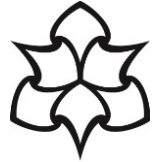


**Manchester Metropolitan  
University**



# City Play Evaluation Report

September 2018

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*for*



*Prepared by:*

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## Executive summary

City Play is a weekly programme of active movement sessions designed for children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). It is run by City in the Community (Manchester City Football Club's charitable arm) and is provided in over 180 preschools, nursery and reception classes each week. The physical activity development programme is linked to a set of fundamental movements and skills that underpin later team sports. The sessions offer a structured set of repeated movement routines made more varied, motivating and accessible by linking them to familiar and imaginative themes for children's play such as TV characters, pirates, animals or adventure walks.

This evaluation report presents insights gained from 14 visits to seven case study sites; two reception classes and five nursery settings in the Manchester area. It draws from two rounds of interviews and observations conducted in the first and second halves of the 2017/18 school year. This enabled researchers to compare levels of activity in the City Play sessions within, and across case study sites.

In addition to evaluating the core City Play programme, this report also considers the complementarity of two activities:

- Professional development resources for early years practitioners.
- City Lifestyles – a healthy eating programme for preschool age children together with their parents which took place in three nursery settings

### Key findings with regard to the City Play core programme

- City Play coaches were skilled in adapting the programme to the different circumstances of the settings while at the same time maintaining consistently challenging core content.
- City Play sessions were highly appreciated by early years practitioners as enjoyable, active elements of children's weekly experiences.
- The children participated enthusiastically and looked forward to the weekly sessions.
- Interviews with the children along with feedback from parents and early years practitioners, suggested the children enjoyed the playful imaginative nature of the games offered in City Play.
- The combination of imaginative play with physical activity routines helps children to sustain and add complexity to their physical movement.
- Observations of City Play sessions revealed that there were much higher levels of activity in the City Play sessions as compared to other parts of the preschool and Reception class routines.
- City Play sessions might be the most significant period of sustained raised physical activity some children's week in their setting.



- The City Play sessions were praised by the early years practitioners as they also supported the development of communication and social participation skills involved in them.
- The City Play sessions were accessible and engaging for most children for 20 minutes. The number of children able to sustain concentration for the whole 45-minute sessions increased over the year. A few children still found it difficult to sustain concentration for more than 20 minutes at the end of the year.
- There was limited evidence of transfer of raised levels of physical activity to routine outside play sessions.
- The coaches themselves were very popular and highly regarded in all the settings visited for their ability to model, elicit and manage physical activity with the children.
- The consistency of City Play has the potential to improve coordination through repeating similar patterns of movements on weekly basis facilitating fluency of movement.
- City Play supported noticeable improvements in turn-taking, social skills and listening for some children who might be more reluctant to participate in other activities.

#### **Key findings with regard to the value added by including professional development materials**

- The CPD booklets provided by City Play offer a helpful, attractive guide to the philosophy and planning of the City Play sessions that could help practitioners to plan City Play activities in their settings.
- The printed materials had been provided to settings but were not frequently referred to or drawn upon by the early years practitioners.
- Coaches and practitioners only had a limited amount of time to review the programme's content and children's development around the taught sessions.
- Two of the coaches organised additional briefing sessions away from their core City Play delivery times to discuss the CPD materials and programme delivery.
- Coaches and early years practitioners recommended that a structured session away from the setting would be a more effective forum for developing practitioner insights into the City Play programme.
- A level of self-confidence is required to lead/join in with the imaginative play and some practitioners seemed to be uncomfortable/embarrassed by this.
- City Play enabled early years practitioners to witness how to keep children moving at a higher level of physical activity for a sustained period in their specific contexts. Modelling to both practitioners and children, ways in which spaces in their settings can be utilised to offer children sustained physical play activities.



### **The complementarity of City Lifestyles alongside City Play sessions**

- Children aged 2 to 4 fully engaged in food preparation and cooking activities with their parents facilitated by the coaches' clear instructions, preparedness and the low height tables and hobs.
- Several parents reported that because they had participated in making the food and had seen what went into the food, this made a considerable difference to the children's willingness to eat new things.
- Some of the parents reported their children trying some foods for the first time.
- The information booklets provided to parents help to structure the sessions and are a reference for key facts and recipes. Parents did not report reading the books outside the sessions.
- Some parents reported taking recipes and food messages on at home, indicating the take-up of important messages around reducing certain fats and the amount of salt that they used.
- They also reported using new vegetable ingredients at home that their child had not eaten previously.
- The findings above suggest that City Lifestyles offers the potential to support healthier eating and portion sizes for participating families.
- Together City Play and City Lifestyles have the potential to reduce obesity by influencing children's daily routines through parents and children's eating habits, children's levels of activity in their educational settings and by encouraging their active play and participation in sports.



## Introduction

### Introducing City Play as a part of the Early Years Foundation Stage

The City Play sessions are primarily structured physical education activities located within the Early Years Foundation Stage framework. City Play coaches deliver 45-minute sessions on a weekly basis to approximately 180 Nursery and Reception classes. A strength of the coaches and the programme is that the sessions are adapted to the wide variety of needs of settings. The settings vary widely in terms of space for physically active play, practitioner engagement, as well as the numbers and ages of the children involved. In most cases, the City Play sessions run across the whole school year for each class, although some settings swap the participating children around on a termly basis. One of the settings reduced the number of children, with smaller groups accessing the sessions for a term rather than the whole year deliberately prioritising some of the children who had found engaging and communication with others challenging in the first cohort. They found that several of the children chose to respond and express themselves physically in the City Play sessions.

The City Play coaches follow a regular pattern of activities: introduction or recap of theme, themed warm-up, themed movement task, themed structured task, theme-based game and a cooling down activity. These activities focus on developing some fundamentals of movement for team sports including ways of moving, spatial awareness, balance, and ball skills as identified in Table 1 below.

**Table 1** Underpinning fundamentals from the City Play curriculum.

Fundamentals of control	Balance	Strength	strength	direction height	body awareness	timing
Fundamentals of movement	Running	Walking	hopping	skipping	jumping	leaping
Fundamentals of skills	Throwing	Catching	rolling	receiving with hands	kicking	receiving with feet
Fundamentals of communication	Listening	understanding the game	communication	turn taking	awareness of others	team working

The imaginative themes are such a prominent feature that initially the sessions do not appear to be related to football, but rather to general movement and balance. It is only after observing two or three sessions, that the regular pattern of activities and movements becomes clear and how these activities might inform a whole range of team sports. The sessions develop children's movements in a range of directions and confidence in addressing a ball, and the context of others moving too. The themes of the sessions such as dinosaurs, space, safari, bear hunt or superheroes, changes the mental landscape of the sessions and emphasis of the movements, but repeats core movements in a way that engages the children in focused joint activity with the adults.

