

Practice Briefing

Early years: Practical strategies for promoting physical activity

BHF National Centre
physical activity+health

Funded by
British Heart Foundation

Contents

Introduction 1

Section 1 – Planning and developing physical activity initiatives 3

Section 2 – Working with parents and carers 5

Section 3 – Increasing physical activity in early years settings 7

Example of current practice 10

NICE behaviour change summary 12

The purpose of this briefing is to provide commissioners, physical activity and health professionals and managers of early years settings with evidence-based recommendations and practical strategies to consider when planning, developing and delivering activities to promote physical activity in the early years, ie, children from birth to five years. These recommendations offer guidelines for best practice. While it would be beneficial for physical activity initiatives to incorporate all of the recommendations given in this document, this may not always be feasible. We therefore advise that initiatives try to incorporate as many recommendations as possible.

Introduction

The benefits of physical activity for health and wellbeing across the lifespan have been well reported. Despite this, levels of participation in physical activity remain low across many age groups, and strategies are needed to increase activity levels across the population. Identifying and using strategies that are both effective and cost-effective is important to ensure efficient use of available resources and funding. This briefing brings together the available research evidence as well as practical strategies to outline recommended approaches and actions for effectively promoting physical activity with children in the early years (aged 0-5).

Promoting physical activity in the early years is a relatively new area of research which has only gained momentum in recent years, and there is limited evidence regarding what to do when trying to increase physical activity in this age group. The majority of current research focuses on preventing or tackling obesity rather than specifically increasing physical activity. Furthermore, due to difficulties in measuring physical activity in this age group, research has typically focused on factors wider than just those of changes to children's actual physical activity levels, such as beliefs and attitudes of parents and carers toward physical activity in the early years.

In July 2011, the Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) from the four home countries of the UK launched new physical activity guidelines for the early years, an age group not included in previous public health physical activity guidelines. For more information on these guidelines, see the joint CMO report *Start Active, Stay Active* (2011).





Practitioners working in early years settings and parents and carers strongly influence the physical activity opportunities available for children in the early years. It is therefore important to consider the knowledge and attitudes of individuals caring for, or working with, children as well as equipment being used to facilitate physical activity and the provision of different types of activities within different settings.

Key recommendations and practical strategies for how best to incorporate the current evidence around physical activity promotion in the early years are listed below. In order to translate research evidence into practice and develop these recommendations and practical strategies we have taken into consideration the current available evidence and identified components of interventions which are often repeated in successful research projects as well as using experience from practice. The recommendations are provided in three sections:

Section 1 – Planning and developing physical activity initiatives

Section 2 – Working with parents and carers

Section 3 - Increasing physical activity in early years settings

At the end of the document there is also a summary of the NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) public health guidance on behaviour change (PH6). This more general guidance is important to bear in mind alongside the population specific information in sections 1-3 when formulating physical activity initiatives.

To help commissioners and early years setting managers assess their initiatives against the criteria in this practice briefing, two check lists have been created to accompany this document which highlight the strategies which are important for consideration at the different levels of planning. These can be found at **www.bhfactive.org.uk**

Section 1 – Planning and developing physical activity initiatives

This section outlines our evidence-based recommendations for actions that should be taken or components that should be put into place when planning and developing physical activity initiatives for the early years. These recommendations are important regardless of whether the aim of the initiative is to increase physical activity provision in an early years setting or create a community programme to help parents and carers increase provision at home.

Each evidence-based recommendation (highlighted below) is underpinned by research findings and is followed by practical strategies to support implementation.

Develop initiatives which target adults who interact with children in the early years

Adult interaction has been found to facilitate greater levels of physical activity in children under five, but research has shown that early years practitioners lack confidence and enthusiasm for promoting physical activity.

There is robust evidence on the importance of the parental and carer interaction with children in the early years. Parents, carers and early years practitioners are responsible for the activities in which children engage. For example, they dictate meal times, decide when to put the child to bed and when and where the child is allowed to have opportunities for outdoor and indoor play.

Strategies

- Target activities and resources at those who have responsibility for the child and their day to day activities.
- Work with those who have high levels of contact with children in the early years, such as early years practitioners, parents and carers.

Consult with parents and carers to identify their needs and barriers

Research has demonstrated that when trying to involve parents and carers of young children in an activity it is important to consult with them to identify their needs and the barriers they face.

By addressing the concerns of the parents and carers it may be possible to break down some of the barriers which hinder them from attending an activity or educational session or which may be hindering the child from being active. For example, childcare worries are a barrier parents and carers may face when attending educational sessions, while busy work schedules or lack of space or time at home are examples of barriers which may be hindering parents and carers from providing ample opportunities for their child to be active.

Strategies

- Consult parents and carers of the target group prior to starting any activities for either them or their children and identify what motivates them to attend.
- Provide practical solutions for issues that might hinder attendance, for example, provide options for childcare at the venue or make the session child friendly.
- Work with parents and carers during sessions to help identify what may be hindering their child from being active and provide them with practical examples of how to overcome these barriers. For example, if lack of equipment is an issue, use everyday household objects to encourage active play.

Use an integrated approach to help target information at parents and carers

Studies have demonstrated the benefits of using existing health services to provide information to parents and carers. There is merit in using those in medical professions, such as health visitors, paediatricians and GPs, to discuss information on physical activity.

Strategies

- Use nurseries, children's centres and schools to provide information to parents and carers on the importance and benefits of physical activity and provide ideas on what they can do with their children to help them be more physically active.
- Work in partnership with local medical, health and social services in order to send consistent messages on physical activity to parents and carers.

Use an integrated approach to help target information at parents and carers

Studies have demonstrated the benefits of using existing health services to provide information to parents and carers. There is merit in using those in medical professions, such as health visitors, paediatricians and GPs, to discuss information on physical activity.

Strategies

- Use nurseries, children's centres and schools to provide information to parents and carers on the importance and benefits of physical activity and provide ideas on what they can do with their children to help them be more physically active.
- Work in partnership with local medical, health and social services in order to send consistent messages on physical activity to parents and carers.

Use multi-component approaches when delivering information

Evidence has demonstrated that the repetition of messages to parents and carers through a range of approaches is more effective than only using one method. Successful delivery methods have ranged from tailored individual feedback to group education sessions and pamphlets to posters in community facilities.



Strategies

- Use a variety of different media, such as leaflets or posters, to relay physical activity messages to parents and carers.
- Work in partnership with local services to provide parents and carers with consistent physical activity messages, eg, agree with health visitors or early years settings how and what information is provided to parents and carers.

For more information on physical activity planning and provision within an early years setting, order the British Heart Foundation *Early movers* resource from **www.bhf.org.uk/publications**

Section 2 – Working with parents and carers

This section outlines our evidence-based recommendations for working directly with parents and carers in either a community or early years setting which are essential for ensuring children in the early years have sufficient opportunities to be physically active.

Each evidence-based recommendation (highlighted below) is underpinned by research findings and is followed by practical strategies to support implementation.

Provide parents and carers with information on the importance of physical activity and the adverse effects of too much sitting time

An educational component often forms the basis of research programmes aimed at parents of young children. While research often does not directly report on increases in parental knowledge, studies that have used educational components do demonstrate increases in physical activity in the children and the frequency of parents engaging in active play with their children.

It is important to educate parents and carers about the detrimental health effects of too much sitting time, ie, sedentary behaviours. While the reasons behind the effects of too much sitting time are not fully understood, one major concern is whether children in the early years who spend a large proportion of their time awake seated or restrained are missing out on opportunities to be active. There is also concern regarding the effect too much sitting time has on obesity.

Information has been relayed to parents and carers through a variety of methods such as providing them with leaflets through a school or trusted source or running parenting classes, which include specific sessions on physical activity.

Strategies

- Provide parents and carers with information on the importance of physical activity and the adverse effects of too much sitting time through a variety of formats such as providing them with a leaflet from a school or trusted source or including it as an element of a parenting class.
- Where appropriate provide informational materials for parents and carers in multiple languages and at a suitable reading level for the target population.

Educate parents and carers about what counts as physical activity

Parents and carers often report that their child is already sufficiently active, but the reality is many activities children participate in are sedentary in nature.

Research has demonstrated that parents and carers believe their child has different opportunities for active play depending on their own willingness to engage with their child. Research, however, is unclear about how a parent or carer's *own* physical activity level influences physical activity levels in children under five years.

Strategies

- Educate parents and carers on the amount of physical activity their child should be participating in every day.
- Provide parents with concrete examples of what physical activity looks like at different stages of development, such as, tummy time for non-walkers or energetic play for walkers, with an explanation as to why it is important.
- Motivate parents and carers to critically evaluate the types of activities their children participate in, such as sedentary activities like sitting in a sandbox versus energetic activities like chasing bubbles.
- Work with parents to identify how long their child participates in each type of activity and provide parents with ideas on how they can balance sedentary activities with more energetic ones.
- Provide parents and carers with a range of age appropriate indoor and outdoor activity ideas for their child.



