RUNNING THE GAUNTLET AGAINST CHILD OBESITY!

A child health and wellbeing group has called for Government to re-think the role of physical activity in its Child Obesity Strategy.

The much-heralded 2016 strategy thrust Ministers into the eye of a storm when the document was cut from 60 pages to 13 with many key recommendations axed. Now a report from the All Party Group on A Fit and Healthy Childhood demands a review of the role of physical activity in the fight against an entrenched national obesity crisis.

Baroness Floella Benjamin, Co-Chair of the Group since its formation in 2014 said:

'Today we're publishing our eighth report 'Physical Activity in Early Childhood' and it's timely reading in the wake of a Government Childhood Obesity Strategy that has been widely criticised for a disappointing lack of resolve and ambition.

The ethos of our Group is that childhood lasts a lifetime and that patterns set up in a baby's very first days can have lasting consequences during the course of a life span. It's not rocket science to say that the UK is in the throes of an obesity epidemic – but at the moment, our Government is not rising to the occasion with all the weapons at its disposal. This APPG is unique in the concerted and determined emphasis that it continues to put upon physical activity as an essential component of any anti obesity policy and the present report follows our two previous in-depth studies on Play and Physical Education. Here we argue that schemes and finance streams predicated solely on improving the nation's nutrition are not in themselves enough. They must go hand in hand with the encouragement of physical activity in the pre-pregnancy, antenatal, post natal and early childhood periods, establishing patterns for the positive behaviours that will reduce our national waistline and support the fit and healthy families that will make a 21st century United Kingdom truly fit for purpose.'

The report is a blueprint for physical activity in early childhood and includes:

- **The nature and diversity of current provision**
- **How government, local authorities, voluntary organisations and business can best promote a rich offer of physical activity opportunities**
- **How infant and baby swimming helps to achieve the physical, cognitive and emotional goals for young children and families**
- **The relevance of physical activity to chidlren with a mental/physical impairment**
- **Socioeconomic issues, ethnic diversity and the planning system as they affect the provision of physical activity opportunities**
- **The role of advertising, traditional and social media and technology in promoting early childhood physical activity**
- **Legislative practice in the UK and models of physical activity promoted by other countries.**

'Physical Activity in the Early Years' is sponsored by infant and baby swimming organisation, Water Babies and Managing Director, Steve Franks welcomed the findings, commenting:

'It's really excellent finally to see a report fully acknowledging the overwhelmingly positive effect of infant and baby swimming and its contribution to the fitness, health and wellbeing of the whole family. Swimming really is a holistic activity and the recognition of its strong role in improving bone health, muscle tone, linguistic capability and spatial awareness as well as motor -skills development and cognitive awareness – leading to enhanced academic performance is long overdue. The safety benefit of teaching infants to swim has long been recognised but now the Government needs to ensure that an early Primary swimming programme is properly financed, that staff are well trained with professional expertise regularly updated and that issues affecting accessibility such as transport costs are no longer insuperable obstacles. Investing in all aspects of physical activity is a must for modern life. Swimming should be an integral part of such a strategy and not an 'add on' or optional extra.'

The APPG report strongly advocates a holistic approach in the fight against child obesity; regarding nutritional awareness and policy as equal in importance to the promotion of strong physical activity programmes. However, lead author, Helen Clark has called for a 'level playing field' for physical activity and an equality of support and profile from government. She added:

'Of course The APPG on A Fit and Healthy Childhood welcomes measures such as the Sugar Tax and we value the fact that accruing revenue will be invested in programmes to promote both physical activity and balanced diets for school age children. However, current practice is contradictory. Whilst sporting events are increasing in popularity, they are also indelibly associated with the promotion of 'energy drinks,' with dubious nutritional claims and containing a cocktail of carbohydrates and flavourings that may actually make children gain weight! The same mixed message arose earlier this year when a National Trust/Cadbury physical activity collaboration 'rewarded' youngsters with calorific mini chocolate eggs! Our report shows that local areas have good initiatives to tackle child obesity, but in practice, funding is allocated overwhelmingly to healthy eating/clubs/gardening/menu planning and sugar reduction schemes without reference to physical activity.

We need a national campaign to stop the rot. The excellent 'Daily Mile' campaign pioneered in Scotland by Elaine Wyllie shows what can be done. We now need our Government to pick up the physical activity gauntlet – and not to mince words - RUN WITH IT!'

ENDS:

'Physical Activity in Early Childhood' will be launched at a reception in Dining Room A of the House of Commons on Tuesday, 17th October 2017 from 4-6pm

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