Some early years practitioners advocate that young children learn most effectively through free autonomous exploration and that directed adult sessions should be for short periods because of children's limited capacity to concentrate. This is referred to by early educationalists as *developmentally appropriate practices* (Copple and Breddakamp 2009), but is a much-contested idea (MacNaughton, 2003). The key issues against which early year's professionals will judge the programme include how children are motivated and enabled to respond to the activities together



with how they are sustained in the activity and the extent to which they are allowed to opt out. Given these potential reservations, it was tremendously positive that in each City Play setting, we were greeted with an enthusiasm for the City Play sessions and, aligned to this, practitioners spoke of how the coaches were seen as a highlight of the week by staff and children.

Managers and receptionists all knew the coaches by name and found the coaches to be reliable, friendly and they were highly appreciated by staff, children and parents in conversation with researchers. None of the practitioners thought that the children were aware of the coaches belonging to a particular football team, only that they were special sports coaches. Practitioners did think that parents were aware that they were from Manchester City Football Club and the nurseries in particular noted that this was viewed very positively where the parents had a choice of days and would book their children in on days when the City Play coaches were in their setting.

### **Summary of the nature of the City Play sessions**

The City Play sessions guided the children's participation into a team sports context in a cleverly structured programme that breaks down complex activities into their constituent parts and helps children explore movement for themselves in the company of others, with modelling by the coach. The familiar story themes and character narratives help the children to visualise and remember the movements in a very engaging way, allowing the coaches to communicate greater subtlety of movement into the sessions. Staff and children in the settings were clearly very enthusiastic about the coaches and the City Play sessions.

The majority of the children engaged fully for the whole 45 minutes in the sessions, as each session moved swiftly through introducing and practicing 8-12 different but interrelated routines. The number of children losing focus towards the end of the session decreased from approximately 25% in October to 10% in March and to 5% in June. It is difficult to separate specific programme benefits from general maturation. All the children became familiar with the routines practices and languages of the programme as the year went on. Therefore, they found it easier to absorb and implement the instructions provided by the coaches.

### **Adaptations to the usual City Play format**

In one school, the City Play sessions alternated between nursery and reception classes on a termly basis and the teacher reported the children to be very disappointed to lose the City Play session in January and delighted when their coach returned in April. This setting also sometimes merged two groups together. This seemed to result in reduced participation by the whole group in the third term, as compared to the groups that had been consistent across the whole year. Another format that was not observed by the researchers, but reported by coaches, involved a group of children being selected randomly from a class each week. The coaches viewed this last option much less favourably. A preferable format would be a group of 15 to 25 children for the whole year because this format yielded the strongest relationship with the group and hence the most skills development from start to end of year.



## Methods used in this evaluation

### Case study sites

In conjunction with City Play managers, seven case study sites were identified. They were drawn from a cross section of settings in which the coaches identified nursery and teaching staff as participating to a greater and lesser extent in the delivery of the City Play sessions and in CPD activity. The case study sites consisted of:

- Two reception classes participating in City Play.
- Three nursery settings participating in City Play with varying CPD experiences.
- Two nursery settings participating in City Play and City Lifestyles at the same time.

### a) Observation

Structured observation techniques (see Appendix 1) were used to capture the levels and range of movement that children demonstrated in the City Play sessions and at different times of day around the case study settings. At least four 20 minute observations were carried out in each setting on each visit, two of these focused on the City Play session. This provided feedback about relative levels of physical exertion in the City Play sessions and other penetration of the programme into the daily pedagogy of the settings in the earlier and later part of the year.

### b) Focus Groups (semi-structured interviews)

The research team conducted short focus group interviews with coaches and practitioners both together and separately straight after the City Play sessions were delivered at two points in the year (see Appendix 2 and Appendix 5). In addition, groups of children were interviewed during the last visit of the year. All City Play and City Lifestyle Coaches were interviewed together as a group early in the Spring and Summer Terms.

- Children were interviewed in small groups in each of the case study settings at the end of the summer term to explore their memories of the City Play activities (Appendix 6).
- All the Coaches were interviewed twice as a group to explore the variety of interpretations of the programme to meet the needs of different settings and to explore how they were working with the CPD materials.
- 14 Parents in the City Lifestyles sessions were interviewed regarding their perceptions of the programme and their children's responses in the sessions and at home (Appendix 3).

### c) Surveys/Questionnaires (Late in Year 1)

A short survey was distributed to parents in each of the case study settings (see Appendix 4) to explore children's reporting of City Play activities to them and the range of physical activities that the children were exposed to.

### Pilot studies

The methods used in the evaluation were piloted in two nursery settings. This highlighted the benefits of interviewing the coach and practitioner in a setting together due to the limited





opportunities to share their perspectives on the City Play sessions together. The pilot study also helped to confirm the validity of the observation and interview schedules.

The City Lifestyles pilot was conducted with a primary school group prior to the introduction of the nursery format. The pilot demonstrated the high regard that the cooking activities were held in by the children, parents and staff in a primary school context. We heard from parents and children who had chosen to take the series of six sessions for a third time. In this age group, children led the activity with a little support and advice from their parents. The discussion around healthy portion sizes was well matched and the children could answer most questions sets by the coach. The discussions instigated around portion sizes were also well matched to the children's understanding.

The pilot confirmed that parents would be comfortable and confident to answer questions around their children's participation and learning in the sessions and the extent to which the sessions were influencing their children's eating.

Two nursery settings (not participating in City Play) were also visited as potential control case study sites. The aim was to compare general levels of activity in the control settings to those in nurseries participating in City Play. The proposed control sites were not developed as full case studies because they both had more adventurous and generous outdoor spaces than many of the City Play case study nurseries, so this would have provided an unbalanced comparison. It is worth noting that the levels of sustained physical activity in the outdoors areas of these two nurseries still appeared to be lower than in the City Play sessions. Unfortunately, it was not possible to develop alternative control groups later in the year and this is therefore listed as a recommendation for future evaluative work.



## City Play observations

### City Play and raised levels of physical activity and physical fluency

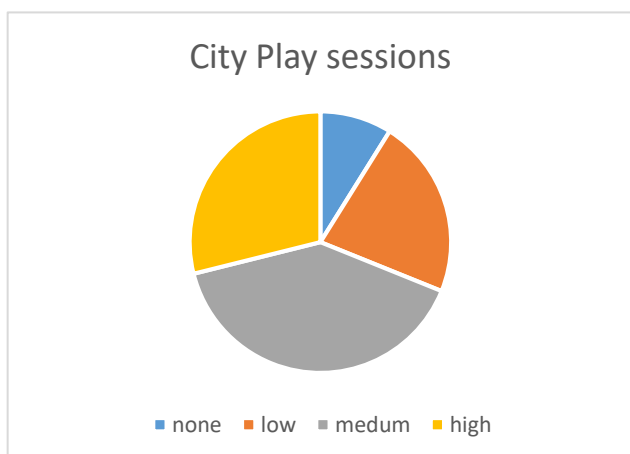
#### *Observations from the evaluation team*

The City Play sessions in all the classes observed were much more active than the other activities children participated in outside the City Play sessions. City Play sessions were the exception in both physical exertion and gross motor physical literacy. The children were consistently active, frequently moving with raised breathing and heart rates.

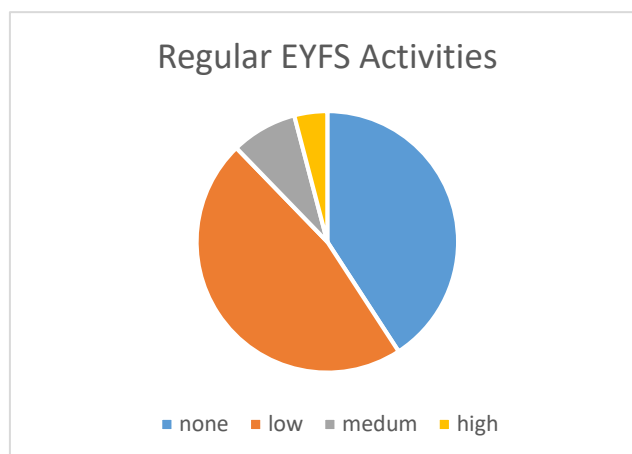
The observations recorded at each City Play session included the observer’s impression of the physical challenge of the activities taking place from none (stationary or inactive) to high (demanding, stretching, raised breathing).

Charts 1 and 2 (below) illustrate the level of physicality involved in the activities observed in the summer term. These observations illustrate that medium to high level of activity comprised 69% of the City Play sessions and a 10% of the regular EYFS play and adult led activities in the settings. The observations were conducted in the summer term and included outdoor play activities where one would expect to see a peak in physical activities.

**Chart 1.** *The level of physicality involved in City Play sessions*



**Chart 2.** *The level of physicality involved in regular EYFS activities*



Charts 1 and 2 suggests that regular outdoor play in some settings, and for some children, may not involve much running around. This might be especially true for younger children and the City Play session might be a significant time of raised physical activity during the week, where a third of the session encourages most of the children to participate with higher levels of aerobic exercise. The City Play sessions were consistently challenging in terms of physical literacy, encouraging the children to think about moving, balancing, staying in spaces and demonstrating new ways of moving suggested by the coaches. The majority of children demonstrated high levels of engagement



throughout the sessions. These high levels of physical activity contrasted with the observed activities in the settings before and after the City Play sessions, which were always at low levels of physical challenge. Outside of the City Play sessions, when the children were engaged in child-led play, there was more time focused on fine motor control, with higher levels of personal autonomy associated with these with high levels of engagement. Where EYFS practitioners were leading whole-class stories, songs or other such activities, levels of physical challenge and autonomy were low, but with high levels of cognitive engagement. This suggests that the City Play sessions do consistently offer an extended period of raised physical activity on a weekly basis.

City Play models both to practitioners and children, ways in which spaces in their settings can be utilised to undertake more aerobic play activities. A recent survey of children's activity by Sport England suggests that at aged five and six, active play and team sports are the most frequently experienced physical activities. According to Sport England 40% of children surveyed experienced less than 30 minutes of physical activity per day, and a further 40% of children experienced more than the Chief Medical Officers (CMO) recommendations of 60 minutes of physical activity per day. City Play makes a very strong contribution to the CMO's recommendation on the day that it is delivered. There is scope for this contribution to be spread more widely across the week if practitioners develop the ideas and routines offered in the programme throughout their setting.

The City Play programme developers identified its aims as allowing children to open up and extend their repertoire of movement so that they might move forward with an increasing level of confidence and fluency in movement. The idea of muscle memory was emphasised in order to suggest that the posture and movement of the body was being supported through the range and directions of movements promoted in the activities, thereby supporting better posture and carriage in later sporting activity. 'Muscle memory' is more accepted in physical and cognitive literature under the name *motor learning in the central nervous system*. Wolpert, Ghahramani and Flanagan (2001) review studies suggesting that similar patterns of movement occur because brain and body identify optimal patterns of performance that together with studies of patterns of movement suggest that movements are monitored in the brain and those movements that feel right become the unconscious basis for reacting (Gallivain et al 2015). Feedback from coaches indicated that they believe the repetitive movements of City Play lay the foundations for more fluid movements. Although we are not able to evidence the effect of muscle memory in this evaluation the theory would support this assumption.

### ***The coaches' perspectives on City Play***

When interviewed together as a group, the City Play coaches emphasised the importance of helping the children to enjoy the physical movement sessions. This was repeated in the personal interviews, as one coach reported:

*"With the younger ones it is more about them associating physical activity with fun. When they are running around, they don't see it as oh I am getting tired if they are having fun".*

Skipping, balance, hopping, moving sideways, forwards backwards, were each seen by the coaches as a good grounding for all sports. They were aware of connections to the National Curriculum in the form of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework citing content around colours and numbers.



Coaches were also conscious that children were learning to join in the sessions with others developing team participation and social skills. One coach talked about seeing the general development of the children's ability to join in with activity being as important as their ability to control a ball. Interviews in the second half of the year placed much more emphasis on children's general development. Practitioners and coaches drew more attention to key successes such as encouraging children to participate more fully in the activities, where there had previously been reluctance to get involved.

