



Independent Evaluation of *Little Fitness* Programme

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Foreword

Social Enterprises are businesses for social good that seek to transform lives and create a more inclusive and sustainable society. This independent evaluation of *Little Fitness* social enterprise confirms the positive impact the programme is having by providing fun, accessible and inclusive educational fitness programmes to children experiencing homelessness and living in marginalised communities.

The experience of recent years has demonstrated the importance of wellbeing for all cohorts in society, but also has highlighted that some groups require proactive support given their specific circumstances.

Physical activity is indispensable to children's development. It is not only essential for their physical and mental health, it allows children to enhance their social skills and emotional intelligence during the most formative periods of their lives. *Little Fitness* identified this important need and opportunity, and has developed an innovative programme to address it. This is why social enterprises are so important, because they respond to societies needs and innovative to find solutions.

I commend Dr Sarah Sheridan for carrying out such thorough and insightful research which shows that Little Fitness is having a significant impact on the participating children, their families and communities. It is encouraging to see that children were reported to be more energetic, more confident and sleeping better, with an increased understanding of their health, whilst parents had an opportunity to meet in a non-judgmental and inclusive environment.

Ireland's social enterprise sector is growing in scale and impact and it will play an increasingly important part of Ireland's journey towards a more sustainable and inclusive economy and society. I want to congratulate Sinead Ryan and all involved in Little Fitness and wish them continued success as they work for a more inclusive society where the wellbeing of all is our shared priority.

Dr Andrew Forde,

Head of Rural Strategy & Social Enterprise,

Department of Rural and Community Development

December 2022

1. Introduction

In November 2022, the Department of Housing reported that there were 3,494 children living in homeless emergency accommodation across Ireland, representing an increase of 37 percent in just 12 months. Almost three quarters of these children (n=2,549) were accommodated in emergency accommodation in the Dublin region¹. Living in emergency accommodation typically entails families sharing small, single-room accommodation with little or no privacy and limited, if any, space for children to mix and play. This means that children in this accommodation are denied the opportunities to grow, socialise and develop in a way that other children take for granted.

Physical activity is crucial to children's development and well-being and while many children have access to various sporting and physical activity programmes within their community, this is not the case for all children, especially many children experiencing the trauma and disruption of homelessness. The *Little Fitness* programme was developed to address this urgent need and to provide children in emergency accommodation the same opportunities for physical activity and fitness as their more advantaged peers. Despite the need for programmes like *Little Fitness* to support the growing number of children experiencing homelessness, *Little Fitness* is the only organisation providing this vital service to children in the Dublin Region.

In June 2022, *Little Fitness* commissioned researcher Dr Sarah Sheridan to carry out an independent, evaluation of the programme. The objectives of this evaluation was to achieve the following key objectives:

- to understand whether the programme is **effective in achieving its goals**;
- to determine the **impact** of the programme on a **child's fitness, knowledge and well-being**;
- to determine the **impact** of the programme on the **parents and families**;
- to capture any **improvements** that could be made to the programme in the future.

2. Little Fitness – Overview

Little Fitness is a social enterprise that is an inclusive, educational fitness programme that seeks to support children who are living in emergency accommodation, family hubs, or where children may come up against barriers in the community.

Children participate in an 8-week programme and each weekly session lasts one hour. During this time, children are taught and supported in a range of fundamental skills and physical activities such as skipping, running, balance, and more. These activities are taught in a way that is highly-engaging and enjoyable for children, as well as being inclusive across age, gender, disability and cultural backgrounds. At the end of each session, following the physical exertion activities, children engage in wind down and relaxation activities including stretching, crafts and colouring. Children are presented with a certification of completion and 'goodie bag' at the end of their 8-week course.

¹ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage Monthly Homelessness Report November 2022

Through an encouraging and non-competitive approach, the *Little Fitness* programme aims to instil self-belief, confidence, resilience and sense of belonging among the participating children. This is seen to be particularly important given the adversities a child might be experiencing in their daily life including housing transience, family stress, and possible ruptures to schooling, local networks and communities. Moreover, through physical activity, stretching and educational activities, this programme seeks to alleviate some of the harm caused by daily life in homeless settings for children and, it is hoped, yield long-term health benefits for children and their families.

Finally, *Little Fitness* provides a space for parents to enjoy a cup of tea, a ‘child-free’ chat, and a chance to relax and make friends in a safe and supportive environment, secure in the knowledge that their children are being well looked after. This allows families an opportunity to be connected to a group on a weekly basis and create change and support through participation.

Little Fitness is made possible by strong collaborations with many organisations supporting families through homelessness. It operates in partnership with Crosscare Family Hub, Young Ballymun, Dublin City South Partnership, Dublin North Partnership, and community creches to deliver fitness and educational programmes directly to children living in emergency accommodation. Its work is supported by Social Entrepreneurs Ireland and Dublin City Council and was a winner of the Dublin City Social Enterprise Awards in September 2022.

