



Case study

Freax

Developing urban mountain biking
into an adventurous activity

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Background

As part of the DCSF's support for the Learning Outside the Classroom manifesto, each sector has been allocated some funding for sector-specific projects. Under the adventurous activities sector, Freax (an adventure activity business run by the Birmingham-based charity free@last) has been chosen to deliver a pilot project with young people currently at school. Working in the inner city of Birmingham gave limited options for progressive adventurous activity learning that was also affordable for all the participants to continue after this project. We considered the accessibility of activities and felt that mountain biking was the one activity where the majority of young people have already had experience and have access to equipment. This formed the starting point for the project: the aim was to enable young people to learn the necessary skills and awareness for turning urban street mountain biking into an adventurous activity.

Approach

Teachers in a local secondary school chose a group of young people whom they believed would benefit most from working together, building confidence and self-esteem and experiencing life outside the inner-city concrete jungle that they live in. The local high school is in Birmingham's inner-city community of Nechells. We hoped to encourage the majority of participants from black and minority ethnic backgrounds with at least 60% of these being girls, as these are the under-represented groups in progressive outdoor activities and only a small percentage of this group explore the great outdoors, let alone have the opportunity to compete against professionals in extreme sports. The barriers to learning for these young people include stress, pressure, negative relationships with peers, teachers and family, fear of failure, low expectations, lack of hope, lack of progressive opportunities and inadequate resources, so we needed a laid-back informal approach to enable the young people to work together and support each other, whilst providing all the equipment necessary (and showing them that you can take part without spending thousands of pounds). We began by taking our mountain bikes and bike course into the school and setting it up in the playground. The course started to develop their skills in understanding how a bike works, riding skills, techniques and safety. Once they had a grasp of these key skills we took them to a large suburban park to progress further using fire tracks, short hills and wooded areas. The final learning curve was for them to discover the adrenaline rush and excitement of single-track riding on a purpose-built course at Cannock Chase, Staffordshire.

Outcome

As this 'informal' learning was not based on academic knowledge but on practical application the transferable life skills and knowledge gained in this course included a high level of communication (listening to, understanding and applying instructions – quickly), coordination, confidence building, care and support for other people in the team, fitness and diet, their own and other people's safety, etc. These skills can easily be transferred into the classroom setting, enabling teaching and learning to be greatly improved.

The progression from the playground sessions to fire tracks to single track enabled the young people to learn the basic necessary skills and build their confidence in a safe environment before exploring

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the adventurous activity. There were many lessons learned, the most expected being that when they started, all the young people found that going up hills was a problem – which highlighted the need for increased fitness and stamina. Although they all enjoyed the thrills of downhill riding they all commented on their need to stay in control of their bikes (one boy even commented on the need for tactics when attacking the single tracks). At one point during the final day we encountered two young people riding without helmets, and comments were made as to how 'stupid' they were, followed by a discussion about the damage a tree can do compared to a bus or a lorry when street riding, and the necessity to wear helmets all the time.

The skills that we taught in the playground enabled the young people to apply these on the single track. For example, in the playground we used a limbo and taught them the correct position for riding under low objects. On the single track they used this same position for riding under trees and down hills and it was quicker and easier for us to describe riding 'limbo' rather than the correct seating position. The playground sessions also helped them to know how to set up their bikes and check brakes etc, enabling more complicated instructions to be given on the track side rather than explaining everything again.

The young people listened well and obeyed all instructions quickly, which meant that we had no injuries, accidents or breakages. We were very pleased to see the progression both in terms of theoretical understanding and practical application. At the start of the course all of the young people showed very limited knowledge and understanding of mountain biking as an extreme sport, yet through some very simple short-term coaching they have been able to increase their skills, knowledge and ability to take a bike off-road confidently on their own. The lessons they have learned will stay with them and help them to keep control of their bikes and ride safely whilst back at home – and hopefully this style of teaching and learning will improve their school life.

Finally, the young people were exposed to the wonders of life outside the inner city and this awe-inspiring new world released excitement and feelings that provided elements of hope (some believed that they have the potential to compete in races), purpose and excitement to their lives. Some great memories have been created.

I have absolutely no doubt that this simple but effective programme can be rolled out and implemented in all schools and will benefit thousands of young people across the country.

Thank you for the opportunity.



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