Thus, while the activities themselves promote cardio vascular exercises (with each session starting and closing with children being encouraged to take note of their heartbeats), enjoyment and relationships were seen as key objectives for coaches in underpinning the short, medium and long-term goals for promoting participation in physical activity.

### ***Practitioners' perspectives on City Play***

Nursery and Reception practitioners were concerned that children's lifestyles might involve more sedentary activity than in the past. They commented that City Play coaches are "*brilliant at getting the children moving*". Practitioners commented on being surprised at the speed and strength of the relationships that the coaches developed with the children, as well as the skill of coaches in helping the children settle and listen. They also commented on the enthusiasm of the children to participate and their eagerness to do what they were asked by the coaches.

Practitioners appreciated the structured nature of the sessions in motivating children to be active and participate, noting that it is something that the younger children are not used to but quickly adapt to.

*"That structure is really prescribed but not in a negative way, it was difficult to begin with but is something they have responded to. That structure is really important, and it not just the physical gross motor side they can then learn and develop in but also communication, speaking, PSE, sharing".*

Practitioners emphasised the value of having the coaches to model activities and movements for the children in a way that demonstrated what they were being asked to do, and thus to extend the quality of the movement. The practitioners reported that the children do rise up to the challenges set by the coaches. The City Play sessions were perceived to make a strong positive connection with the children in all of the settings. One practitioner reported a number of the parents saying,

*"Who's [coach's name]? Because the children are talking about him all of the time. Parents are saying that the children are wanting to do things - they want to play football, they are mentioning cones".*

The staff in all of the settings offered similar affirmative responses to questions about improvements to children's participation in the City Play activities. The summer term observations showed only one in ten children in each group losing focus in the last 10 minutes of the session as compared to six in ten in October. Reflecting on the year as a whole nursery and teaching staff pointed to the first two or three weeks being more challenging in terms of managing the class while children became accustomed to what was expected.



They noted the positive developments in the children's abilities to move, balance, catch and kick. For example:

*"The balance has come on; they are more confident, more confident to engage with the climbing frame now".*

*"The younger children in the group were not able to jump from both feet [child's name] has worked on that and after a few months they can all do that".*

Practitioners were able to identify individuals who had made personal progress with particular skills.

*"We targeted together some of the children with poor gross motor skills and they have progressed much more than I would have expected".*

*"E is a child who made such amazing progress-he was not confident and didn't like joining in the sessions and now he is very active and confident".*

### **Parents' perspectives of City Play**

None of the parents survey responses gathered indicated that they were worried that their children did not receive enough physical activity outside of the setting. Around two thirds said that they thought their children received enough but more would be good. One respondent said their child was reluctant to join in outdoor play and sports. Half of the parents indicated they thought the children benefitted from adult support to develop skills and stamina, suggesting that children's natural energy and activity levels are sufficient for health. All of the respondents indicated some physical activities that their children participated in outside of the setting; football, swimming, ballet, bike riding, gymnastics, playing in the park. Showing that City Play is not the only physical activity that some children encounter during their week.

Only one of the respondents said that the provision for physical activity was not a consideration when choosing their child's setting. Suggesting that the majority of parents do want settings to offer a physical as part of the EYFS.

### **Children's perspectives on City Play**

Focus group interviews with the children as part of the summer term visits confirmed that children felt 'excited', 'happy' and 'good' before the sessions. The children's responses to the question of what they enjoyed about the City Play sessions emphasised the game themes:

*"Games, football pirates, Captain Hook, jelly fish, robots, spaceship, dinosaurs, velociraptors, Spiderman, Superman, Hulk, driving jeeps, being animals, ninjas, toilet town, chicken game., play games, the farmer game, football".*

*"I like it when we play games. I don't like kicking balls, I'm bored".*

*"I like it on Wednesday cos [coaches name] does football I love football".*

These playful aspects of the sessions were the most prominent in the children's responses. The children also said they enjoyed catching, skipping, running, throwing, bouncing on the balls, football bounce.



The children said that after the sessions they felt 'tired' and 'good', 'very happy', 'great'.

All the parents' survey responses indicated that their child had talked to them about the City Play sessions: half said they had talked about it a little and half that they had talked about it lots. One parent indicated their children had talked to them about pretending and the themes of the games as well as the coach. The majority of respondents indicated the children appreciated all the elements the coaches offered: pretending, games, jumping, kicking, catching. One parent responding to the survey felt their child was more positively disposed towards physical activity at the end of the year as compared to the beginning. This implies that the parents perceived their children to already positively disposed to the physical activity at the start of year but the programme does have potential to facilitate a shift in children's attitudes.

### ***City Play - improving communication and social skills***

All the nursery and Reception practitioners emphasised, what they identified as more noticeable progress in less expected benefits of the programme such as turn-taking, social skills, listening, communication, joint activity and wider levels of confidence.

*"The children want to listen 'cause they are having fun".*

*"Because they enjoy it the children listen really well".*

*"Their physical coordination has improved, they are able to kick a ball in a much more controlled way, but other areas like their listening and communication has improved too. They are more able to share".*

The children's ability to concentrate and listen was highlighted in all the settings as showing significant progress, particularly for some of the children who found concentration in other activities more challenging. Practitioners in each setting were readily able to give examples of children who surprised them in the way they engaged socially with the coaches.

*"There was a boy who joined the nursery part way through the year and after a couple weeks responded brilliantly in the sessions but went back to being shy and timid in the nursery. His mother came in and asked who [coach's name] was because he was talking about him and the games they did when normally he didn't say much about the nursery staff or children".*

This illustrates that the coaches despite visiting only once per week, generate positive motivating relationships with the children.

### ***Evidence from the coaches***

Coaches noted the power of 'theme' as a framing device to help children listen, understand and remember particular movements. The themes need to be familiar, for example, one coach described using superhero characters to introduce more power into movement or actions.



Coaches were aware that the City Play sessions were a marked contrast to the much more autonomous child centred practice they had seen in the preschools, and were therefore very conscious of giving some choice to the children by allowing them scope to interpret instructions for movement in a variety of ways.

In the Spring Term, the coach for one of the Reception age groups noted some children were more reserved in engaging with some of the imaginative themes. In the second round of visits both Reception classes were perceived by their coaches and teachers to be ready to receive less themed, more abstracted, instructional content. However, both Reception teachers and coaches agreed that the children were still very comfortable and engaged with the imaginative elements of the programme - provided that the themes were age appropriate i.e. pirates were more appropriate as compared to 'going on a bear hunt'. Another Reception teacher also affirmed that the themed sessions were very helpful and motivating for the age group. Towards the end of year, another coach had taken over this particular class and the class clearly participated enthusiastically in the imaginative aspect of the games.

*"Imagination drives it. I did dinosaurs before; T-Rex and so on, as in other schools but the children here had been to the Manchester Museum and brought a whole new way of moving to their session".*



## Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

The pack of printed CPD materials available to support coaches in transferring knowledge about the City Play approach, offers a helpful programme of informative and reflective activities. These materials would support practitioners to plan and deliver their own sessions, two of seven settings visited during the year had managed to include a more formal review of the CPD materials to complement the City Play sessions.

### ***Coach perspectives***

During a focus group with coaches, they indicated that they had found it difficult to include the planned CPD materials as part of the weekly visits because of the time pressures on both practitioners and coaches. They also suggested that for many practitioners this was not a priority. One coach had been able to create a regular dialogue with the setting about what they were doing involved; the practitioner observing the session while others support the children, a post session discussion, plans for the next session, tasks for the practitioner to input into sessions. Another coach had set up a 90-minute session at the end of a day and worked through some of the materials with the practitioners. Both expressed similar views:

*“Ideally I would want the EYP (Early Years Professional) at a CPD at the Etihad- then they would be totally focussed - they wouldn’t have children to worry about”.*

Explaining what they are seeking to achieve was very helpful to the sessions. Staff in these settings talked much more about developing the City Play activities across the whole week in their own planning and staff developing the use of role-play.

### ***What practitioners are learning from City Play***

Practitioners absorbed and noted a wide range of aspects of the delivery of City Play from witnessing the weekly delivery of the sessions. Practitioners acknowledged the communicative, team-working and participatory progress over the year as exceeding their expectations of development to a greater extent than the physical skills. The Reception teachers in particular did not feel the children’s physical skill development was beyond what they would expect. It is possible that practitioners are less tuned in to the fundamental skills and less aware of a general progress of the class overall. The child tracking data from the programme may provide some insights into variations in the fundamental skills.

EYFS practitioners appreciated the coaches’ ability to adapt the sessions to build on the children’s interests by paying more attention to popular themes and games. This suggests that they appreciated the coaches were not following a strict programme for each session, but rather adapting on a session-by-session basis in order to support the children’s interests and pace of development.

In settings where space was more limited, early years practitioners were particularly pleased to see how the City Play coaches motivated sometimes reluctant children to play outdoors.

*“To be honest it hard to get them to go out [for outdoor play] at other times but we are lucky to have [coach’s name] because it is fun for them to go outside”.*

*“[coach’s name] is very engaging he is like a children’s entertainer when you are on holiday. He gets the children’s attention”.*





EYFS practitioners noted that even though the sessions are delivered by City in the Community coaches, they did not feel like football sessions: the focus on a broad range of underpinning movements and the imaginative role-play develops team sports skills without the children realising this is what they are doing. This indicates that follow-up communication about the aims of the programme might be helpful to practitioners. The practitioners reported using some of the imaginative games (game, flight to Dubai) between sessions.

There was some variation between the settings in how much settings built upon the City Play sessions. All of the settings identified examples of activities and games that the *children* continued between sessions. Two settings said that they could not continue activities between sessions because they did not have the same equipment as the coaches. Two of the case study settings confirmed that they [the practitioners] played the games between sessions. These were settings where most of the City Play sessions took place in the outdoor play area rather than an indoor hall. It poses the question as to whether the sessions might promote more physically active play in the settings by working with practitioners and children in the outdoor or indoor play areas they use on a daily basis as part of the EYFS.

One setting said that they had purchased similar materials and incorporated activities into their regular settings, which was the setting participating in the complementary CPD programme. The materials used by the coaches are relatively simple and inexpensive. Hand-sized cones, circles and rubber frogs were used regularly. Five-inch diameter footballs were used in every session. One of the reception classes also said that they extended the City Play activities in their own PE sessions and outdoor play. This suggests that supporting the confidence of nursery and teaching staff might be as important as having the 'right' equipment.

Practitioners noted variations in ways the programme is received, not so much in response to the numbers of participants in the sessions, but rather in relation to the ages of the children. They noted that the older three-year-olds and children aged four relate particularly well to the imaginative content of the sessions and become familiar with the pattern of activities, so that by the middle of the year they are engaging enthusiastically in the playful content of the sessions. By the end of the year, the children could move quickly from one game to another and respond quickly to changes of rules and themes. In the Reception classes they were able to work in teams of five and six children on simple tactical games.

All of the practitioners interviewed acknowledged their role in supporting the individual needs of children in order to allow the sessions to run as smoothly as possible. They recognised that often the younger children might be reluctant to be outside or to be distracted by other things after 15 minutes. All the practitioners interviewed also acknowledged the coaches' skill in matching the sessions to the children's abilities and interests to keep them engaged and participating throughout the session.



## City Lifestyles

### ***Evaluation team observations***

The City Lifestyles sessions with the nursery age children introduced in 2017/18 impressed both parents and practitioners because the portable cooking hobs used at nursery height tables, revolutionised the ability of children to participate in cooking as an activity. Cooking in domestic settings usually takes place at a height that makes it hard for young children to see and therefore engage. The children in the City Lifestyles sessions were able to engage with all elements of the preparation process, cutting and cooking. The children's parents were nearby to support, demonstrate and supervise safety, but the culture of the sessions was for the children to participate as much as possible.

The participation of the preschool children in the healthy eating messages was more limited in comparison to the primary age group observed in the pilot visit, but the healthy eating messages were shared with the parents in a brief summary and discussion in the 10 minutes before the children arrived. The messages about child-size portions and cooking with less salt were conveyed in an authoritative non-patronising way alongside interesting facts during the cooking activity, as one coach described:

*"I say in the nicest possible way, I'm not here to change adults' diets. But if I can show you your child likes food with this [a little] amount of salt but you normally use this [a lot] amount, then we can come to some sort of compromise at home".*

### ***Parents' perspectives***

The parents were very complimentary about the knowledge of the coaches and their ability to relate to the children. The main recommendation from a number of parents was that they would like to see the number of sessions extended from six to eight, ten or twelve. The length of the sessions at about an hour for the parents (45 minutes for the children) was judged to be about right by all parents interviewed. There were also clear advantages of sessions which finished at the end of the school day in terms of convenience for parents making a reduced number of trips and in respect of the number of parents that were able to participate at that time.

