EXPERIENCES IN SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ARE A KEY ELEMENT IN THE PHYSIOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN, PROMOTING SKILLS LIKE COORDINATION, BALANCE AND STRENGTH. HOWEVER, AS A GROUP OF LOCAL PRIMARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IS NOW DISCOVERING, THERE ARE ALSO A MYRIAD OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL BENEFITS TO BE GAINED FROM SIMPLY PARTICIPATING IN SPORTING ACTIVITIES.

BRIDGING the GAP

BY BRONWEN WATSON

The 'Moving into Learning' program is one such program exploring these benefits and is the first of its kind for SUSF. It is a unique experiential physical education program for students with challenging mental and emotional behaviours. Designed to foster physical, social, cognitive and emotional growth through well supported physical education experiences, the 'Moving into Learning' program does not teach one particular sport, instead, the primary aged students in the program have been encouraged to engage in everything from juggling soccer balls and parachute games, to exploring gymnastics apparatus, flinging frisbees and pretending to be Major League Baseball players.

Our Partner
Bridge Road School for Specific Purposes, a local primary school, approached Sydney Uni Sport & Fitness to design the tailored 'Moving into Learning' program due to the lack of such a program in the community. The idea behind the program, linking physical education experiences to positive learning outcomes in the classroom is not a new one. However, what Principal Jackie Sutton did need was expertise in designing and delivering a highly resourced and well structured program for her group of special students.

"With our students, we have to build skills in sport and communication in small steps, carefully broken down," says Luana
Mitchelmore, a teacher at Bridge Road. “[But] it’s evident that the children’s confidence is growing because they are all becoming more willing to have a go at new things, in and out of the classroom.”

Providing activities that are challenging but in which students have the ability to achieve a level of success, has been important in providing a positive self-esteem boost to children who often struggle with understanding that getting ‘out’ in a game is not a reflection on their self-worth. Tears can come as easily as smiles with this special group, where even the idea of playing on a team can cause mass excitement!

**Supporting Discovery**

An important component of the program has been to ensure the students have fun engaging in physical activities. So far, ‘the Harry Potter Hall’ – also known as the Old Teachers College Gymnasium - has really captured the imaginations of this group of seven year olds. In such a stimulating environment for children, students who were initially very hesitant and shy are now more than happy to clamber onto a beam, step-kick across, and then launch themselves into an, if not graceful landing, then at least an entertaining one!

“With practice [the students] are overcoming their fears about using equipment such as the balance beam and becoming far more spontaneous in their participation,” Luanne recounts. Discovering, that with a little bit of practice and a try again attitude, they can suddenly direct a kick, score a goal, run three bases, or walk along a high beam, means that students in the program are gradually becoming more confident in their ability to participate and more willing to keep trying until they succeed. Importantly, students are grasping the sporting ideals of perseverance, resilience, acceptance, and effort, that also help immensely with learning in a traditional classroom.

Perhaps Luanne puts it best; “It gives them an opportunity to handle frustration, fear and failure in a supportive environment, beyond the bounds of school.”

It is hoped that the ‘Moving into Learning’ program bridges the gap, so to speak, between the positive emotional responses associated with engaging physical activity, to building confidence and self control. It is a nice reminder that sport can be about much more than just muscle and medals. For this special group of kids, a weekly adventure with Sydney Uni Sport & Fitness is helping them with the skills they need to learn for the sporting field, classroom and beyond.