

Ready for action

Nicole Weinstein discovers how active-play uniforms could reshape UK primary school classrooms by boosting children's health, confidence and engagement

Traditional school uniforms restrict movement, limit opportunities for active play, and 'don't reflect the needs of modern learning environments'. That is the message from the Active Uniform Alliance, a coalition of educators, parents and health professionals who are calling to transform school uniforms to support healthier, happier and more active young learners.

Campaigners argue that formal uniforms with their restrictive skirts, impractical footwear and movement-limiting designs create significant barriers to natural movement and play. This is backed up by a global study led by academics from Cambridge University who found that children who wear school uniforms may be less physically active.

The coalition is calling for primary schools to move towards 'always active uniforms', made from breathable fabrics that are not restrictive around the neck and have a loose cut to enable free movement. They include T-shirts or cotton polo shirts and leggings or jogging bottoms, which are 'robust, easy to clean and cheap to replace'.

By allowing spontaneous participation in sport and physical activity without the need to change clothes, they reduce the barriers to active play throughout the school day. This aligns with research from the Youth Sport Trust (YST), which finds that 74 per cent of parents with children aged four to 11 and 67 per cent of primary school teachers would support an always active uniform policy.

The YST, which champions the goal of giving every child 60 minutes of PE, sport and play each day, has been spotlighting schools pioneering the always active uniforms approach. To find out what this looks like in practice, *Nursery World* spoke to two schools already embracing the change.

DAME DOROTHY PRIMARY SCHOOL, SUNDERLAND

Dame Dorothy Primary School has always taken pride in being an active school, but in



April 2024, the head teacher took it one step further.

With obesity rates in Sunderland among the worst in England for Year 6 children, leaders decided to trial a PE-inspired uniform designed for movement, comfort and inclusion.

'As educators and leaders, we face an important question: what can we do, within the school gates, to reverse these trends and create healthier futures?' head teacher Iain Williamson asks. 'For us, the answer starts with the basics: how we dress for school.'

Dame Dorothy's always active uniform consists of a polyester sports T-shirt, leggings or joggers, and a quarter-zip top. At less than half the cost of traditional uniform and replacing the need for a separate PE kit, Williamson says it is 'affordable, easy to wash, doesn't need ironing and, crucially, it's popular with both pupils and parents'.

In a school where activity is part of the ethos, staff found that traditional uniforms were hindering movement, discouraging participation, and disproportionately affecting girls and pupils with special

educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Williamson says, 'Our journey started a decade ago, following a teacher's observation that a short run after phonics improved her class's behaviour and focus. We created a perimeter path and introduced a daily running club. But while physical activity became part of our whole school identity, the uniform was still a barrier.'

'We had children reluctant to run, avoiding climbing equipment, or sitting out PE entirely,' he adds.

Since introducing the always active uniform, feedback has been 'overwhelmingly positive' from pupils, parents and staff.

'A uniform like ours – worn by both staff and pupils – has a liberating effect on teachers, reinforcing the message that we are an active school. Children are dressed to go outside and climb, jump, run and be active. It's given our early years staff the freedom to get children outside and moving in all weathers,' Williamson says.

'It's a pointless task to try to keep EYFS children sitting for more than four to five minutes – they're just not ready or able. This approach – short bursts of teaching

early years in schools: school uniforms



St Michael's has active uniforms



Activity levels have increased



The policy impacts all learning

interspersed with outdoor activities – often gives Reception teachers another five minutes of quality learning later on. Whereas pushing through and ignoring the signs can result in more behavioural issues, clashes and lack of focus,' he adds.

But this approach is not limited to early years. 'It's about embedding movement into the school day from EYFS up to Key Stage 2 so that it supports rather than competes with academic learning,' he adds.

Not only does the uniform 'lend itself to every aspect of early years life', it also helps children manage toileting, as it is easier to pull down joggers or leggings. Children with SEND also report that the material is comfortable on their skin. 'It's not itchy or stiff. It's light, breathable and easily dries. It supports inclusivity, and when children feel comfortable, confident and ready to move, they are more focused and resilient,' Williamson adds.

ST MICHAEL'S C OF E PRIMARY SCHOOL, DURHAM

Before Covid, St Michael's C of E Primary School had a traditional uniform policy with trousers, skirts, leather shoes and button-up cardigans. But in 2021, the school switched to an active uniform to support children's holistic development.

'With a renewed focus on outdoor play and physical activity to support our post-Covid cohorts, we needed a practical and comfortable uniform to match,' says executive head teacher Beth Dawson.

Stiff grey trousers have been replaced with easy-to-pull-up jogging bottoms, and leggings or shorts have replaced pinafores. Polo T-shirts and jumpers with the school logo are optional, and parents can bulk buy from supermarkets, making it 'accessible for all,' explains Dawson.

One of the key changes since introducing

the new uniform has been children's 'willingness to get dirty,' says EYFS teacher Nic Bourner. 'We encourage them to run, jump, climb, roll around, and get messy outdoors, and an active uniform supports this. Parents are also more relaxed because items can affordably be replaced.'

Staff also wear active uniforms, such as joggers, leggings, and trainers, to model active behaviours and take part freely in physical activities throughout the day.

As well as boosting children's activity levels, the active wear has also increased children's independence and 'readiness' for Reception.

'Rather than getting frustrated being unable to pull up tights, pull down trousers or take off shirts with zips or buttons, the leggings and joggers slide down easily. This supports their "self-help" skills and gives them a sense of achievement,' explains Bourner. 'It also frees up more time for more quality teaching as we're not spending 40 minutes of an hour-long PE lesson getting changed,' she adds.

Removing the barrier of dressing and undressing has also opened up more opportunities for planned and spontaneous physical activity throughout the day.

'We have motor skill activities each morning, where children do obstacle courses such as crawling under benches or balancing on beams. It's much easier to move freely in the active uniforms,' explains Anne-Marie Orchard, PE lead across the One Excellence multi-academy trust. 'It also facilitates movement breaks during transitions, so when the teachers notice that concentration is lagging, they can easily do a circuit – for example, some jumping on a trampette – or a lap around the playground.'

There are also plenty of opportunities within provision for children to practise dressing themselves. The role-play area includes dressing-up clothes with a variety

of fastenings, and 'we make sure all children are supported as they develop these skills,' Bourner says. 'They also have full-body suits for outdoor play in wet weather, which they learn to put on and zip up themselves.'

And when it comes to formal learning, children are more comfortable sitting on the carpet for 'short bursts of such as phonics and literacy,' she adds.

'They come back from movement breaks more self-regulated and less fidgety.'

Tracking children's movement has been an important step in the school's mission to raise awareness of healthy, active lifestyles. All children in Reception wear Moki Bands on their wrists, which track the number of steps taken each day. 'If a child isn't moving much, we look at the reason why and come up with solutions,' Orchard says.

The school also subscribes to Fit for Life, a digital fitness resource for schools.

'Through short, intense sessions that get the heart pumping and the muscles working, children from EYFS up to Key Stage 2 are supported to build up their stamina with specially tailored, age-appropriate muscle and bone-strengthening activities.'

Last year, 87 per cent of children hit their Good Level of Development in the prime areas of learning at the end of Reception. Bourner says that movement is embedded in 'every aspect of the school day.'

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Sign up for support to make the change to an always active uniform: activeuniform.org
- Fit for Life: go-well.org/fit-for-life
- Moki Bands: <https://moki.health>
- Youth Sport Trust: www.youthsporttrust.org/about/what-we-do