Nutrition, health and schoolchildren
Physical activity in schoolchildren

Being physically active in early life is of particular importance as it not only impacts on current health status but health later in life also. Being physically active in childhood and adolescence helps to maintain a healthy body weight, aids bone and musculoskeletal development, reduces the risk of diabetes and hypertension and has numerous psychological and social benefits.

Sedentary behaviour

There is concern that many children spend too much time being sedentary. This includes activities such as watching TV, playing computer games, reading, listening to music, sitting and lying down. Evidence suggests that being sedentary may be linked to an increased risk of being overweight or obese. Activities such as TV viewing are often associated with bad eating habits such as consumption of foods that are high in fat and/or sugar. It has been estimated that boys and girls spend an average of 3.4 hours on weekdays and 4.1 hours on weekend days being sedentary, excluding school and sleeping time. The average time spent being sedentary increases with age.

Physical activity

Physical activity includes activities ranging from organised sport and exercise, to active play, and activities that form part of everyday life, such as active travel and housework. Certain types of physical activity can have specific benefits e.g. aerobic activities benefit the cardiovascular system and weight bearing activities benefit the skeleton. Engaging in a variety of types of physical activity is therefore very important.

New UK-wide guidelines on physical activity have been published by the Chief Medical Officers from the four home countries of the UK. They state that:

- All children and young people should engage in moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity for at least 60 minutes and up to several hours everyday.
• Vigorous intensity activities, including those that strengthen the muscle and bone, should be incorporated at least three days a week.
• All children and young people should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (sitting) for extended periods.

Moderate intensity activity raises the heart rate and leaves the individual slightly out of breath, but still able to talk. Vigorous intensity activity will cause the individual to be short of breath, have a rapid heart beat, and they will not be able to carry on a normal conversation. The recommended amounts of physical activity can be made up of smaller bursts of activity for example, walking to school, spontaneous play and structured PE lessons.

Factors influencing physical activity in children

Understanding the factors that influence children’s physical activity is extremely important as research indicates that physical activity behaviours can track into adulthood. Research indicates that the majority of children are not doing the recommended amount of physical activity. Boys tend to be more active than girls and physical activity levels seem to decrease with increasing age, especially in girls.

Children in minority ethnic groups, with the exception of Pakistani boys and Irish children, are less likely to do the recommended level of activity compared to the general population. It has been suggested that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to participate in more unstructured activities or free play, while children from higher socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to take part in sports in clubs and structured activities.

Parents can potentially encourage their child to be active by being a role model, providing support or by facilitating activity such as providing transport or financial support.

Children who walk or cycle to school may be more physically fit. However, an increasing reliance on cars instead of walking and cycling, concerns over safety, and a lack of green space are commonly cited as barriers to being physically active.