Create age inclusive promotional materials for education and activity sessions

If the title of a session is too specific, parents and carers might not see themselves as the target audience and might therefore not be motivated to get involved. For example, obesity prevention projects often struggle to recruit people because parents and carers do not perceive their child to be an unhealthy weight.

Strategies

- Use an inclusive title and description when creating promotional materials, eg, 'Do you want a baby/ child that sleeps well at night? Find out how physical activity can help'.
- Use the age of the child as the only inclusion criteria on promotional materials, eg, use age not weight status.

Section 3 – Increasing physical activity in early years settings

This section outlines our evidence-based recommendations to help those working in early years settings effectively increase physical activity and decrease sedentary behaviour in children under five.

Each evidence-based recommendation (highlighted below) is underpinned by research findings and is followed by practical strategies to support implementation.

Ensure appropriate levels of practitioner training and support are in place

Adult interaction has been found to facilitate greater levels of physical activity in children under five, but research has shown that early years practitioners lack confidence and enthusiasm for promoting physical activity.

The presence of more qualified practitioners, eg, university graduates, has been connected with more energetic activity in the playground.

Research has demonstrated that a single training session on how to promote physical activity at an early years settings session is not enough for sustained changes in practice.

Practical experience has shown that when implementing changes in physical activity provision, it is important for the managers of a setting to be involved and provide extra support to practitioners in the process.

Strategies

- Consult with setting managers to ensure appropriate levels of practitioner support are in place.
- Work with practitioners at each setting to identify and fulfil training and support needs.
- Provide 'booster' training and information sessions to refresh practitioners' skills and knowledge for promoting physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviour within their setting.
- Provide practitioners with a range of activity ideas for both outdoors and indoors.

Partner with external agencies to help practitioners develop their physical activity knowledge and expertise

Early years practitioners may not have a strong expertise in developing and facilitating physical activity opportunities for children in the early years. Collaborating with external agencies when initially looking to change physical activity provision within an early years setting may help provide extra support while practitioners are developing their knowledge and skills and building their confidence.

Strategies

- Identify community based support systems, such as a physical activity co-ordinator or local authority health improvement team, which can work with practitioners to help provide physical activity sessions for the children or can provide practitioners' training sessions.
- Consider the individual needs of the setting and practitioners to determine how best to provide support.

Involve parents and carers both directly and indirectly in the activities to ensure they are also carried out in the home environment

Parent and carer involvement is crucial for ensuring physical activities carried out in a setting are continued in the home environment.

Positive effects on children's physical activity levels have been evident even through parents' and carers' indirect involvement with the early years setting's activities. One study saw increases in activity levels after providing details on the activities their child had been doing at nursery and instructions on how to carry out the activity at home. In addition, information on the importance and benefits of physical activity was provided to parents and carers.

Practical experience has demonstrated simply equipping practitioners with the skills and knowledge they need to enable them to speak and work with parents and carers may have a positive impact on the child's physical activity levels.

Strategies

- Get parents involved directly through the setting, eg, invite them for a stay and play session or put on educational sessions.
- Provide practitioners with specific training on how to promote physical activity for children in the early years to parents and carers.
- Involve parents and carers indirectly by speaking with them or providing visual prompts which let them know what physical activities their child has been doing during the day.
- Provide parents and carers with physical activity ideas for the home environment.

Offer more frequent short periods of outdoor play

Studies in pre-schoolers have demonstrated that children are most physically active during the first 10–15 minutes of outdoor play time.

Shorter periods of outdoor play have been linked with higher step counts and physical activity levels.

There is no evidence that children compensate for increased outdoor activity by being less active during the rest of the day.

Strategies

- Modify break times in order to provide shorter, eg, 10-15 minutes, and more frequent outdoor play sessions.

Provide more 'activity friendly' portable equipment

Studies in preschools have demonstrated that children are more active when more portable outdoor equipment is provided. Providing extra fixed equipment and playground markings has not been effective in increasing children's physical activity levels.

More available equipment coupled with increased creativity in use has also resulted in increased levels of physical activity.

