



# