

Fact Sheet

Factors influencing physical activity in the early years

Physical activity can be influenced by a wide range of factors. In the early years, children have little independence and rely on adults to make their decisions. Therefore social and environmental influences that may help or hinder physical activity may be particularly important. Factors which may influence how physically active a child under the age of six years is are outlined below.

Demographic

- Boys are generally more active than girls.
- In younger children, a child's age has little influence on the amount of physical activity they participate in.
- It's not clear whether a child's ethnicity or their BMI/ weight may have an impact on physical activity levels.

Social/cultural

- While parental encouragement does not appear to change physical activity in the early years, parent-child interactions and role modelling appears to encourage higher levels of physical activity in young children.
- A parent's weight and physical activity levels have mixed effects on their children's physical activity levels.
- Parental/maternal education level has shown mixed influences on their child's physical activity levels.
- Socio-economic status is not related to the time a child spends physically active.
- A child who watches more television (TV) or spends much of their time sitting may have lower overall physical activity levels, but this is still unclear.

Psychological

- Very few studies have looked at psychological factors in this age group. No conclusions on the relationship between these factors and physical activity are available to date.

Environmental

- Children who spend more time playing outdoors have higher levels of physical activity.
- Settings with fewer children, shorter breaks and more time between breaks were found to have higher levels of physical activity. Children in the same setting often had similar physical activity levels.
- Weather has been found to have a mixed effect on children's physical activity levels.

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Factors influencing sedentary behaviours in the early years

Sedentary behaviour, or time spent sitting, is a relatively new area of public health research. Only a small number of studies have looked at which factors influence sedentary behaviours outside of screen time such as TV viewing. Below are outlined the current factors which may influence how much time a child under seven years spends sitting or watching TV.

Demographic

- At this age, neither boys nor girls tend to spend more time watching TV.
- Older children might spend more time watching TV than younger children.
- It is unclear whether children with a higher BMI spend more time watching TV than normal weight children.
- Ethnicity may be related to the total amount of screen viewing a child does.
- Family structure/parental marital status has no impact on the amount of time a child spends watching TV.

Social/cultural

- Family viewing habits have a strong impact on the amount of TV a young child watches.
- Children of parents with a high BMI tend to spend more time watching TV.
- Parents' educational attainment may influence the amount of time a child spends watching TV.
- Children whose parents impose screen viewing limits/ rules spend less time sitting/watching TV than those whose parents don't have rules.

Psychological

- To date, no psychological factors have been assessed for their relationship with sedentary behaviours in young children.

Environmental

- It is unclear if children with TVs in their room watch more TV than those who don't.
- The total number of TVs in the house is not related to screen viewing time.
- While children whose parents think their neighbourhood is safe watch less TV, time spent playing outdoors does not affect the amount of time spent watching TV.



References

Factors influencing physical activity

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Factors influencing sedentary behaviours in the early years

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