

**LEARNING
FOCUS:**

**CHILDREN
& YOUNG
PEOPLE**



NIHR | Applied Research Collaboration
Yorkshire and Humber

Creating positive experiences for children and young people

**Active and healthy
madrasas in Bradford**

Healthy Madrasas in Bradford – creating positive experiences for children and young people

The challenge

Over 40% of children in Bradford come from South Asian backgrounds; most of these children live in deprived neighbourhoods and live with health inequalities. Physical activity levels among South Asian children in Bradford are significantly lower than White British children. South Asian girls in the UK are the least active demographic group. Most South Asian children in Bradford are of Islamic faith and 91% of South Asian Muslim children in Bradford attend madrasa after school on most days of week. A madrasa is a religious school for the study of Islam.

The solution

The solution we came up with was to design and implement an intervention to support madrasas to engage children in healthy lifestyle behaviours including sport and physical activity. The intervention is called Healthy Madrasas.

Parents of children attending madrasa trust madrasas as safe spaces for children and young people, especially girls, to engage in sports and physical activities. Mosques and madrasas also have reach and influence into families and the wider community to reinforce healthy lifestyle behaviours; they have the ability to either provide physical space for physical activities, or can connect with neighbouring assets such as green spaces or local community centres for this. Importantly, Islamic narrative supports physical activity and healthy lifestyle messaging.

As a first step to design the intervention, we conducted research to explore how to involve madrasas in healthy lifestyle activities. We learned from leadership, management and teachers in madrasas, and parents of children attending madrasa, about what is important for the community and other stakeholders in madrasas to consider when planning and delivering sports and physical activities.

We learned that staff and volunteers in madrasas would require training, resources and bespoke guidelines on how to plan and deliver sports and physical activities. We co-produced a Healthy Madrasa Toolkit with madrasa staff that provides detailed guidelines on how to plan and implement sports and physical activities during and after madrasa times.

Through Sport England investment, we created a workstream Active Faith Settings and made it an integral part of Bradford's Local Delivery Pilot. The largest piece of work within this workstream was the Healthy Madrasas intervention. We needed an organisation to deliver the intervention but did not identify any community organisations that had an in-depth understanding of the madrasa system or prior experience of successfully working across Islamic denominations for healthy promotion.

A new, locally trusted organisation which was able to fulfil these criteria was established: Faith in Communities. Faith in Communities builds rapport and trustworthy relations with madrasas in Bradford. It employs community engagement managers who work with a group of madrasa staff to implement the Healthy Madrasa Toolkit.

Stakeholders involved

To co-produce the content of the Healthy Madrasas Toolkit, we worked with local children, parents, madrasa staff and volunteers, sports coaches, physical activity specialists, dietitians, local businesses, public health specialists and applied health researchers. To supplement the public health messages in the toolkit, we involved an Islamic scholar who provided Islamic narrative such as verses from Quran and Islamic stories on the same health messaging.

We built a partnership with the Department of Health and Wellbeing at Bradford Council and secured additional funding to support delivery of the toolkit. We worked with Bradford Council for Mosques (an umbrella body representing more than 120 Islamic religious settings in Bradford), building trust and senior leadership buy-in, which in turn opened the doors to working with mosques and madrasas within Bradford.

When Faith in Communities works with a madrasa, it links them into the local system, connecting them with local sport, physical activity and health practitioners to deliver sessions in the setting and with community organisations and other assets like green spaces.



Impacts and benefits as a result of these interventions and new ways of working

- 30 madrasas and over 6,000 children in madrasas have been reached through the Active Faith Settings work.
- Six girls' youth clubs in madrasas, which have a focus on sport and physical activity, have been established and are flourishing with strong female leadership.
- All 30 madrasas have developed and delivered local action plans which include regular inclusion of physical activity during curriculum time and extra-curricular sports and physical activities. Most madrasas have also delivered active travel sessions. Mosques have also promoted physical activity messages to the wider community during prayer times.
- Our work has influenced the physical infrastructure of madrasas and new buildings have started considering allocating space for girls and boys to deliver physical activities.
- Most importantly, we observed behaviour change in madrasa leadership and staff, who have started normalising planning and delivery of sports and physical activities, and have prioritised creating opportunities for girls to be active.
- Madrasas are now better linked into their local assets and use the green spaces and community organisations on their doorsteps to help support and promote physical activity.
- At system level, we observed acceptance in local authorities and wider programmes to build partnership with madrasas for all health promotion initiatives. Active Faith Settings has become part of local strategy and practice.



The learning

Alongside the implementation of the Healthy Madrasas intervention we have also conducted research to learn about what works, why and how. We have identified that there are four important components which make the intervention a success. These are:

- 1. A delivery organisation** that engages with madrasas and with local leaders (e.g. place partnership/local authority), holds funds to support the delivery of the intervention, and employs a team of community engagement managers. This helped to overcome systemic barriers to implementation (e.g. some madrasas not being able to receive funding to deliver activities as they are not constituted organisations).
- 2. Community engagement managers** who support the madrasa to draw up individualised action plans. They are trained in planning and delivering sports and physical activity sessions and workshops, using the Healthy Madrasa Toolkit. They link the madrasa up with other local assets. They share cultural and religious values with settings, which creates trust. They needed to be flexible, available and understand the madrasa system.
- 3. A health group within each madrasa.** This group consists of madrasa teachers, leader, parents of children attending madrasa, imam, a health or social care practitioner from within or outside madrasa, sports or physical activity coach in the neighbourhoods, local community activists interested in health promotion, and/or members of local communities or community organisations. Their role is to work with the community engagement manager to develop and deliver their action plan within their setting. The group is essential for the long-term sustainability of the intervention.
- 4. The Healthy Madrasa Toolkit** provides detailed guidelines for madrasa staff on building sport and physical activity into curricular and extra-curricular time and running other physical activity workshops within the setting for staff, children and families. The toolkit is culturally and religiously relevant and this motivates the setting, staff, children and families to engage. Resource to deliver against the toolkit is also necessary and is held by the local delivery organisation.

4 KEY COMPONENTS OF HEALTHY MADRASAS PROGRAMME



What's next?

We are now expanding our work out to engage with a further 20 settings across the Bradford district.

We are also working to understand how the intervention can be well sustained within a light-touch model once the work is well established in a setting and the intensive support of the community engagement managers is withdrawn.

Take a look at this [video](#) that explains more. Our Healthy Madrasa development team are really interested in learning how the intervention could spread and be adapted to other localities. We have already started this in Bristol. Please get in touch if you would like to find out more for your place.

Find out more about [JU:MP Bradford](#).

Find out more about [Faith In Communities Bradford](#).

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