

Children and Physical Activity Policy Statement



Introduction

Evidence shows that children who are physically active have a better chance of becoming healthy adults, yet a significant proportion of children are not reaching recommended levels of activity¹. Regular activity not only reduces the risk of obesity in adulthood, but it also reduces the likelihood of risk factors for chronic diseases, such as heart disease and type 2 diabetes, developing early in life². The BHF recommends that children and young people aged between 5 and 19 should take part in 60 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity every day.

Policy statement

Children who are physically active have a better chance of becoming healthy adults, yet surveys show that up to 30% of boys and 40% of girls are not reaching the recommended minimum levels of physical activity. A range of action is needed to address this shortfall.

Many children are not even aware of how much exercise they should be getting - only 10% of English children can correctly recall the need for 60 minutes of daily physical activity. This may be contributing to low levels of physical activity, and we believe that sustained communication at population and individual level is needed to improve understanding.

Whilst UK governments are working to develop consistent physical activity guidelines, there are still no recommendations for children under-five. Activity recommendations for under-fives should be a priority and dedicated resources will be needed to support early-years professionals and parents.

Some groups of young people are less active than others, adolescent girls for example, and some ethnic groups. These inequalities must be tackled; all children and young people should be encouraged to get active and provided with a range of easily accessible structured sporting activities, and opportunities for unstructured active play.

Schools need to maximise the opportunities for children to take part in physical activity during and around the school day. Children should be encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities, to be physically active at break-times and to walk and cycle to school.

Collection of information on physical activity levels is inconsistent across the four nations, making direct comparisons and tracking of trends over time difficult. This should be addressed through consistent collection of data by local authorities, regional bodies and national governments. Data should cover the full range of physical activity including active travel and everyday activities.

Background

¹ 'Couch Kids', London, 2009. British Heart Foundation.

² 'Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans', Washington DC:US, 2008. Department of Health and Human Services.

The importance of physical activity

Physical activity has a number of known benefits for children and young people; it helps prevent overweight, obesity and Type 2 diabetes, and improves bone strength. It can even have psychological health benefits, there is evidence that being active improves self-esteem and reduces anxiety and depression^{3,4,5}.

Levels of obesity have more than doubled in the UK in the last 25 years. About 10% of children are now obese and a further 20-25% are overweight⁶. Risk factors for cardiovascular disease, such as hypertension and impaired glucose tolerance, are already present in overweight children, and this is linked to a higher risk of cardiovascular disease in adulthood⁷.

As well as the personal and social costs such as mortality, discrimination and social exclusion, there are significant health and social care costs associated with the treatment of obesity and its consequences, as well as costs to the wider economy arising from chronic ill health⁸.

There is no clear single cause of obesity – sedentary lifestyles, dietary changes, our social environment and other factors all play a part. However, evidence shows that physical activity is one of the factors that can have a major role in improving the health and well-being of our children.

Current UK guidelines for physical activity

The evidence appears to suggest that a minimum of 60 minutes of physical activity a day is appropriate for children and young people aged 5-18. There is a suggestion that more activity than this, and more vigorous activity, may provide additional health benefits^{9,10}.

The current guidelines are similar, but not the same across the UK as shown in table 1. Consistent guidelines for use across the UK are currently being developed by the British Heart Foundation National Centre for Physical Activity in collaboration with representatives from the Department of Health in each of the four nations.

Table 1: Current physical activity guidelines in the UK¹¹.

Country	Guideline
England	A total of at least 60 minutes of at least moderate intensity physical activity each day. This should include activities to improve bone health, muscle strength and flexibility at least twice a week.
Northern Ireland	A total of at least 60 minutes of at least moderate intensity physical activity each day.

³ 'Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans', Washington DC:US, 2008. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁴ 'Couch Kids', London, 2009. British Heart Foundation.

⁵ 'At least five a week: Evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health', London, 2004. Department of Health.

⁶ McPherson, K et al: 'Tackling Obesities: Future choices - Project Report', London, 2007. Government Office for Science.

⁷ Baker JL, Olsen LW, Sorensen TI: 'Childhood body-mass index and the risk of coronary heart disease in adulthood', 2007. New England Journal of Medicine. 357:2329-37

⁸ McPherson, K et al: 'Tackling Obesities: Future choices - Project Report', London, 2007. Government Office for Science.

⁹ 'Couch Kids', London, 2009. British Heart Foundation.

¹⁰ 'Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans', Washington DC:US, 2008. Department of Health and Human Services.