Many of the parents whose children participate in *Little Fitness* also engage in Young Ballymun as part of the Area Based Childhood (ABC) programme. To date the *Little Fitness* programme has been delivered on a weekly basis during the school term in a community centre in Ballymun in collaboration with Young Ballymun and Dublin South City Partnership. The programme was also delivered in two family hubs in Dublin 12, while a five-week programme was delivered in collaboration with Aspire, the Autism Spectrum Association of Ireland. In quarter four of 2022, *Little Fitness* also provided three further programmes for Young Ballymun.

3. Methodology

3.1 Questionnaire data collection

Little Fitness routinely administers brief survey questionnaires to parents of participating children to better understand the needs and impact of the programme among the children. This dataset was analysed to inform the findings of this evaluation. In June 2022, survey questionnaires were administered to the parents of children who participated in two *Little Fitness* programmes in partnership with Young Ballymun. These paper self-completion survey questionnaires were distributed to parents on the first and last day of two programmes that took place during the evaluation period.

In total, 18 questionnaires were completed by parents – 10 from the first programme and 8 from the second. These questionnaires recorded basic demographic information, information on the children’s usual physical activity levels and knowledge, as well as information about their usual behaviour and relationship with their parent or guardian.

3.2 Qualitative interview methodology

The qualitative component of the evaluation consisted of a combination of semi-structured interviews and a focus group with parents whose children attended *Little Fitness*. Six parents participated in the focus group and there were five one-to-one interviews completed – totalling 11 research participants.

Of the 11 parents interviewed, they had a total of 15 children who had attended *Little Fitness*. The ages of the children ranged from 4 to 13 years. A majority (n=9) of the research participants were mothers while 2 were fathers.

The focus group and interviews were transcribed and a systematic thematic analysis was carried out. This yielded a series of themes and sub-themes which are presented in this report (Section 5). Direct quotations are drawn upon throughout to offer additional insight into the experiences and views of parents. In the presentation of the findings, all identifiable information has been removed (though for the purpose of context, it is indicated whether the quotation is derived from either focus group or interview).

The interviews took place in July 2022, several weeks after *Little Fitness* course concluded. This offered the parents time to reflect on the programme, as well as capturing whether there were any medium-term impacts, including children's fitness and energy levels. For ethical reasons, it was decided not to interview children themselves due to their young age but this was not seen to limit the evaluation as parents offered rich insights into the programme.

All data protection and research ethics protocols were adhered to in carrying out this evaluation. Parents were fully informed of the purpose of the research and voluntarily consented to participating in the study (see Appendices 1 and 2). All data were treated confidentially and no identifiable details were included in either the transcripts, analysis or write-up of the study.

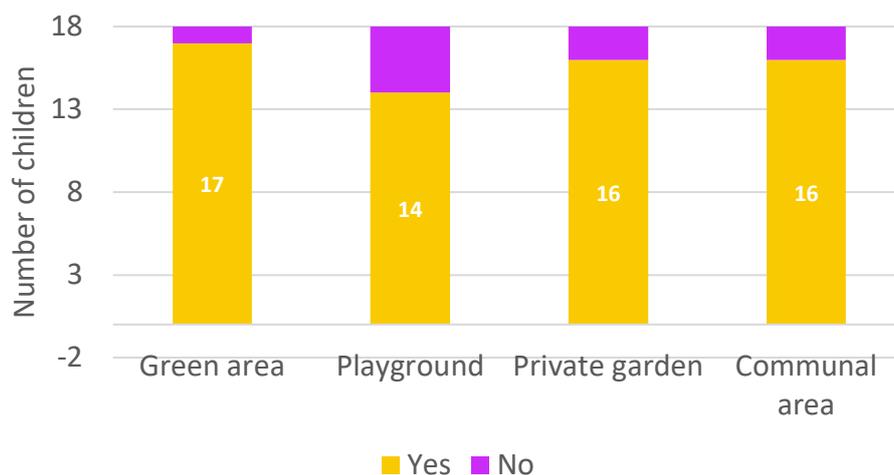
4. Survey questionnaire findings

Of the 18 children who took part in the two programmes during the evaluation period, there were 9 girls and 9 boys. All the children were living in emergency accommodation when they initially enrolled in the programme. The children's ages ranged from 4 to 13 years of age and the average age was 8 years old.

In terms of the children's typical physical activity before they began the programme, 11 of the 18 participants took part in organised activities such as sports club, scouts, or athletics. Half of the children were physically active (for example, running, cycling, swimming) almost every day for at least 20 minutes. However, five of the children were only active for more than 20 minutes on two days per week. In terms of more vigorous exercise, that is physical activity for 60 minutes or more per day, girls were more active than boys averaging four days per week compared to only two boys.

