings in attending to their first session, there was a lot of anxiety to begin with

'I was really dreading it... I was really, really scared, but when I got here it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be.'

It seems that the 'fear' was about self-consciousness and about their ability to keep up with the rest of the group. However, these fears seem to have been quickly dispelled:

'It was really comfortable, everyone made you welcome. No one looked at you as if you shouldn't be here which sometime you do feel if you're a bit over weight. Here everyone's up for it and it doesn't matter what you look like or who you are, you can just get on with it.'

One parent who had come to the group on her own commented that for her, the hardest thing was 'getting through the door'.

After attending her first session, she described her excitement:

'I felt fantastic, euphoric almost... you get that adrenalin rush after you've done exercise and it was so good'

The parents were asked about any life changes they have made since taking up aerobics. Coming to the class had been a great inspiration for the parents some of whom had radically changed long-term unhealthy habits:

Eating habits had changed:

'Doing the food diaries actually made us really focus on what we were eating and it was that that had a big impact on what we were eating'

'my complete eating habits have changed. I don't eat chocolate, I hardly ever drink pop anymore'

'I feed my kids better',

Food preparation had changed:

'I've gone up to using four or five vegetables per meal from two'.

'the children's meals are better balanced'.

Food shopping habits had changed:

'I buy lower fat spreads for the family'.

'I've learnt about food labelling'.

Bad habits had changed:

One parent had stopped smoking:

'it inspired me to give up smoking...I smoke, I'm overweight...it's not good is it, really?'

Parents were taking more exercise:

Most parents admitted to doing very little exercise before coming to the class but this had now changed:

'Since I've started coming I'm doing cycling and lots of things. it inspired me to get on and do those things again'

The parents were asked whether or not attending the aerobics class has had any personal affects. Some stated that it has given them greater confidence, more energy, a sense of achievement and improved their mood. It had also had health benefits for one asthma sufferer

More energy:

'When I finish here, I feel quite alive, re-vitalised.'

'I feel fitter, and I'm doing the housework quicker because I have more energy'.

Sense of achievement: *'I'm pleased with myself for sticking at it.'*

Improved mood: *'I'm more positive.'*

Improved health: *'I'm using my inhaler less.'*

The groups were also asked about whether or not their families had benefited from their attendance at the class. Comments mainly concerned the fact that they had become more conscious of what their children were eating this had made them change their children's diets. Another parent had found that doing aerobics had had a positive effect on her relationship:

'I'm really happy when my husband comes home on a Tuesday, he thinks I should do aerobics every day!'

Another found that it had helped with her parenting: *'I'm less ratty with the children.'*

The parents liked the aerobics class run by Sure Start, because it is a place where they feel comfortable and accepted for who they are whatever shape and size does not matter. One parent commented: *'normal people come here'*. They did not feel this was so with aerobic classes run by Health or Fitness Centres.

'You're amongst real people. Like commercial aerobics classes they're all like hourglass shape, really fit anyway. You wonder why they're there.'

There was lots of praise for the fitness instructor who they felt was always positive and encouraging:

'...she doesn't make you feel bad about what you eat, she gets you thinking about what you eat and when you eat. She's always there if you want to talk.'

'there's no pressure to lose weight, it's about how you feel, if you lose weight, great.'

Interview with the Aerobics Instructor

The aerobics instructor was asked about how she perceived her role. She perceives it as a facilitator rather than as an instructor or teacher. She does not feel her role is merely to instruct the class in healthy exercises but takes an holistic approach to health promotion. *'I'm there to motivate people, to give them guidelines and ..to keep it relaxed and informal.'*

Her philosophy is, that by positively encouraging good eating habits/healthy lifestyles, changes will occur which will be of benefit to the family as a whole. She believes that promoting dieting engenders feelings of shame and can lead to problems with eating disorders. At the Sure Start Aerobics: *'if parents over-indulge they are invited to share their experience with the rest of the group so it can be 'laughed off'*. The instructor and parents are there to work in partnership, playing a supportive role to one another:

'I want people to come along and share their experiences...I've had problems with my weight and my weight goes up and down just as everybody else's so I can share and get out of it the same as everyone else.'

The Aerobic Instructor was asked about any differences between the classes she runs at leisure centres and the Sure Start class. She distinguished between two in terms of motivation: those attending commercial classes are self-motivated. At the Sure Start group they are initially motivated by the aerobics instructor's enthusiasm rather than by their own drive self-improvement. There is also a difference in the atmosphere:

'At the leisure centre you have a more hard core element of participants they want to be pushed a lot harder, so I push them harder and it's all very formal whereas here it more informal, more fun and it's a more relaxed environment.'

This softly, softly approach at the Sure Start aerobics class has paid off.

