



Physical Activity Patterns: Young People

This fact sheet highlights the recent key facts and figures on physical activity patterns of young people aged 5 to 18 years.

Current physical activity recommendations

According to the Chief Medical Officer (2004)¹

- Children and young people should achieve 60 minutes of at least moderate intensity physical activity every day*.
- At least twice a week this should include activities to help improve bone health (activities that produce high physical stress on the bones), muscle strength and flexibility.

Physical Activity Targets for the UK

Both England and Scotland have set targets to increase physical activity levels among young people. There are currently no targets set for Wales and Northern Ireland.

England: To increase the proportion of school children in England who spend a minimum of two hours each week on high quality sport to 85% in 2008.²

Scotland: To increase the proportion of all children aged 16 and under taking the minimum recommended levels of physical activity to 80% by 2022. This will require an average increase of 1% per year across the population to achieve this target.³

Wales and Northern Ireland: Do not have any set targets at this moment in time

Health benefits of physical activity in young people

There are a range of health benefits to young people engaging in regular physical activity these include:

- Healthy growth and development of the musculoskeletal and cardiorespiratory systems.¹

*this hour can be accumulated throughout the day, e.g. 4 x 15 minutes and can be lifestyle activities, structured exercise or sport.

- Maintenance of energy balance (encouraging a healthy weight) ¹
- Prevention of predisposing risk factors of coronary heart disease, such as high blood pressure and abnormal lipid profile.¹
- Maximisation of bone health and development, during the years of growth spurt physical activity can increase bone mineral density and help reduce risk of osteoporosis in later life.¹
- Opportunities for social interaction, academic achievement, improved mental well-being and increased self-esteem.¹
- There is also some evidence to suggest that physical activity in childhood is related to general cognitive functioning and academic achievement in school. ⁴

Current levels of physical activity

The following statistics highlight the current physical activity levels of young people living in England, Wales and Scotland. There is an absence of data on young people living in Northern Ireland.

- In 2002 in England, 70% of boys and 61% of girls aged 2-15 years met the current physical activity recommendations. ⁵
- A further 13% of boys and 16% of girls participated in at least 30 minutes of physical activity on 7 days a week. ⁵ ◇
- The Scottish Health Survey (2003) found similar results with 74% of boys and 63% of girls participating in 60 minutes of activity a day and a further 12% of boys and 18% of girls achieving at least 30 minutes of activity a day. ⁶ ◇
- In Wales 42% of 11 year olds, 38% of 13 year olds and 29% of 15 year olds met the current physical activity recommendations. ⁷
- After the age of 10 girls activity levels tend to decline and by the age of 15 only 50% of English girls and 41% of Scottish girls achieved the recommended 60 minutes of physical activity on 7 days a week. ^{5, 6}
- Boys activity levels remained relatively stable until the age of 13-15 years. ^{5, 6}

◇this is the recommendation for children who are currently inactive.

School sport and PE participation

The School PE and Sport Survey 2005/06 included 16,882 partnership schools in England. Over 5 million school children participated in the survey making it the largest survey in Europe.⁸

- Overall 80% of the pupils participated in at least 2 hours of high quality PE and school sport each week[∞]
- There has been a significant increase in pupils receiving their 2 hours of PE a week within curriculum time (44% in 2003/04, to 50% in 2004/05 and now 61% in 2005/06)
- Competitive sport (e.g. football, athletics & cricket) remain popular with most schools
- Ninety-seven percent of schools have at least one sports day during the academic year
- Many schools have club links* with different sports clubs. The most common links are with football (78%), cricket (52%), rugby (46%), dance (40%) and athletics (38%).

Travel Patterns

The National Travel Survey (2005)⁹ reported that:

- Between 1995/97 and 2005 the number of primary school aged children walking to school decreased from 53% to 49%, with a consequent increase in the number of children being driven to school from 38% to 43%.
- There has been a 2% increase in secondary children walking to school from 42% in 1995/97 to 44% in 2005.
- Only 1% of primary and 2% of secondary pupils cycled to school in 2005.

[∞] High quality is defined as 'producing young people with the skills, understanding, desire and commitment to continue to improve and achieve in a range of PE, sport and health enhancing physical activities'.⁶

*The Club Links programme is part of the Governments National school Sport Strategy. Its purpose is to strengthen the links between schools and local sports clubs and in doing so increase the number of young people joining accredited sports clubs.