As shown in Figure 1 below, a large majority of the 18 children had access to a green area, playground, private garden, or communal area near to where they lived. However, more than one-third (7/18) reported that it was not safe to play outside in their local area and a similar number of parents reported that the parks, playgrounds and play spaces accessible to them in their local area were also not safe.

Figure 1 Number reporting access to spaces for play

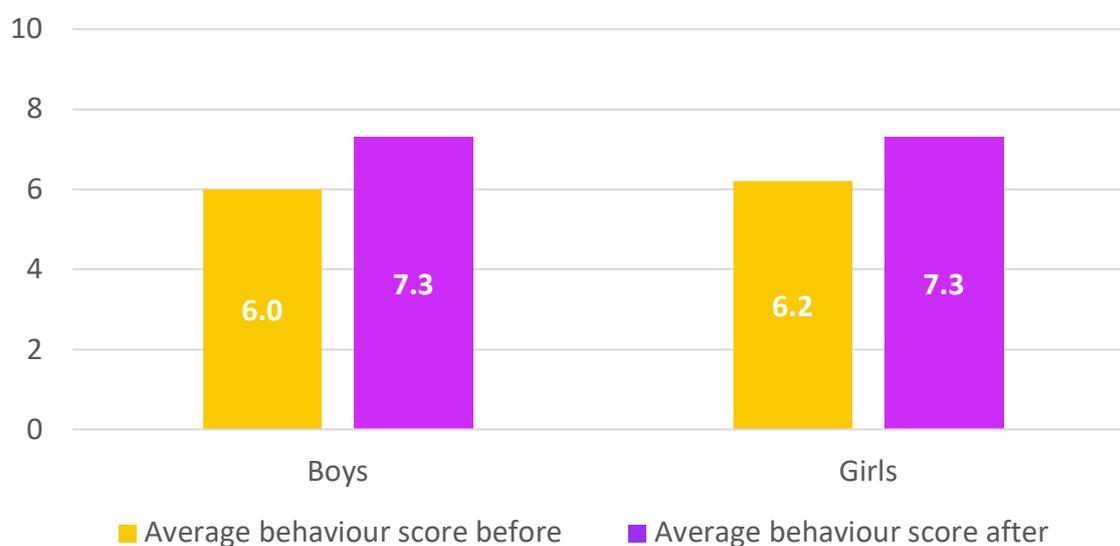


The questionnaire included a series of statements that could be used to describe the child's usual behaviours. The five behaviours included were: restless, overactive, cannot stay still for long; rather solitary, tends to play alone; often unhappy, down-hearted or tearful; nervous or clingy in new situations, easily loses confidence; sees tasks through to the end, good attention span. For each behaviour, the parent reported whether it was not true, somewhat true, or certainly true of their child.

For the first four statements a score of two was given when the behaviour was not true of the child, a score of one when somewhat true and a score of zero if certainly true. The final positive behaviour was reverse coded. These scores were then summed with higher scores indicating more positive behaviours. Before attending the programme, the average score was 6.1 from a maximum of ten. This had increased slightly to 7.3 at the end of the programme.

Figure 2 (overleaf) shows the average scores for boys and girls before and after they participated in the programme.

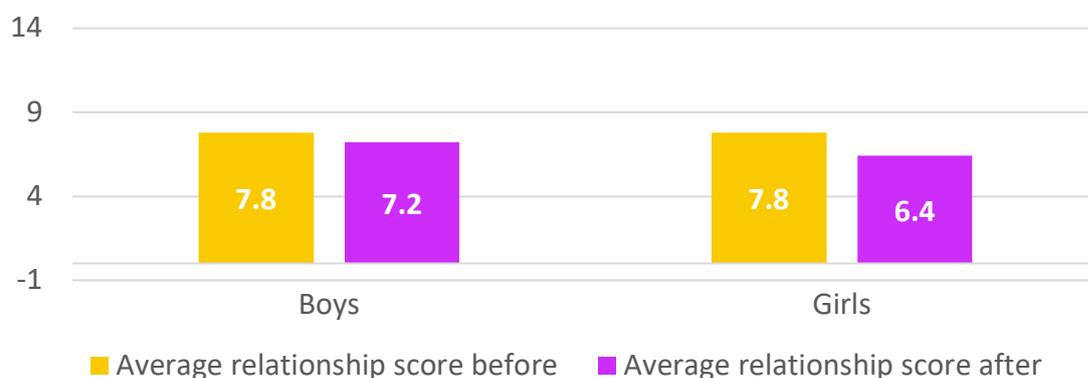
Figure 2 Average behaviour scores of boys and girls before and after participation in Little Fitness



The questionnaire also included five statements about the parents’ relationship with their child. The statements were: my child does not want to accept help when he/she needs it; when I praise my child, he/she beams with pride; my child reacts strongly to separation from me; my child is overly dependent on me; my child and I always seem to be struggling with each other. For each statement the parent reported the degree to which each statement applied to their relationship (does not apply, not really, not sure, applies somewhat, definitely applies). Scores ranged from zero to 20 with higher reflecting a less positive relationship with their parent.

