

THE ROLE OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN PROMOTING ACTIVE LIFESTYLES

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Following publication of the new UK Chief Medical Officers' guidelines for physical activity in 2019 (see the autumn 2019 edition of *Physical Education Matters*) and the recent World Health Organization's report on global inactivity in adolescents (Guthold et al., 2019), the Association for Physical Education (afPE) has updated its Health Position Paper. This article shares two areas of the paper: headlines emerging from the increasing volume of physical activity information on children and young people, and the role that physical education can play in enabling children and young people to lead active lifestyles.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY HEADLINES ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Data on children and young people's physical activity and their attitudes towards physical activity is collected on a regular basis via, for example, national surveys. Details of this data for the UK are presented in Appendix 1 of the afPE Health Position paper. This section (section 7 of the paper) presents headlines emerging from the increasing volume of physical activity information on children and young people.

1. The vast majority of children and young people do not meet the 'one hour a day' physical activity for health guideline.
2. Boys are more active than girls across all age groups.
3. Boys participate in formal sports more than girls.
4. Children and young people become less active with increased age and the decline is greater amongst girls than boys.
5. The proportion of children and young people who walk or cycle to school has fallen and the proportion of car journeys has increased.
6. Children and young people from the lowest socio-economic groups are less active than those from the highest.

7. Only 1 in 10 children and young people aged 11-15 years are aware of how much physical activity they should do. Only 1 in 4 adults are aware of the correct physical activity for health recommendation for children and young people.
8. There is a positive association between knowing the physical activity guideline and achieving it.
9. Most children and young people perceive themselves as either very or fairly physically active compared with other children their age; two thirds of children and young people in the lowest activity group think that they are very or fairly physically active compared with others.
10. Girls are more likely than boys to want to do more physical activity, regardless of age.

To add to the complexity of the picture, national survey data point to differences in physical activity participation according to a range of variables, such as geographical

region, urban or rural location, culture or religion, and special educational needs and disabilities. Each of these require a specific, targeted approach to increase physical activity participation across all groups within the UK.

HOW CAN PHYSICAL EDUCATION PROMOTE ACTIVE LIFESTYLES?

High quality physical education contributes to a whole school approach to promoting healthy lifestyles through the physical learning context it provides for every child. It provides regular participation in physical activity for children and young people aged 5-18 and ensures they learn and develop core movement skills which facilitate their current and future involvement in a variety of physical activities. This builds their confidence, competence and motivation to participate in physical activity and to take part in a wide range of activities as they get older.



Health and wellbeing should be viewed holistically to comprise physical, psychological/mental and social aspects of health. afPE recommends that limited and limiting views of children and young people's health and wellbeing, which reduce health to a focus on appearance, weight, size and shape, be avoided.

From a health perspective, curriculum physical education provides an inclusive learning entitlement which should ensure that all children and young people:

- Are provided with opportunities to gain competence in a broad, balanced range of physical activities.
- Are helped to enjoy being active, and to feel confident and comfortable in a physical activity context so that they are more likely to choose to be active in their own time.
- Experience and appreciate the broad range of benefits (physical, psychological/mental and social) of a healthy, active lifestyle.
- Are aware of how active they are and should be, and know how to find out about and access activity opportunities in the community, including at school, around the home and in the local area.
- Understand about 'energy balance' and the need to increase physical activity in daily living to assist with healthy weight management.

To promote healthy, active lifestyles amongst children and young people, afPE recommends the following approaches.

- The key role of curriculum physical education should be recognised and supported in any strategy addressing children and young people's health and wellbeing. Physical education focuses on learning through the context of physical activity and is for all pupils; in this respect, it is the cornerstone of effective physical activity promotion.
- Curriculum physical education should develop the understanding, skills, confidence and attitudes required for all pupils to be active in their own time. This should include pupils learning about the physical, psychological/mental and social health benefits of physical activity, the physical activity for health guidelines for their age, and how to access the broad range of physical activity opportunities within the school setting and the local community. In teaching the above, physical education teachers should be aware of, connect with and utilise the power and momentum of national physical activity campaigns such as Change4Life (www.nhs.uk/Change4Life) and This Girl Can (www.thisgirlcan.co.uk).
- Physical education should be centrally and collaboratively involved in addressing the physical activity aspect of whole-school approaches to health, and in engaging pupils (and staff) in a broad range of interesting and appealing curricular and out-of-school-hours physical activity opportunities.
- Physical activity sessions (such as energy breaks during lessons or lunchtimes) are welcomed as an important addition to physical education. They complement curriculum physical education but should **never** replace it.
- As encouraged through whole school approaches to the promotion of health, pupils and parents should have a voice and schools should seek and respect their views on physical education, physical activity and school sport and try, where possible, to take on board their ideas.
- Schools should identify pupils who do not meet the physical activity for health guideline and attempt to establish why this is, bearing in mind that some individuals may not be able to access opportunities beyond physical education. This may be the case for children and young people: with disabilities; from families without a car; with low skill levels; who have significant household duties; and who act as carers. Culturally aware and sensitive communication with these pupils and their families could help to understand their non-participation and reduce barriers to their involvement. This may be achieved through adaptation of existing policies and practices and the creation of new and different ways of involving or engaging them in the sort of activities they would like. Further strategies may need to be developed to address the challenges of those young people who, despite all provision and opportunities, choose to reject or drop out from physical activity.
- Physical education teachers should have the knowledge, understanding and skills to be effective promoters of physical activity. This should include learning about the social construction of health and fitness and the complexity of behaviour change as a form of social reform. This may require adjustments to initial teacher training and the provision of professional development specific to the promotion of healthy, active lifestyles.

Clearly, in addition to curriculum physical education – which is statutory for every schoolchild – schools can play a significant role in enabling children and young people to adopt active lifestyles, through whole school, cross-curricular and enrichment provision.

In summary, the high quality experiences afforded by the school should also motivate and encourage children and young people to be active in their own time, to pursue activities they particularly enjoy, and provide them with the necessary knowledge, skills and understanding to enable them to take up and pursue activities now and in the future. ■

REFERENCES

- Guthold, R., Stevens, G.A., Riley, L.M. & Bull, F.C. (2019). Global trends in insufficient physical activity among adolescents: a pooled analysis of 298 population-based surveys with 1.6 million participants. *Lancet Child Adolescent Health*. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(19\)30323-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(19)30323-2).
- UK Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines (2019): <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/physical-activity-guidelines-uk-chief-medical-officers-report>.

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You can read the full 2019 Health Position paper at: www.afpe.org.uk/ It covers:

- Section 1: Physical activity, physical education and school sport
- Section 2: Whole school approaches to the promotion of physical activity
- Section 3: Physical education's contribution to public health
- Section 4: Physical activity for health guidelines
- Section 5: Significance and key features of physical activity for health guidelines
- Section 6: UK governments' physical activity targets
- Section 7: Physical activity headlines on children and young people
- Section 8: Monitoring health, fitness and physical activity in schools
- References
- Appendix 1: Physical activity data
- Appendix 2: Practical recommendations for physical education teachers for addressing childhood obesity