'Everybody's motivated now, not just by me, but by themselves and people want to be. You can see that, and from my point of view it's great and I think everyone has improved. ...what I'm teaching here is now up to what I'm teaching at the leisure centre and that's brilliant. There been a massive improvement.'

Looking to the future, the aerobics instructor would like to see greater improvement to people's diets and a little more weight loss. The group has been successful both for her and the people involved with the classes being well attended. If attendance increases to a greater extent she would like to start a second group.

Thinking about increasing membership, most of the publicity is through word-of-mouth. This confirms the findings from the user survey. In order to engage more Sure Start members, the Aerobics Instructor would like to reduce the rate to £1.00 per session but she recognises that the motivation to attend must come from the parents: *'You've got to be at the stage you want to make a change or you enjoy exercises, whatever you do you've got to enjoy it.'*

The instructor was asked about how she felt about having a man in the group. She was very pleased that there was a man attending but she recognised that he was a bit of an exception as many men are at work during the day. She also feels that men tend to have a problem with co-ordination which makes aerobics more difficult. The instructor suggested that men might be more attracted to low impact activity such as walking, running or circuit training:

'maybe we could come up with something that uses minimal amount of equipment, like skipping ropes, just a couple of benches to do step offs...you could keep the cost down and it would be quite a good service for men.'

Finally, the instructor was asked about the gains parents had made by coming to the aerobics class. The most noticeable gain was in their increased confidence and in their fitness level:

'They speak up in the group, they put their ideas forward, laugh and joke. There's been a massive change since we started, there's more group support really'

Interview with the Community Nursery Nurse

The interview with the Community Nursery Nurse was mainly to ascertain her thoughts behind setting up the group and about any problems/setback she had incurred. This has provided much of the background information used in the Introduction section.

Asked about her perception of her role, she sees it very much as a universal activity which is accessible to all:

'It's not just about meeting mums... when we first started we had Portuguese mums, not that they've particularly stayed, but I think it breaks all barriers like for instance, we've got a dad who comes as well, everyone is welcome which is nice – you don't need language, you just come and do the exercises.'

The Community Nursery Nurse is delighted with the achievements of the group:

'...by listening to what they (the parents) are saying, I gather that their whole life is changing through it. I mean, they're doing a lot more for themselves and to see one mum lose weight and develop is wonderful.'

Asked about her perception of the Instructor she responded:

'(she) is wonderful. She is friendly provides a nice smiling, welcoming atmosphere. She remembers all your names, she knows details about you and she's genuinely concerned.'

Interview with the Crèche Workers

The interview with the three of the crèche workers centred around two problem areas, their personal safety and the problems associated with holding the crèche in the same hall as the aerobics class.

The staff voiced their concerns about the fact that space in the hall is limited and they have to move tables around to form a barrier between the crèche and the aerobics. Some of these concerns were about the physical effort of moving them: *'As crèche workers I don't think we should be lugging them out...'*

Other concerns were about the potential danger these tables posed as they are turned on their sides with the legs facing towards the parents.

'I'm always worried that parents while doing exercise are going to fall back and hurt themselves on the legs. I'm surprise no-one has hurt themselves. It's totally a hazard and it's not suitable.'

There were mixed responses to whether or not it is an advantage to holding the crèche in the same hall.

The Crèche Workers had mixed views: For some children, being in close proximity to their mother has enabled them to settle quickly into the crèche. For other children, being able to see their mother but being unable to make physical contact has caused upset. For mothers' of newborn children, however, it is quite an advantage:

'Some parents are coming in just after having the baby so it's probably the first time they've left their children so it's quite nice they can see them throughout the session and have their baby looked after.'

The Aerobic Instructor also has mixed views.

'The crèche's worked well. It's just the noise really. I think the negative thing is the children get quite upset sometimes and the mum's you can see, are worried or maybe not getting a break or time on their own. But it's positive that the children can see that the parents are doing some exercise and that's good.'

Some of the parents, however, do not necessarily like having the crèche in the same place as the aerobics class.

The crèche should not be at the back of the hall – it's too noisy and we need the space.'

'Noise from the children makes it difficult to hear sometimes.'

Conclusion

The conclusion from this evaluation is that this healthy living initiative is working very well and that the aims and objectives in setting up the group are being met. The parents report that they have changed both their own and their family's eating habits and have taken up exercise. They all report that they enjoy the class and are very happy with the way it is, except perhaps for the problem of noise from the crèche. All report feeling healthier, more energetic and fitter. They also relate that their families have benefited from their improved moved.

There are some issues of concern regarding the crèche i.e. health and safety issues which need to be urgently resolved. There is also a slight concern regarding the attendance of Sure Start members which seems to have dwindled a little, and lack of inclusion of 'hard to reach families' i.e. minority groups.

The whole team appears to be working well together with great enthusiasm and those who are attending the class feel that they have gained much, in terms of social contact, healthier life-styles and personal development