Parents were impressed and surprised that children were able participate in the cooking activity.

*"I didn't expect very much when they said there were little sessions, I didn't expect the little oven things, it's much more than I expected. They're just fab. She can use them. It's interactive, they do everything. It's really good".*

Parents reported through interviews that involving children in cooking was more challenging in their kitchens at home and so involving their children in food preparation was something new, but was something that their children were now doing more at home.

*"It's just really nice. Before this, when I was doing tea, I wouldn't necessarily get her involved. Whereas now because she wants to, she's more confident at doing things in the*



*kitchen, it makes home life better, rather than me doing tea and her getting in the...she's helping, it's a lot nicer".*

*"Like if we are at home baking cake, maybe. But for cooking, the hob at home is not good; you don't put your son or daughter there but that one [gestures] yes".*

As children had actively participated in making the food, and had the ability to touch and smell ingredients, several parents reported that this made a considerable difference to their child's willingness to try new foodstuffs for the first time such as fish cakes, spinach and some vegetables. Parents also felt that seeing other children eating helped them to try new things, for example:

*"She [child] can't wait to come on a Tuesday and do it so I think it must be something positive and she looks at food a little bit differently. Before she would mess about a bit, where now she gets involved, she wants to help".*

*"Because the first time I came, they made pasta and we made the pasta sauce and it had little vegetables in it. Normally, they [the children] say they don't [like it]. She ate two plates".*

*"We started at an early age when it comes to vegetables, fruit and things like that, we didn't have much of a problem with it, but it's more meats and stuff, we struggle with that, but fruit and veg, she's fine with those".*

Several parents said that their children were familiar with all of the foods presented in the sessions. Parents in focus group interviews reported small but potentially important changes to their cooking.

*"Just adding veggies, brown rice and brown bread" or*

*"Especially with the salt, I know now, no, no, no, because I was putting in lots of salt".*

Parents indicated that they found the City Lifestyles books a helpful reference for checking the recipes:

*"They're straightforward, they're not complicated, they're simple".*

All participants interviewed would recommend the session to friends.



## City Play in context

Interviews and observations from the evaluation provide supporting evidence of the positive influence of City in the Community's involvement to motivate adults and children's participation in physical activity. Cohort studies continue to suggest that promoting lifelong healthy living is linked to both diet and levels of activity. The type of activities and sports promoted by City Play are helpful in early adulthood but generally, positive attitudes to walking, swimming, dancing and other forms of movement become more significant in later life (Martin et al 2014). Cohort studies also show that early childhood interventions in family lifestyle choices such as City Lifestyles to be effective for some families (Gray et al. 2017).

Seeking ways to further encourage the spread of City Play (and City Lifestyles) activities beyond the set preschool sessions would help to address continuing and increasing concerns about childhood obesity nationally and internationally (OECD 2017) by improving children's health through the promotion of healthy nutrition and active play opportunities. These are key aims within the target to improve the obesity indicators for Children's Centre reach areas across Manchester. Public Health figures (Public Health England, 2016) show that Greater Manchester is below the National average for indicators of childhood obesity at age four and five (10.8% of children) and significantly below average at age 11 (24.3% of children). The positive relationships between the coaches and children in the City Play sessions may also enable some children to join organised sports sessions more easily at some point in the future and could make an important contribution to enabling young people to lead healthy lifestyles as identified by Sport England (2018).



## Conclusions and recommendations

### City Play

- **Achieves raised and sustained raised levels of physical activity for the whole class.**
- **City Play sessions offer 45 of the 60 minutes of daily raised level of physical activity recommended by the Chief Medical Officer in a format that is engaging and fun for children aged 3 to 6 .**

Settings valued the sessions as they kept all the children moving at a higher level of physical activity for a longer period of time. Observations noted sustained levels of physical activity, promoting physical fluency and awareness. With City Play coaches only visiting once per week; observations and interviews suggested that in some settings (especially those with less rich outdoor play areas) there might not be any other periods of raised physical activity in the day. Some children might, therefore have days with very limited periods of physical activity in their settings. End of year interviews with practitioners suggest that they might not appreciate how much more active many of the children are during the City Play sessions, as compared to the regular play activities available in the settings.

#### ***Recommendations:***

- City Play coaches could do more as part of their weekly visits to raise practitioners awareness of the recommendations for 60 minutes of raised physical activity per day.
- The CPD components of City Play should encourage practitioners to think about facilitating at least 30 minutes of daily activity in their settings and give them the confidence to support similar activities on a regular basis.
- Although City Play coaches role model how 45 minutes of raised physical activity can be realised in the settings they visit, there is currently limited evidence to support the notion that sustained physical activity occurs frequently outside of City Play sessions.

### Linking imaginative play and physical activity

- **City play sessions are very successful in engaging and motivating children to participate in sustained physical activity by linking imaginative playful games to schemes of movement.**

At the mid and end points of the year the majority of children in each of the sessions observed participated enthusiastically for the whole of the 45 minutes of the session. Some of the children lost attention as the sessions went on but the regular changing of the tasks helped to bring children back on task. With younger children, earlier in the year, practitioners and coaches identified challenges in keeping all the children focused for 45 minutes. The imaginative dimensions of City Play appear to help children focus for increased periods of time on sustained physical activity.

The coaches were very popular and highly regarded in all the settings visited by the researchers. The coaches were all perceived to be funny and playful with the children, motivating the children's sustained and focused participation in the sessions particularly in the later part of the year.



*“The coach does a great job, he gets the age really well, he deals with them really well and is appreciating it is way more than a sports session there is way more to it than that”.*

**Recommendations:**

- Coaches could shorten the nursery age group sessions earlier in the year and give more time to supporting children’s free play in the outdoor spaces helping them to extend child led play into more active play.
- The coaches are likely to provoke the children into developing more active play scenarios in their playground spaces. Developing a more child-led segment within the City Play sessions could engage children’s listening, speaking, sharing and creative skills in addition to the physical development aims of the programme.