¹¹ 'Couch Kids', London, 2009. British Heart Foundation.

Scotland	At least 60 minutes of moderate activity on most days of the week
Wales	60 minutes of moderate intensity activity on at least five days of the week

The 60 minutes can be accumulated through shorter bouts of activity of 10 minutes or more throughout the day. Shorter bouts of activity have been shown to have similar positive effects to a single long bout of an equal total volume. Accumulating bursts of activity in this way also fits well with young children's natural activity patterns and makes it easier to achieve the 60 minute target¹².

Physical activity and under fives

Whilst the relationship between physical activity and health outcomes in pre-school children is not yet known, some guidelines on how best to encourage under-fives to be active are important. Guidelines for pre-schoolers have already been introduced in the US¹³ but there are no such guidelines in the UK.

However, the British Heart Foundation suggests that UK guidelines for physical activity should recommend that all infants are encouraged to be physically active and that sedentary behaviour should be restricted during early years¹⁴.

Sedentary behaviour

Research also suggests that high levels of sedentary behaviour could negatively impact the wellbeing of children whether or not they meet the physical activity guidelines¹⁵. Sedentary behaviour doesn't just refer to watching television or playing computer games - listening to music, doing homework and reading are also examples. More research is needed to understand the link between sedentary behaviour and health. However, young people should avoid being too sedentary and find physically active alternatives where possible.

In 2009 the Department of Health Cross Government Obesity Unit commissioned an international expert group to review the health risks of sedentary behaviour and obesity. A report is due to be published in March 2010 and is expected to feed into new UK physical activity guidelines.

Several countries including Australia, Canada, and the US have already introduced recommendations to reduce sedentary behaviour. For example, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education in the US discourages periods of inactivity over two hours for children, especially during the daytime¹⁶.

Levels of physical activity amongst children and young people

National health surveys show that there are still significant proportions of young people who are not reaching the recommended levels of physical activity. Surveys conducted in 2003 and 2007, in Scotland and England respectively, found that about 30% of boys and 40% of girls are not reaching the 60 minutes a day target. This figure was significantly higher in Wales and Northern Ireland in 2007¹⁷.

¹² 'At least five a week: Evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health', London, 2004. Department of Health.

¹³ 'Active Start: A statement of physical activity guidelines for children from birth to five years', Virginia: US, 2002. AAHPERD Publications

¹⁴ 'Couch Kids', London, 2009. British Heart Foundation.

¹⁵ 'Couch Kids', London, 2009. British Heart Foundation.

¹⁶ 'Couch Kids', London, 2009. British Heart Foundation.

¹⁷ *Ibid*

Even though activity levels are comparatively high in England and Scotland, a high number of children aren't reaching the target in these countries. For example, the 2007 National Health Survey for England found that 15% of boys and 19% of girls don't even achieve 30 minutes of activity each day¹⁸.

Because the health surveys in England, Scotland and Wales rely on questionnaires to collect data there is a concern that they may be overestimating the number of young people achieving the 60 minute a day target. Objective measures of physical activity consistently record lower levels of activity than those reported by children and parents^{19, 20}. In 2009 the BHF commissioned a poll which found that whilst 71% of parents think their child is active enough, only 11% of their children are actually doing the recommended amount of exercise²¹.

Because data on physical activity is collected differently across the four nations it is difficult to directly compare levels of activity between UK countries.

Inequalities

Studies have consistently shown that boys are more active than girls across the ages of 2-15. For example, 15-year-old boys in Wales were found to be twice as likely to take part in recommended levels of activity, and in England 66% of boys compared to 47% of girls reach the 60 minute a day target²².

This gender difference is apparent at an early age, but the gap is greatest at adolescence. Girls' physical activity levels tend to decrease with age, especially after the age of ten. Whereas national health surveys in England (2007) and Scotland (2003) found that boys maintain relatively high levels of physical activity between 2 and 15 years^{23,24}.

Ethnicity also influences participation in physical activity. With the exception of Pakistani boys and Irish boys and girls, children in minority ethnic groups are less likely to achieve 60 minutes of activity a day²⁵. Activity levels also vary by region. For example, in London only 63% of boys and 50% of girls achieve the target²⁶.

Barriers to physical activity

Although 61% boys and 74% of girls say they would like to be more active physical activity levels for many young people remain low. Surveys have shown there are a range of reasons.

- Cost, distance, means of travel, and a lack of facilities or choice can all restrict access to structured sport.
- The threat of crime, busy traffic, neglect of local play areas can act as barriers to unstructured physical activity.