There was a slight improvement in the quality of relationships between the parent and their children, with the average relationship score decreasing from 7.8 before the programme to 6.8 afterwards. Figure 3 shows the average relationship scores of boys and girls before and after participating in *Little Fitness* and this shows that there was a greater improvement in relationship quality with girls.

Figure 3 Average relationship quality scores of boys and girls before and after participation in Little Fitness



5. Qualitative Data Findings: Focus Group and Interviews

This section describes the impact *Little Fitness* had on children, as experienced and described by their parents. Consistent positive feedback was given by parents on the *Little Fitness* programme itself and the benefits of the programme evidently extended beyond the one hour of contact time per week. Parents described positive changes in their children such as an increase in their children's energy levels and improved sleep, enhanced knowledge of healthy eating and the benefits of fitness, as well as improved confidence and social skills.

The programme also had a very positive impact on the parents themselves, due to the "welcoming atmosphere" which allowed for a relaxed and informal space for parents to interact. There were also an indirect benefit *Little Fitness* on parenting through improved mood among children and initiating healthy habits and routines.

5.1 Impact on Child: Increase in Energy, Better Sleeping Patterns

Several of the parents noted that their children immediate benefits from the programme. For example, parents described how children were often "buzzing" with increased energy and vitality immediately after attending the programme.

"I noticed that ... the first day, they were dragging their feet but by the end they were full of energy and raring to go." – Parent, Interview

"Normally, it'd be home from school and he'd go straight up into his room. Now [after *Little Fitness*], he'd be home from school and maybe jump around on the trampoline with the girls [sisters]." – Parent, Focus Group.

Four parents reported reduced 'screen time' (i.e. time on phones, tablets, video games, etc.) on days of *Little Fitness*.

"It's really hard for my daughter to turn the 'Nintendo Switch' off but the days of this [*Little Fitness*], she will put it down herself and go to sleep." – Parent, Interview

Several parents noted that their children slept better on the nights of *Little Fitness*:

"My eldest daughter has trouble sleeping, but I noticed that the nights of *Little Fitness*, she went to bed earlier and slept well. It has a good impact from that point of view." – Parent, Interview

"They sleep better that night [of *Little Fitness*]. They conk out early!" – Parent, Focus Group

"They are in bed earlier after *Little Fitness*." – Parent, Focus Group

Other parents reported that *Little Fitness* had a direct and immediate impact on the child's interest in fitness and physical activity, for example, children expressing a desire to engage in further activities or to return to sports or other activities that they had given up previously.

“When it finished [*Little Fitness* Course], he wanted to do exercises and now we do a Dublin Park Run for kids, that's a 2km run. That's something that he's now doing. He's trying to fill the void [since *Little Fitness* course ended].” – *Little Fitness*, Interview.

5.2 Impact on Child: Increased Knowledge of Health and Body

The educational impact of *Little Fitness* featured strongly across all parents' accounts of the programme. In both the focus group and one-to-one interviews, parents reported that their children shared with their family newly-acquired knowledge that they had gained in the programme – for example, discussing the human body, muscles, general physical fitness, as well as healthy-eating.

“He loved it from start to finish. He really, really took to it and couldn't wait to tell us about what muscle he learned and the healthy foods ... He wanted to grow muscles.” – Parent, Interview

“He was talking about stretching, he was showing us push ups, then he was showing me a 'burpee' [type of exercise] but he used a different name...” – Parent, Interview.

There was also evidence of children seeking to implement healthier eating due to knowledge gained in the programme.

“He asks 'Is this healthy Mummy?' He tells me chicken has protein and he helps me make it now.” – Parent, Interview

“Last week in Aldi, he said 'no' to flavoured water and wanted to get normal water. It's him changing our choices and him coming aware. We were in homeless accommodation before and seeing the changes in him, this will hugely benefit him through life. It's not me forcing him to eat tomatoes or Mammy says I have to do this – it's him coming to me asking for Tommy Tomatoes for dinner and he said we need protein for my muscles, so we can get chicken. And he's four years old!” – Parent, Interview

Some children shared their learnings from *Little Fitness* in the home with other family members:

“They say you do this, and this is healthy for you – they share what they learned.” – Parent, Focus Group

“When he gets home, he tells his sister ... ” – Parent, Interview

The focus group and interview data strongly demonstrated the educational and learning dimension in *Little Fitness* was also 'fun' for children. For example, parents described how the children would talk about 'Tommy Tomato' and 'Bertie Banana' and other learning activities.