**City Play CPD**

- **The materials and modelling provided by City Play are well suited to supporting EYFS practitioners in planning and promoting physically active play in their settings.**

Interviews and observations suggest that many settings are not fully realising recommendations for children to experience raised levels of physical activity. There were very limited opportunities for discussion between the coaches and practitioners around the delivered session times. A few coaches experimented with whole staff CPD sessions with some success where the settings were developing a broader health policy in their setting. Some practitioners were uncertain about the deeper aims of the programme and seemed to view City Play as a weekly activity led by the coaches rather than as something they might incorporate into daily routines. Coaches have indicated that they had found it difficult to include the planned CPD materials as part of the weekly visits due to time pressures on both practitioners and coaches. Coaches and practitioners had reached an understanding that pastoral care responsibilities fall to the practitioners.

Practitioners cited access to ‘the right’ equipment as a barrier to continuing physical activity outside of the City Play sessions. These should not be significant barriers and indicate something about the confidence of practitioners to improvise games and role play with confidence.

**Recommendations:**

- City Play coaches should seek to encourage settings to think about ways to promote daily activities that feature raised levels of physical activity.
- The programme should seek to develop a CPD offer that enables practitioners to absorb the City Play techniques and ideas in workshops that further guide and encourage them to plan for regular physical activity in their settings.
- CPD should also help them to develop their own self-confidence to engage in physical play activities with the children.
- CPD should encourage the practitioners to play a more leading role in the delivery of physical activity in the city play sessions and beyond.
- CPD as part of weekly visits or workshops should include discussion regarding the purchasing, improvisation and substitution of equipment.



- Coaches may need support in acting as mentors to practitioners and in delivering training to adults.

### City Play and City Lifestyles

- **The combined potential of both City Play and City Lifestyles programmes to influence attitudes to physical activity and healthy eating and thereby reduce or prevent obesity were apparent in the first year of the evaluation.**

The challenge with all programmes that involve parents is helping them to make time to attend workshop sessions. The Parents interviewed who attended the City Lifestyles sessions pointed to the beginning and end of the school day as the easiest times for them to attend. Their responses to messages about portion sizes, and food types together with their reports about children trying and liking new foodstuffs is very encouraging and suggests the potential for significant impact if combined with suitable daily levels of raised physical activity. Coaches have indicated that they had found it difficult to include the planned CPD materials as part of the weekly visits due to time pressures on both practitioners and coaches.

#### **Recommendations:**

- City Play could explore ways to develop workshops for parents and children that add an awareness of the importance of daily activity to compliment the healthy eating messages of the City Lifestyles workshops.
- Coaches may need support in delivering mentoring to practitioners and in delivering training to parents.

### Inclusion

- **City Play sessions were very successful in involving all the children present in the settings visited in an extended period of raised physical activity.**

Some children with social needs especially those in wheelchairs may find it challenging to participate in some aspects of sessions involving things such a, hopping, jumping, kicking, balancing.

#### **Recommendation:**

- It would be helpful to prepare coaches through planning and training to be able to support the inclusion of a broader range of children with special needs.

### Evaluation

- **The planned nature of the programme and consistency of delivery enable the children to repeat a number of fundamental movements regularly over the course of the year.**
- **During the first year evaluation coaches indicated that they believe the children will be able to engage more swiftly and with greater fluency with the City Stars football coaching programme that commences in Year 1 primary school classes.**



There is an opportunity in an additional evaluation year to draw from coaches experiences with City Stars groups and City Play fundamentals of movement assessments to compare children's progression over the Reception year and into Year 1. The first year evaluation highlighted the wide differences in resources, space and equipment available different settings.

***Recommendation:***

- Evaluating the progression of former City Play groups as the progress into City Stars programmes will help to develop a more informed analysis of improved fluency of movement.
- The identification of carefully matched control group settings that help to shed more light on the raised levels of activity and additional fluency that City Play offers.





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## Appendices



**Appendix 1**

# City Play Observation Schedule

Venue code

Observer code

Number of Children

Date

Activities where children are in dynamic movement

Time start      Time stop

Activity tag	Number of children	Physical challenge	Physical literacy	Physical cognitive	Children's engagement	Children's Autonomy	Adults Stretch

Overview of activities

Time start      Time stop

Activity tag	Number of children	Physical challenge	Physical literacy	Physical cognitive	Children's engagement	Children's Autonomy	Adults Stretch

Overview of activities



Time start      Time stop

Activity tag	Number of children	Physical challenge	Physical literacy	Physical cognitive	Children's engagement	Children's Autonomy	Adults Stretch

Overview of activities linked to photographs

Time start      Time stop

Activity tag	Number of children	Physical challenge	Physical literacy	Physical cognitive	Children's engagement	Children's Autonomy	Adults Stretch

Overview of activities linked to photographs

### Code guide

Score	Physical challenge	Physical literacy	Physical cognitive	Children's engagement	Children's Autonomy	Adults Stretch
High 3	Demanding stretching, breathing	Fluent movement control	Synthesising and extending	Children engrossed in activity having fun	Children free to interpret	set appropriate challenges
Medium 2	Short bursts of energy or physical control	Developing control	Practicing and doing	Participating Actively enjoying	Adults set limits children lead	Offer verbal or visual encouragement
Low 1	Low level of movement and control	Tentative experimental movement	Following routines	Hesitant reluctant neutral	adults lead limited choice	Encourage through attention
None 0	Stationary and inactive	Limited movement	Disengaged or confused	disinterested and distracted	Adults control and direct	No adult attention



## Appendix 2

# Interview with practitioners and City Play coach

Practitioners prepare review children's participation in the City Play session Interview (active, neutral, reluctant) and in physical activity Review any video /photographs that the setting makes

### Review of Children's Participation

How is their engagement in City Play sessions?

What is it about their engagement that suggests learning?

How might the activities be followed- up?

### Same children in 'classroom' context

How is their engagement in classroom sessions?

What is it about their engagement that suggests learning?

Has the City Play session influenced their activities?

How might the activities be followed- up?

# Interview with practitioners

How have the children responded to the City Play sessions and staff? (What differences do you think it makes that they are from MCFC?)

What do you think the children have gained from the project in terms of physical development and in terms of attitudes towards physical activity?

What do you think you and your staff have learned about the children from the project?

Has participation in the project encouraged you to revise the way you support children's physical development in anyway?

Would you suggest any revisions or developments to the programme?