Strategies

- Provide a variety of smaller objects for children to play with, such as balls, push or pull toys and tricycles.
- Provide parents with activity ideas along with a 'take home bag' of activity friendly equipment or list of everyday household items which can be used to promote activity, such as lengths of materials with different textures or balls of different sizes.



Include adult-led activities to improve motor skills

While research has shown that shorter outdoor activity sessions are more beneficial for increasing levels of physical activity, it is important to provide some longer sessions of structured activity, ie, adult led activity, to improve motor skills.

Research has shown that providing 1.5 hours of adult-led activity each week is sufficient for producing improvements in motor skills development, ie, development of movement abilities involving small muscles and precise movements (fine motor skills) or whole body movements involving posture and larger movements (gross motor skills). Successful motor skills development sessions which promote fundamental movement skills (eg, locomotor, balance and ball skills), body management and physical fitness tend to last 30-45 minutes and be implemented on two to three days per week. The research behind these findings, however, was carried out in slightly older children (aged 4-6 years), and this length of time may not be appropriate for younger age groups. Therefore, it seems more sensible to recommend that adult-led sessions balance the length of the activity to a child's interest and attention span corresponding to their age.

Strategies

- Provide adult-led activity sessions throughout the day which offer children an opportunity to improve motor skills, for example, have a practitioner-led throwing and catching session during outdoor play time which the children can choose to join.
- Work towards providing children with longer activity sessions, eg, 30-45 minutes maximum by age 5 or 6, which are explicitly designed to improve motor skills development two to three times a week.

Use physical activity as a medium through which to integrate all areas of learning and development

Physical activity can be used to support a number of UK early years curriculum areas, such as physical development, language, literacy and communication skills and personal social and emotional development.

Strategies

- Integrate physical activity into the daily routine when planning activities so as not to infringe on opportunities for free play, eg, build actions into counting rhymes.
- Use physical activity to support other areas of the curriculum, for example, using positional and directional language when playing games.

Ensure a balance of free play and adult-led physical activity opportunities

Free play is beneficial not only for enabling children to practise their motor skills but also for their emotional, social and cognitive development. Therefore, it is important to balance structured activities with opportunities for free play.

Strategies

- Provide specific opportunities for physical activity, such as tummy time, crawling activities or energetic games, within the early years setting's daily routine.
- Assess indoor and outdoor environments, and if possible rearrange them to offer more free space for active play.
- Balance more adult-led activity sessions with opportunities for indoor and outdoor free play.
- Repeat activities to allow for lots of 'practice time', so young children have ample opportunities to master their environment and refine their newly learned skills.

For more information and resources on physical activity in the early years visit **www.bhfactive.org.uk**

Example of current practice

While it is advantageous to include as many recommendations from this briefing as possible when creating initiatives to promote physical activity in the early years, it may not always be feasible to include each one. Below are two examples of how different audiences can be engaged in understanding the importance of physical activity in the early years.

Engaging with parents

This example of a physical activity workshop demonstrates how settings can work with parents to provide them with information on physical activity. **This workshop was targeted at parents and carers and used a multicomponent approach to provide information on physical activity and activity ideas to these individuals.**

A two-hour workshop targeted at parents and carers titled the 'Physical play' workshop was hosted by Heatherbrook Pre-School in Leicester City. The workshop was run twice, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, to accommodate parents and carers whose children only attended a half-day session, and was promoted in the setting's newsletter and posters.

This workshop gave parents and carers the opportunity to learn about the importance of physical activity for children in the early years through informal conversations with staff. A notice board was created to display facts about physical activity and how it affects a child's development. Practitioners also gave parents and carers leaflets on physical activity and ideas for activities they could do with their children. Throughout the workshop, nursery staff spoke with parents and carers about physical activity opportunities they have in their home environment, local parks they could take their children to and activities available at the local Sure Start centre.

The event also showcased activities the children do at the setting, such as parachute games and Zumba dance. Parents were encouraged to try these activities with their children at the event. An obstacle course, which included challenges for the children such as crawling, sliding through tunnels, climbing on crates and jumping into tyres, was set up outside. Parents were invited to join in and encourage their children with the challenges.

The nursery is currently putting together equipment bags and activity cards for parents and carers to take home.

Feedback from the individuals attending the event highlighted the importance of educating parents and carers about physical activity in the early years. Many parents and carers were surprised to learn how much work and practice needs to go into helping children develop different skills and techniques that adults often take for granted, eg, skipping, throwing, hopping.