"The fun things – they made beanbags – my daughter loves that. It's a stress ball with rice. There's a song with it." – Parent, Focus Group

"She was doing banana muscles and different things and she brings it everywhere to show everyone. When she got home, she had to go out and show all her friends." – Parent, Focus Group

"He wanted Tommy Tomatoes for dinner." – Parent, Interview

These descriptions strongly suggest that the content of the programme was both well-pitched and engaging for participating children.

5.3 Impact on Child: Increase in Confidence and Social Skills

While some of the parents knew each other from the adult education programme, few of the children who enrolled in *Little Fitness* knew each other, and almost all attended different schools. Many parents reported an increased in children's confidence and social skills as a result of *Little Fitness* and has become, for some children, an important social outlet.

"My daughter doesn't have friends on our road so she likes the mixing in *Little Fitness*." – Parent, Focus Group

According to some parents, the programme was also beneficial for children in interacting with the opposite sex as most attended single-sex schools or if they had only engaged in separated sporting activities in the past.

The positive social and interactive space were seen to be rooted in the non-competitive and motivational approach underlying *Little Fitness* (which will be returned to in more detail in Section 5.5). The benefit of socialising for children was especially beneficial for children who have additional support needs or who have a level of social anxiety which may render team-based or competitive sports less suitable. Again, the approach adopted by the instructor in *Little Fitness* was regarded as particularly helpful in fostering positive group dynamics.

"The mixing is important. My son is not great with groups. Even in school, he would be taken out a lot by himself so he is not really ever in a group setting, so coming here he was very hesitant to enter a group space but she as letting him sit back at the window and he was joining in himself - and that's a big improvement." – Parent, Focus Group

"Sometimes in the multi-sports camps they're hard on them [the children] if they're not up to scratch and my daughter is not good with criticism and I thought Sinéad [Course Trainer] was brilliant with her and all the kids loved her. My daughter would have a very negative

viewpoint on exercise and Sinéad said to her, ‘Just give me one week and I promise I’ll change your mind’, and she did!” – Parent, Interview

Furthermore, one migrant parent reported how *Little Fitness* made her children feel more included in her local community and the programme has enhanced her social network: “It made the children feel among others.”

There was also evidence of increased socialising of children within their community and peer networks as a direct result of *Little Fitness*.

“I struggle to get them to go out at night, they don’t want to go out, they just want to sit in their room. But last week, when we got back [from *Little Fitness*], my son just got changed and ran out the door. They were playing on the road – he just said ‘I’m going out!’ - he was full of beans! And he’s gone for an hour and a half....” – Parent, Focus Group

“My daughter can socialise with two kids, three max, but when there’s more, she tends to not walk into a situation or even the playground, she wants me to come with her. But, she’s getting more confident now. The teachers in school are even noticing – she’s playing with more kids rather than sticking to the one friend...when she goes to *Little Fitness* she doesn’t ask ‘Mam will you walk me in?’, she just walks straight in.” – Parent, Focus Group

In the case of this child quoted above, this positive change has also been noted by a teacher.

At the end of each course, the *Little Fitness* trainer awards each child a certificate of completion of the programme in front of the parents. According to the parents, this offered the children a sense of achievement and the positive impact, as noted by several parents.

“I think it was a good idea that they got certificates. Then, they understood that they achieved something. They also got a ‘goodie’ bag. Their little faces lit up when they got it.” – Parent, Interview.

5.4 Benefits of *Little Fitness* for Parents

While children are attending the *Little Fitness* programme, parents are welcome to remain on site in an adjacent room. Most typically stayed to interact with other parents; while some took the opportunity to enjoy a walk nearby.

“I stayed with the other parents for most of the classes. Sometimes I took the hour to get a walk in myself. It helped me clear my own head. It was blissful.” – Parent, Interview

Staying on site with other parents provided an opportunity to socialise with one another, share tips and challenges related to their children, parenting or schooling, etc. For some parents, this provided the only window for socialising during the week, and was described by one parent as a “really important” moment in their week.

“It was so nice for parents. I had my ‘me’ time - with my friends. It was very important. When you’re looking after a child, everything revolves around the child, you have to be there always when you take the child to a party, but [in *Little Fitness*] I was communicating with other parents, challenges, obstacles – we learned from each other.... I knew on Wednesdays, I would have a cup of coffee with my friends. It was really important. We shared other things that I wouldn’t have known if I wasn’t there. Sometimes, we would talk about swimming classes – oh, which one, could you connect me? It was really good.” – Parent, Interview

For parents with children who had additional support needs or behavioural issues, sharing challenges with parents was particularly helpful.

“I know that my daughter wasn’t the only one in the class with special needs and there was an inclusive feeling of the whole thing. The parents got along quite well. We would sit down and have a cup of tea. I think some of the Mams with younger children were asking me a lot of questions because I’ve been on my own with four kids and they were looking for advice from me as a single parent for so long. At the same time, I was given information.” – Parent, Interview

As already outlined, many of the parents already knew each other from the Healthy Families course. *Little Fitness* therefore provided continuity which enhanced rapport and camaraderie.