## Appendix 3

# City Lifestyles session parent participant questions

### FOR USE WITH PARTICIPANTS OF THE HEALTHY EATING SESSIONS

#### A. HEALTHY EATING CHALLENGES

- What are the main challenges that parents face around meal times?
- How about getting children to eat healthy things?
- What challenges do you think parents face around the snacks and drinks that children want?

#### B. THE LIFESTYLES SESSIONS

- *Can you tell me about the sessions that you attended – what were you doing and how did you find them?*
- *What motivated you to sign up to the sessions?*
- *How did the children respond to the sessions?*
- *Why did you keep going to the sessions?*
- *Were there sessions that you decided not to go to?*
- *What did you think about the activities and resources? Were they at the right level for you/your child?*

#### C. CHANGES FOLLOWING ON FROM THE SESSIONS

- *What did you and your child gain from the sessions?*
- *Did anything change as a result of going to the sessions?*
- *What about the takeaway resource packs? What were these like? Did you use them?*

#### D. DEVELOPING THE SESSIONS

- *How did you find the length of the sessions?*
- *How many sessions do you think there should be?*
- *How easy were they to attend?*
- *What things did you enjoy / favourite part?*
- *What things did you not like or not enjoy about the sessions / least favourite?*
- *Would you recommend these sorts of sessions to other people?*
- *Why is that?*
- *What could be improved?*



## Appendix 4

### City Play Survey: questions for parents and carers.

Dear Parent/Carer, your child has been participating in weekly 'City Play' sports play activities during this school year. The sessions are run by coaches from Manchester City Football Club's City in the Community, to develop the children's confidence and skills in physical movement (PE).

Manchester Metropolitan University have been working with City in the Community to assess how this activity is helping children. We would greatly value your opinion about how your child has responded to these activities. You do not have to complete this survey. If you do help us, the survey is completely anonymous and your comments will be kept confidential. We are not recording any personal details about you or your child, only noting the setting that they attend.

We hope that you will help us by answering these questions and returning them to your child's setting. Thank you.

Dr. Martin Needham. Faculty of Education. Manchester Metropolitan University.  
[M.Needham@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:M.Needham@mmu.ac.uk)

Dear Parent/Carer

Please tick **all** the boxes you agree with and write a comment where there are lines.

#### CHILDREN'S PHYSICAL PLAY OUT OF SCHOOL/PRESCHOOL

- Outside of school/preschool, do you think there enough spaces and times for children's physical play activity?

Yes, plenty  Enough, but more would be good  no, not enough

- Are there any physical play activities that your child is more reluctant to join in with?

Outdoor Play  Throwing and catching  Running Games  Climbing  Sports

- Do you think young children need encouragement and guidance to develop their physical skills and stamina?

No, they do this anyway  Yes, to develop skills  Yes, to build strength and stamina

- Do you think physical play opportunities are more important for boys or girls?

Girls need more  Boys need more  All children need the same opportunities

- What kinds of physical activities does your child like? Please Comment

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**Please turn over to complete the questions on the other side of this paper.**

**CHILD’S PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AT PRESCHOOL/SCHOOL**

- How important were opportunities for physical play when choosing your child’s preschool/ school.  
 Very important  important  Not important
- How important is physical play at preschool/school to your child’s day?  
 Very important  important  Not important
- Are there any particular physical play activities you would like to be available or to be discontinued at preschool/school? *Please comment*

**THE CITY PLAY SESSIONS**

- **How did you know about the City Play sessions?**  
 Written Information  from talking to staff  from talking to my child  I didn’t know
- **What has your child told you about the City Play sessions?**  
 Nothing  a little  lots  they seem to like them
- **What things have they liked about the sessions?**  
 nothing specific  the coach  the games  running  pretending  jumping   
 catching  kicking  balancing
- **Was there anything your child talked about from the sessions? Please comment**

**MY CHILD’S INTEREST IN PE AND SPORT OVER THE LAST YEAR**

- Are they any more interested in physical activities as compared to this time last year?  
 Yes  No  Don’t Know  Possibly  for example? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do they have any new games, actions or words that might be connected to the City Play sessions?  
 Yes  No  Don’t Know  Possibly  for example? \_\_\_\_\_
- Have you noticed any changes to their confidence in their physical movement?  
 Yes  No  Don’t Know  Possibly  for example? \_\_\_\_\_
- How have your child ‘s physical skills and interests changed over the last year and do you think any of these changes could be linked to the City Play sessions?  
 Please comment

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

*Thanks for your help. Please return the completed survey to your child’s school.*





## Appendix 5

# City Play practitioner end of year reviews

## Interview with practitioners and City Play coach together

In advance of the visit please could practitioners think about how children have responded to the City Play sessions during the year. If you are able to share some examples of how particular children have responded to City Play that would be very helpful. If you have any examples of observations, pictures or videos that you could share with us that would be very helpful.

### **Are there particular examples of children's progress over the year that you would highlight?**

How has their engagement in City Play sessions been over the course of the year?

What sorts of progress have they made over the year?

How does their engagement in City Play compare to or support their engagement in other activities? in classroom sessions?

If you were working together next year how would you be looking to support each other?



## **City Play end of year Interview with practitioners.**

How have the children's responded to the City Play sessions and staff changed over the course of the year?

How have the children benefited from City Play sessions this year? How about in terms of physical development and attitudes towards physical activity?

What do you think you and your staff have learned about the children from the project?

Has participation in the project encouraged you to revise the way you support children's physical development in anyway?

Would you suggest any revisions or developments to the programme or ways of working together next year?



## Appendix 6

# City Play Children's focus groups.

With groups of 3 or 4 children.

Explain to the group that we would like to ask them about the City Play sessions they have with (use the coaches name) because people would like to know whether children like City Play and what they learn from it. That we will record what they say so we can write down the things they say about City Play but we won't keep the recording. It will take 10 minutes. Is this OK with them they can go to do something else if they don't want to do this.

Explore with the children what they enjoy about the City Play sessions?

How do you feel before the sessions?

How do you feel after the sessions?

Are there things are they better at now that they have practiced in the City Play sessions?



If pictures of the City Play sessions are available use these as reminders.

Ask the children to choose something that they thought was good about the City Play sessions.  
Explore why they have chosen that thing.

Ask if the City Play sessions have given them ideas for games to play in their  
nursery/classroom/outdoor area?

Have they done any of the City Play games at home or away from nursery?