Practitioner training

This project demonstrates how practitioners' knowledge and understanding of physical activity in the early years can be increased.

The **Public Health team at NHS Leicester City and Leicester City Council partnered with four private nurseries** to pilot a physical activity project for the early years. The aim of the project was to **increase nursery practitioners' knowledge and understanding of physical activity and activity provision within the nursery setting for non-walkers,** children aged 0-2 years.

Throughout the eight month project **practitioners were offered support through:**

- two formal training sessions (two hours each)
- two sharing practice meetings (two hours each)
- three informal support visits to each nursery (15-30 minutes each).

Key concepts covered throughout this project included:

- increasing physical activity within the early years setting
- creating enabling environments
- creating positive activities for non-walkers
- positive interactions between practitioners and non-walkers
- practitioner engagement with parents and carers.

The training sessions were designed to offer practitioners a formal introduction to physical activity in non-walkers. They provided practitioners with information on the importance and benefits of physical activity in the early years, as well as resources which support them in changing provision and provided practical ideas on how to increase provision within the nursery setting. The sharing practice meetings offered practitioners a more informal chance to sit down with the other nurseries involved in the project to share what had and had not been successful in their nurseries.

Training facilitators visited practitioners informally at their individual settings. The purpose of these visits was to give practitioners specific feedback and suggestions on changes to their individual nursery environments.

The BHFNC conducted a formal evaluation of this project. We found that following the training practitioners:

- had an increased understanding of physical activity in non-walkers
- were provided with tangible methods for including more physical activity for non-walkers in the nursery's daily routine
- were more actively involved in providing high quality physical activity opportunities for non-walkers
- felt more confident and were more willing to discuss a child's physical activity and physical activity ideas with their parents and carers.

The findings from this project are being used to further develop a training resource for early years practitioners and physical activity standards for early year settings.

NICE behaviour change summary

The information on this page is a summary of the NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) public health guidance on behaviour change (2007). These strategies are important to keep in mind throughout the different phases of physical activity initiatives regardless of the target audience or setting.



Development

Develop knowledge of your target audience, eg, their needs, interests, barriers and facilitators.

Conduct a needs assessment to address how personal, environmental, social and financial factors may affect the initiative.

Develop the initiative in collaboration with your target audience.

Develop and build on the strengths and assets of your target group, eg, current skills, talents and capacity.



Planning

Work in partnership with individuals, communities and organisations to plan initiatives.

Take into consideration the local context and circumstances, eg, socio-economic, cultural, social and environmental factors, when planning the initiative.

Include structural improvements, eg, consider how changing the physical environment, access to and provision of services and service delivery may affect participation.

Create a detailed written plan which:

- provides the theoretical link between initiative and outcome
- identifies the specific behaviour being targeted and why
- justifies the models used to design/deliver the initiative
- specifies what will be delivered, when, by whom, for how long and how often
- describes how the initiative will be evaluated, including the process and outcome measurements and the methods for evaluation.



Implementation phase

Develop social approval for the initiative.

Target specific groups and tailor initiatives to the target audience.

Provide training and support for those involved in developing and delivering the initiative.

For more detailed information on behaviour change, consult: National Institute for Health and Care Excellence public health guidance 6: behaviour change (2007).

To learn more about how to evaluate a physical activity initiative, see the Physical Activity Standard Evaluation Framework published by the National Obesity Observatory (NOO), now part of Public Health England.


MONSTER

Keep up-to-date

Our bi-monthly updates bring the latest developments in physical activity and health straight to your inbox and feature all the latest resources and publications, funding opportunities, conferences, events and much more.

Sign-up to our database – It's FREE!

To receive our bi-monthly physical activity update and information about other resources like this evidence briefing subscribe to the free BHFNC database at **www.bhfactive.org.uk/subscribe-to-database**

Follow us on Twitter

You can also keep up-to-date on the latest news by following us on Twitter. Follow us on **@BHFactive**

Got a burning question?

Do you have a physical activity query you need an answer to? Our helpline may be able to help.
Get in touch on **01509 226421** or email **bhfnc@lboro.ac.uk**

T54799/DPS/July13

Last updated July 2013

Published by
British Heart Foundation National Centre (BHFNC)
for Physical Activity and Health, Loughborough University

T: 01509 226421 F: 01509 226420
www.bhfactive.org.uk

Loughborough University

The British Heart Foundation is a registered charity in England and Wales (225971) and Scotland (SC039426).