“There’s many courses that we could go to each other but there was never any follow on or something for the kids. So it’s kind of nice ‘cos we are all with each other in the morning and then we have this in the afternoon.” – Parent, Focus Group.

As already alluded to, this camaraderie was particularly helpful for migrant parents (i.e. parents who were not originally born in Ireland) as the course, and opportunity to socialise with others, helped them and their children integrate into the local community.

“As a parent, I met some parents as well and it gave me a lot more knowledge about Ireland....It give us more knowledge about the society, about diversity, about food...it made the children feel among one.” – Parent, Interview

One parent in the focus group suggested that some crafts or adult-colouring which could be a pleasant way to spend the hour, whilst “also chatting to one another”.

The indirect benefits of *Little Fitness* on daily life for parents also featured strongly in their accounts. Better sleep among participating children, less screen time, increased social activity and enhanced confidence not only helped children but also parents.

“They’re burning more energy throughout the day, whereas if they’re not doing anything they have more energy to do their tablets and their SwitchesThere’s less arguments then.” – Parent, Interview

“I thought it [the course] was brilliant! I had three smiling faces coming out every week...” – Parent, Interview

“It’s [*Little Fitness*] been so important to me and my family. Sometimes it’s just me and my son, me and my son, and this [*Little Fitness*] is always something he looks forward to. It’s not just about playing around but intentioned exercises - and now we don’t sit down as much...” – Parent, Interview.

As already referenced in a previous sub-section, the healthy habits learned by the children in the class often extended into the home. One parent described how she also learned about how to reduce sugar and lower cholesterol through the course content and conversations with other parents: “It teached(sic) me how to reduce sugar...”

Importantly, many parents commended *Little Fitness* as an inexpensive activity for them as parents, as it did not require any financial investment in equipment, costs for participation in leagues, or other costs associated with other group-based activities.

“It’s simple equipment used so the likes of Irish Dancing or football, it’s a whole kit for 100-and-something euros, then they need the gloves, then they need the boots - it’s expensive! Especially with me and three of them [children]. If I took [son] to football and the girls to dancing, it would cost a fortune. Whereas this, the three of them can all come, it’s the same group, not staggered times like other things and it’s little things like that that all blend in. And it makes it much easier for the parents and then you don’t have to go out and buy all the stuff like the skipping rope, or the hula-hoop...” – Parent, Focus Group

The above quote also captures the practical benefits of children of different ages attending the same course and at the same time. The nature of the *Little Fitness* programme meant that it was less of a practical burden for parents as they did not have to drop and collect children at staggered times.

“I find it great ... by the time you are home you are kind of 5pm in the evening so it fills the gap in the day when you are not trying to entertain them. It’s nice to have a couple of things on during the week to break the cycle, and to do something different.” – Parent, Interview.

Furthermore, the parents generally had positive feedback on the practical side of *Little Fitness* in terms of timing of the course, parking facilities and accessibility, etc.

All the parents confirmed that they would enrol again in the future and hope to see the course extended into the next schooling year. Some parents would enrol their children twice a week, or 90 minute classes, if it were possible, but others were content with once per week. While several parents would have liked the course to have been available during the summer months (and a parent suggested the programme could work in the outdoors) and all had expressed their children’s disappointment that the course had come to an end.

“I wish they could extend it [*Little Fitness*] outside of the course [adult parenting course] so that the kids could keep on coming every week. That would have been really good for them.”
– Parent, Interview.

During the focus group discussion, several parents stated that they would like to see *Little Fitness* ‘mainstreamed’ across schools as they considered it to be so impactful to their children: “I’d say it would be huge.”

5.5 Principles of Inclusivity and Non-Competitive Participation

Across the qualitative data, the parents framed the success of the *Little Fitness* programme due to two key factors: 1) the teaching style and strategies for engagement used by the trainer (Sinéad Ryan); and 2) the principle of non-competitive participation of the programme. Considering the importance parents placed on these characteristics of the programme, it is treated separately in this sub-section.

Firstly, as already highlighted, the competencies of the trainer to engage with children was noted by all parents. The trainer was described as making all children feel welcome and included, regardless of gender, age, nationality, and level of fitness. Importantly, it was a space that also accommodated neurological diversity.

“Sinéad let him come in at his own pace.” – Parent, Interview

“He loved her [trainer]. I’ll tell you how I know he loved her: he doesn’t remember names. But from day one, it was Sinéad this and Sinéad that. I knew then, he seriously likes this class cos he remember her name. Normally it’s the lady, the lady, even if he’s known someone for months.” – Parent, Interview

“Sinéad was a very good listener. She was accommodating.” – Parent, Interview

“My daughter seemed to really connect with Sinéad. She was patient. She tailored her approach towards the kids. She made everything into a game, a challenge. My son said that he was exercising without realising. It wasn’t just constant exercises, there was information and little games. An all-rounded approach.” – Parent, Interview.