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰ Basterfield, L. Adamson, A.J, et al. 'Surveillance of physical activity in the UK is flawed: validation of the Health Survey for England physical activity questionnaire', 2008. Archives of Disease in Childhood. 93:12

²¹ TNS survey 2009 commissioned by BHF

²² 'Couch Kids', London, 2009. British Heart Foundation.

²³ Bromley, C. Sproston, K and Shelton N 'The Scottish Health Survey 2003. Volume 3. Children' 2003. Edinburgh. The Scottish Executive

²⁴ Craig, R, Shelton, N (Eds). 'Health Survey for England 2007. volume 1: Healthy Lifestyles: knowledge, attitudes and behaviour', 2008, Leeds. The BHS Information Centre for health and Social Care.

²⁵ 'Couch Kids', London, 2009. British Heart Foundation.

²⁶ Craig, R, Shelton, N (Eds). 'Health Survey for England 2007. volume 1: Healthy Lifestyles: knowledge, attitudes and behaviour', 2008, Leeds. The BHS Information Centre for health and Social Care.

- A lack enjoyment, parental support, or spare time can also prevent participation²⁷.

In addition, a lack of awareness of the 60 minute a day guideline – only 10% of girls and boys in England can recall the recommendation - could also be a contributing factor to low activity levels among some groups and also needs to be addressed.

Activity in schools

It is important that schools offer a diverse range of activities to ensure that as many children as possible participate, and actively work to meet the needs of the least active groups of young people. Extracurricular activities, break times and active travel to and from school all provide important opportunities for additional physical activity.

In the UK school targets for PE provision all centre on providing two hours per week. However, and the infrastructure and delivery mechanisms of school sport vary considerably across the UK.

The School Sport and Young People Strategy in England aims to provide all children with at least five hours of sport every week – including two hours of PE and three hours of extra-curricular activities²⁸. There has been a significant increase in the numbers of young people taking part in two hours or more of curricular PE in England. For example, in 2007/2008 78% of pupils participated in at least 120 minutes of PE, compared to 34% in 2003/2004. Provision in primary schools has increased between 2003 and 2008²⁹.

But there is still room for improvement: the provision of school sport drops off after Year 9 (age 13) – just at the time that adolescent girls tend to reduce their participation in physical activity – and whilst pupils may spend two hours in PE the actual length of time they are active for is often much less³⁰.

Schools in Scotland, Wales, and NI are falling short of achieving two hours of curricular PE. In Wales, on average, primary schools offer 93 minutes a week across year groups and secondary schools 99 minutes³¹. Only a third of primary schools in Scotland provide two hours of PE at each stage. About two thirds of Scottish secondary schools met the target at S1/S2, the majority at S3/S4 and only one in seven at S5/S6³². In Northern Ireland as few as 14% of primary schools receive two hours of curriculum PE per week, and just over half of secondary school pupils took part in two or more hours of PE at school³³.

Government activity

The 2007 Foresight Report - *Tackling Obesities: Future Choices*³⁴ - commissioned by the UK Government, warned that if trends in overweight and obesity continue to rise, around 40% of Britons could be obese by 2025, and by 2050 'Britain could be a mainly obese society'.

²⁷ 'Couch Kids', London, 2009. British Heart Foundation.

²⁸ 'Be Active Be Healthy' 2009, London. Department of Health.

²⁹ 'Couch Kids', London, 2009. British Heart Foundation.

³⁰ *Ibid*

³¹ *Ibid*

³² *Ibid*

³³ *Ibid*

³⁴ <http://www.foresight.gov.uk/Obesity/14.pdf>

Strategies for the promotion of physical activity vary across the UK but all four nations have shown a commitment to increasing children and young people's levels of activity.

In 2008 the Department of Health in England published *Healthy Weight Healthy Lives*³⁵, a cross-government strategy which aims to support people in maintaining a healthy weight. The strategy initially focuses on children, and aims to reduce the proportion of overweight and obese children back to 2000 levels by 2020.

The BHF is a partner of *Change4Life*, a campaign launched in 2009 by the Westminster Government which encourages families to 'eat better and move more'. The *Change4Life* website, helpline, and advertisements provide healthy eating ideas, recipes, and tips on how to be more active. A number of additional campaigns including *Swim4Life*, *Bike4Life*, *Play4Life* and *Walk4Life*, have since been launched and *Change4Life* is working with a number of partner organisations to deliver activities nationwide.