- The average distance for primary school aged children to travel to school has increased from 1.3 to 1.5 miles between 1995/97 and 2005 and the distance for secondary pupils to travel has remained approximately 3 miles.[#]

Sport and exercise participation

The 2002 Health Survey for England⁵ reported that:

- Boys and girls aged 5-10 years had similar sport and exercise participation levels.
- Fifty-nine percent of boys and 55% of girls participated in some form of sport and exercise for at least 15 minutes one day per week.
- Only 16% of boys and 10% of girls participated in sport or exercise on 5 or more days a week.
- Older boys (11-15 years) are more likely to participate in organised sports than girls (66% of boys compared to 57% of girls).
- At least 50% of girls aged 15 years and 43% aged 12 years did not participate in any sport on a weekly basis.

A Sport England Survey of young people found¹⁰:

- Young people are participating in a wider range of sports in their free time with an increase from 10 sports in 1994 to 11.2 in 2002.
- The top 3 sports played outside school hours remained the same between 1994 and 2002 (swimming 51%, cycling 49% & football 37%)
- Girl's football is more popular both inside (increase from 7% in 1994 to 13% in 2002) and outside school hours (increase from 13% in 1994 to 18% in 2002).
- The number of young people taking part in extra curricular activities has decreased slightly from 45% in 1999 to 42% in 2002 however, this is still a 6% increase than those taking part in 1994.
- Young people taking part in inter-school competitive sport has increased since 1994 from 26% to 31% in 2002.

[#] The length of the school journey may account for the variations in mode of transport to school.

Sedentary Behaviours

Research has shown that young people spend a considerable amount of their leisure time in sedentary pursuits. ^(10, 11)

- Nearly a third of 11-15 year olds in Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales watch 4 hours or more of TV a day during the week with even higher levels of TV viewing being reported at the weekends. ¹¹
- The number of children in the UK watching 4 hours or more each day was higher than the average for many other countries who participated in the study¹¹
- Boys were far more likely to play computer games than girls¹⁰
- Boys aged 11-15 in Scotland (41%) and Wales (35%) spent 3 or more hours a day playing computer games at the weekends. The levels were found to be only slightly lower during the week.¹¹
- On average 18% of girls aged 11-15 in Scotland and Wales spend 3 or more hours playing computer games at the weekend again slightly lower levels were reported for week days.¹¹

Inequalities in activity

Socio-economic status

The HSE 2002 ⁵ reported that there was no consistent relationship between overall activity levels and socio-economic status in young people. However participation levels in sports and exercise were related to socio-economic status. The proportion of children aged 2-10 who had taken part in at least one day of sports and exercise decreased gradually from managerial and professional (62% for boys and 65% for girls) to semi-routine and routine households (47% for boys and 42% for girls)

Index of Multiple Deprivation

The Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2000 is based on levels of deprivation in local areas in six domains (income; employment; health deprivation and disability; education, skills and training; housing; geographical access to services).*

* the index is presented in quintiles ranging from the first (the least deprived) to the fifth (the most deprived).

Although there was no consistent relationship between areas of deprivation and children's overall activity levels, the 2002 HSE⁵ revealed that there are marked differences in sport and exercise patterns by deprivation levels:

- Sport and exercise participation rates of children (aged 11-15 years) from the least deprived quintile were 9% higher than for children from the most deprived quintile.
- Sport and exercise participation rates were higher for boys and girls aged 2-10 years in the least deprived quintile group than their contemporaries in the most deprived quintile group (14% and 11% respectively).

Disabled individuals

The disability survey 2000: Survey of young people with a disability and sport, conducted by Sport England in 2001¹³ found:

- The majority of young disabled people participated in some form of sport or exercise at least once in the previous year.
- However, young disabled people were less likely to participate in sport than all young people on a regular basis.
- Young disabled people were more likely to participate in sport on a frequent basis in school lessons than out of school hours.
- Disabled young people educated at special schools were more likely to participate in sports and exercise than those in mainstream schools.
- The proportion of young disabled people participating in 2 or more hours of PE lessons was significantly lower than for all young people.

Ethnic minority groups

The 2001 HSE for England¹⁴ examined the health of Minority Ethnic Groups and reported that:

- Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Chinese young people had lower sport and exercise participation rates than young people in the general population
- Fifty-nine percent of Indian and 46% of Pakistani boys participated in sport and exercise for 5 minutes or more the previous week compared to 63% of Boys in the general population.
- As with the boys, fewer girls in the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups reported participating in sport and exercise compared with the general population.

- Irish and Black Caribbean young people had similar sport and exercise participation rates to young people in the general population.

Summary

There is growing public health concern over the effects that sedentary lifestyles are having on young people and adolescents, particularly in relation to overweight and obesity. It is important to reduce the time young people spend being sedentary and increase physical activity participation rates to improve health and prevent the development of many chronic diseases which tend to track from an early age.

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