This inclusive approach was particularly appreciated by parents of children who had developmental delays, disabilities or those who may require additional supports .

“I was nervous leaving him [son], usually I need to be there to explain this to him and I was anxious but Sinéad said ‘It’s ok, you can go’. And I was wondering how it was going to be and I was expecting to be called - maybe he’d break something, but I understand that he has to be independent – and to my surprise, he followed through every instruction. This means Sinéad was loud enough but I also believe she knew how to communicate with him. It wasn’t easy to leave my son with her at first but I realised the coach knew what she was doing, how to get to

the kids, how to engage, to participate, but at the same time to make it fun so it wouldn't be boring! And he didn't come to me for one hour!" – Parent, Interview

Some parents described how *Little Fitness* was enjoyed by children who ordinarily would not enjoy group-based activity or training.

"The kids seemed to be pumped for it! Except for my 13 year old who has special needs and she's not predisposed to exercise, but even she seemed to really like it!" – Parent, Interview

"My son has a delay in speech so he can't explain so much about it...Now when he knows he's going, he knows he's going for the exercises. ...it wasn't random play, it was proper exercises, and he was very happy. He was always looking forward to it. He knows the days of the week so today he'd be like, it's Wednesday – yes, yes, *Little Fitness!!!*" – Parent, Interview

Secondly, the parents described how the programme taught children the benefits of exercise and movement in a way which accessible, straightforward and non-competitive. This was a particularly prominent theme in the focus group discussion in which there was a consensus among the parents that *Little Fitness* provided children with a rare opportunity to engage in an enjoyable physical activity without any competitive element.

"It's just fitness and you can do it in your own way. Whereas football you kind of have to be good. Or dancing you kind of have to be good. There's pressure on them then. And it's another pressure on them. This is just throw a beanbag, jump, hop..." – Parent, Focus Group

"All the other sports are competing against each other and this is not like that - you just go in and you do what you can do." – Parent, Focus Group

"I brought my son over to the football and it was too competitive for him and there was too many rules. He doesn't take well to rules and being told to stand in a certain area - it just didn't work! But coming here, like he doesn't want to participate straight away but he does join in." – Parent, Focus Group

"Even if they say at the courses, we are here to have fun, it never really is. When I joined them in the Irish dancing they said it can just be for fun, but everything was about the competitions, and the feet had to be a certain way, you had to stand a certain way... There's less pressure on the kids. That's why my kids have taken to it." – Parent, Focus Group

The principles of non-competitiveness was particularly valued by parents of children who may face additional barriers for participation in sports. Moreover, completion of the programme can offer children with a sense of achievement regardless of externally-set markers or competitions.

"There's no expectations. So a lot of things my child has quit because there's pressure or if he doesn't perform, he's letting someone down, where this is just ...he has a great time and he is in great form when he leaves. – Parent, Focus Group

“Like in other sports then, say if he was running or something like that, it’s all about keeping up with the other children. They’re still competing against each other and then the kids are comparing themselves to others.” – *Little Fitness*, Focus Group

The simplicity in how the course is delivered is particularly valuable for parents who are living in emergency accommodation or in overcrowded settings in which a family may have limited space.

“It proves to the kids that you don’t need to go into this big open space, they’re in quite a small room there [doing *Little Fitness*] and there’s a good load of them [children]. And I think it shows them that you don’t have to have a big space. There’s a lot of people that live in hotels so the likes of this is perfect.” – Parent, Focus Group

6. Conclusion

Parents who are living in emergency accommodation are doing everything they can to help reduce the stress and anxiety for their children but given the immense challenges of daily life in emergency accommodation – and the negative impact that confined conditions have on a child’s growth and development – initiatives such as *Little Fitness* are urgently needed to mitigate the short and long-term harm.

This evaluation clearly demonstrates that the programme had a positive impact on both children and their parents. This was evidenced through both the quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire captured improvements in children’s behaviours and their relationships with their parents, while the interviews and focus group data provided rich insights into the range of benefits to the children and families who participated in the programme.

This evaluation finds that *Little Fitness* was highly effective in achieving its goals in teaching fitness classes to children through education, themes, skills and games. These positive outcomes were achieved through strength-based principles which sought to engage children at their own pace and preferred style of engagement. It is an accessible course and incurs no additional costs for parents.

Parents particularly appreciated the welcoming, non-competitive and encouraging approach of the *Little Fitness* trainer which they believed effectively engaged their children in exercise, healthy eating and the benefits of fitness. The programme offered a welcome reprieve during a highly stressful period for children and their families.

Parents described a range of specific positive impacts from the programme, as detailed in this report, including:

- increase in child’s energy;
- improved sleep;
- less ‘screen’ time or video games;
- increased knowledge of healthy habits;
- increased knowledge of the physical body;
- increase in confidence, including improved social skills;

- direct improvement in mood and well-being;
- indirect benefits on parenting.

