

POSITION STATEMENT: **ACTIVE PLAY AS A FORM OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN THE EARLY YEARS**

KEY MESSAGES

- Evidence from several studies suggests infants in England are not meeting the Chief Medical Officer's (CMO) recommended guidelines of 180 minutes of daily physical activity (PA).
- PA, through play, is imperative for the development of a child's overall health. Engaging in PA during early years increases the chances of adopting healthier lifestyles as they grow old.
- Whilst play is recognised in various strategies and frameworks, greater emphasis on the benefits of play as a form of PA is needed.

Overview

National surveillance data suggests 52.8% of children and young people in England did not meet the CMO guidelines for PA. In comparison, the levels of PA in the North West of England fared better at 51.5% [1]. There is however, a lack of quantitative data when documenting activity levels in 0-5 year olds. Data from academic reports indicates high levels of sedentary behaviour in early years children [2,3,4]. Furthermore, it has been reported that 3-4 year olds are more active when in childcare settings compared to when they are home [5], despite there being evidence showing high levels of sedentary behaviour within early years settings [3].

PA through play is imperative for the development of a child's mental, cognitive and physical health [6,7]. Additionally, it is evidenced that children who regularly engage in PA during early years are more likely to adopt healthy lifestyles as they develop. One of the most common forms of physical activity for children is active play [6]. Active play is unplanned, self-directed and contains natural movement. It aids children with fundamental movement skills that includes co-ordination, balance and their gross and fine-motor skills [8,9]. Encouraging active play within early years settings is the ideal opportunity to engage children in PA that's set within a safe and nurturing environment.

In 2021-22, the National Child Measurement Programme found that 22.3% of reception aged children were either living with obesity or overweight [10]. In contrast, the North West of England averages

higher, at 23.3% [1]. The CMO Guidelines reports that PA reaches a lifetime peak at 5 years old and declines thereafter. Accomplishing higher levels of PA during early years should aid in maintaining higher levels in later life [11].

What does the evidence say?

- Low levels of PA is recognised as a contributing factor to increased rates of childhood obesity [11].
- One randomised controlled trial in England found (88.9%) of children aged 2-4 years did not engage in the CMO recommended guidelines of 180 minutes of daily PA [2].
- It is reported that levels of outdoor play activities have decreased significantly over the past 30 years [6,12].
- Restricting a child's opportunity to play can have a detrimental effect on their childhood, causing long-term effects on both their physical and cognitive development [6].
- Children's ability to cope with stress is influenced through play. Evidence suggests that children who spend time in a natural environment can reduce anxiety [6].
- Barriers such as lack of green spaces, facilities, parental behaviour and transportation need to be taken into consideration when addressing outdoor active play [11,14].
- As PA and sedentary patterns are developed during early years, this is a critical time to encourage PA [15].

- One study found that two thirds of Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) children spent their time stationary within classrooms[3].
- It is important that children are given ample time and space to engage with play in a stimulating environment which is a key factor in encouraging them to be active [16].

Policy context

Despite there being no current official national guidelines within the UK based on play and PA in pre-school children, there are multiple policies and frameworks that highlight the benefits of PA in the early years:

Better Health: Healthier Families: 'Better Health' offers guidance on physical play activities to engage children achieve the recommended PA guidelines [17].

NICE Guidelines: Physical activity for children and young people: This guidance recommends those who provide programmes to children and young people should ensure active play is accommodation [18].

Sport England: Uniting the Movement: Sport England's Uniting the Movement includes a focus on creating and protecting spaces for children to play and enjoy being active outdoors [19].

Statutory framework for the EYFS: Setting the standards for learning, development and care for children from birth to five: This framework argues that government at local and national level, as well as schools should value the importance of free-play as an important aspect of the child's school day [20].

HENRY: HENRY offer active play activities that support children in being active, connecting with families and supporting social development [21].

Family Hubs: Family Hubs are local support centres commissioned by the government where families with children and young people aged 0-19 years can access support for health and wellbeing needs. There is an opportunity here to promote the importance on active play to parents of young children.

Our position and what we will do

Active play is key to promoting good physical and mental health in the early years. Stakeholders across the system, specifically early years settings, should seek to provide sufficient opportunities and raise awareness of the benefits with parents and carers. We will use relevant opportunities including consultations and enquiries to promote greater emphasis on the role of play as a of physical activity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government should routinely collect data on activity levels in infants to better understand how active young children are.
- Local authorities ensure that green spaces and outdoor play areas are taken into consideration when taking into account local plans and planning policies, providing access to everyone.
- Early Years providers must provide access to an outdoor play area or at least, outdoor activities are to be planned and taken on a daily basis [16].

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