In 2006 the Welsh Assembly Government introduced the *Food and Fitness Implementation Plan*³⁶, a five year plan for promoting physical activity and healthy eating for children and young people. This was followed in 2009 by *Creating an Active Wales*³⁷, which aims to support children and young people to live active lives and to ensure that children from all backgrounds are able to access physical activity opportunities. The Welsh Assembly Government launched *Health Challenge Wales*³⁸ in 2005, and this campaign continues to provide tips and information on getting active and making healthy lifestyle changes. The campaign sits alongside a number of physical activity initiatives aimed at children and young people, such as *Dragon sport* and *5x60 Get With It*, which put young people in touch with opportunities for activities and sports.

In the *Healthy Eating, Active Living*³⁹ paper, the Scottish Government outlines its plans to tackle diet and physical activity from 2008 to 2011. Over half of resources have been allocated to the early years, targeting pregnant mothers and pre-school children. A number of projects have been introduced to encourage and enable physical activity, including *Girls on the Move* which offers a range of activities for girls and young women, and the *Play@home* scheme which focuses on pre-schoolers.

The Scottish Health Committee's 2009 report, *Pathways into Sport and Physical Activity*⁴⁰, made a number of recommendations to improve levels of activity across the nation. This includes a renewed commitment to providing a minimum of two hours of PE in schools each week, and sets out that this target should be met by all schools by August 2010. The ongoing *Active Schools*⁴¹ programme provides opportunities for school age children to become more active and healthy, and works alongside other initiatives such as the Youth Sport Trust's TOP play scheme.

In Northern Ireland a cross-department taskforce, *Fit Futures: Focus on Food Activity and Young People*, was established in 2004. This initiative aimed to stop the rise in obesity in children and young people by 2010 through six strategic priorities, including creating healthy schools and communities. However, in 2009 a report

³⁵ http://www.dh.gov.uk/dr_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/documents/digitalasset/dh_084024.pdf

³⁶ <http://www.healthschool.org.uk/teachers/school-food-fitness-policy-e.pdf>

³⁷ <http://wales.gov.uk/docs/phhs/publications/activewales/100121activewalesen.pdf>

³⁸ <http://wales.gov.uk/hcwswebsite/healthchallenge/?lang=en>

³⁹ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2008/06/20155902/0>

⁴⁰ <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/s3/committees/hs/reports-09/her09-05-00.htm#17>

⁴¹ <http://www.sportscotland.org.uk/ChannelNavigation/Topics/TopicNavigation/Active+Schools/>

examining the approach to tackling obesity in Northern Ireland was published, *Inquiry into Obesity*⁴². This report highlighted a lack of 'safe, affordable, accessible and age appropriate play and leisure activities' for children. After several years in development, a new 10 year sports strategy - *Sport Matters: The Northern Ireland Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009 - 2019* – was approved in late 2009. The Public Health Agency for Northern Ireland also launched *Physical Activity: It All Adds Up* in 2009, a campaign specifically highlighting that activity can be spread throughout the day in order for young people to achieve the 60 minute target.

BHF activity

Since 2000 the BHF has funded the BHF National Centre for Physical activity and Health based in the School of Sport, Exercise and Health Sciences and Loughborough University. The centre provides information, translates evidence into practice and raises the profile of physical activity in the health agenda.

Our *Food4Thought* campaign is now in its fifth year, this wide-ranging campaign aims to tackle childhood obesity by making it easier for children and parents to make healthier choices about food and activity. *Food4Thought* is a multidimensional social marketing programme which targets 11-13 year-olds, teachers, policy makers and parents.

The BHF runs three fun and active fundraising events for children and young people. Ultimate dodge ball is a team event that helps children organise a tournament, and Jump Rope for Heart is a sponsored skipping challenge, both of which help children raise money for the BHF and their school or club. Artie's Olympics is a programme of competitive and non-competitive activities for under-8s.

The BHF's CBHF website has plenty of tips on getting active and achieving the 60 minutes a day target, as well as information on the benefits of activity, healthy eating, and five-a-day. Children can learn about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle by creating mini-digital versions of themselves, called Yoobots. By changing their Yoobot's diet and exercise children can see the impact it has on its body shape, heart and other internal organs.

The BHF produces resources for use in and out of school for children and young people, teachers, play-workers and parents. We have a range of teaching packs for schools, one of which helps primary schools develop a whole school development plan on physical activity. Out of school we train tutors to offer *Active Club Workshops*, where they teach play leaders to use the BHF's *Active Club* pack.

For further information please email policy@bhf.org.uk

⁴² http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/health/2007mandate/reports/report10_09_10R_.htm