Little Fitness also offered a social outlet for parents in which they were able to stay on site and interact with other parents; an opportunity for parents to share and learn from one another in an informal way. Further, *Little Fitness* provided a sense of continuity from the Healthy Families course and allowing their children to interact with one another for the first time and foster a sense of community.

Finally, all parents intended to continue with the programme and all agreed that they would ideally like the course length to be extended, including during school holidays. Given the large and growing number of children in emergency accommodation, there is a clear and pressing need for *Little Fitness* to continue to provide opportunities for children to enhance their physical activity, improve their health and well-being and alleviate the trauma of homelessness. Above all, *Little Fitness* provides an excellent model of how children in homelessness can be supported and encouraged in a safe and nurturing environment which evidently benefits them and their families.

Appendix 1 - Information Sheet for Parents

LITTLE FITNESS EVALUATION INFORMATION SHEET June 2022

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INTERVIEW?

Little Fitness is aimed at giving every child in Ireland access to an inclusive fun educational fitness programme. To make sure that we achieve this aim, we want to collect some information from parents on the impact of the programme. To do this, we would like to invite parents to participate in a one-to-one interview with an independent researcher.

WHAT DOES TAKING PART INVOLVE?

The interview will take between 15 and 25 minutes to complete and will focus on your personal views and experiences of the programme, with questions like:

- In your opinion, what was good about the programme?
- What could have been better?
- What is needed to improve the programme?

The interview will not include any direct questions about your background, housing, financial or personal situations. Rather, the interview will just focus on your views on *Little Fitness* and whether it was beneficial to your child and your family.

If you agree to take part, Sinead of *Little Fitness* will pass your number to the researcher who will call you to explain the process further. She can meet you in person, or interviews can take place over Zoom or telephone, whatever your preference may be. We would like to record the interview (the recording will be deleted) but if you do not want that, that's no problem.

You do not have to take part in this consultation process if you do not want to. Whether you do or not, will have absolutely no impact on your children's participation in *Little Fitness*.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE INFORMATION?

No individual will be identified and no information will be shared with anyone. Once the interview notes have been analysed, they will be destroyed carefully and no record of your individual responses will be kept.

The information you give will be used to help *Little Fitness* understand the impact of the programme. All identifiable information will be removed from the so that we can show how the programme works to funders and other agencies.

HOW DO I FIND OUT MORE?

If you have any questions you can phone or email Sinead Ryan, Mobile Tel: XXX XXXXXX; email: sinead@littlefitness.ie or the researcher directly at Sarah Sheridan, Mobile Tel: XXX XXXXXX or email: sarahsheridanresearch@gmail.com

Appendix 2 - Interview Schedule

LITTLE FITNESS EVALUATION

Interview Schedule with Parents

INTRO

Hello, my name is Sarah Sheridan and I am an Independent Researcher. *Little Fitness* ('LF') has invited me to carry out an independent evaluation of the programme - to see what works, what might not be working so well, and what might be needed. This helps *Little Fitness* understand the impact of their programme on both the child and on you as a parent.

Have you read the information sheet and are happy to take part in this study? Have you signed the consent form? Are you happy to proceed?

Would it be possible to record this interview? [establish consent to record]

I'll start with some questions about how you heard about the programme, and then move on to how your child got on in LF. Please say as little or as much as you like.

Introduction to LF:

- Where did you find out about the LF Programme?
- How many of your children are attending *Little Fitness*?
- Can you tell me your child's / children's age?
- What was your first impression of the programme? Did your impression change over time?

Child's Perspective:

- How does/did your child feel about LF?
- What sort of activities was your child doing?
- Was there a particular part of LF that your child liked best?
- Was there something in LF your child didn't like?
- How was their activity levels before LF? Did this change over the course of LF?
- Did you see any other changes in your child as a result of LF? (e.g. behaviour, well-being, etc.)

Parent's Perspective:

- Overall, what did you think of the LF Programme?
- What do you think worked best in the programme?
- Was there an aspect to the programme you did not like?

- Did you usually stay on site during the LF classes? If so, what was your experience of that?
- From a practical perspective, what do you think about *Little Fitness*?
 - o Is the project well-timed? (day/hour)
 - o Are the facilities good?
 - o Does it have good transport links or parking availability?
 - o Is it convenient to where you live right now?
- Would you enrol your children on LF again if it were offered?
- If there were more courses put on in LF, would you attend more? Can you explain your answer.
- Would you recommend LF to friends or family?

Final Feedback:

Now that we are at the end of the interview, do you have any other final feedback, opinions, or views on any aspect of the LF programme that would like to share?

Thank you for your time.

Sharing your experience and feedback will really help *Little Fitness* to understand and respond to the needs of children and parents in the future.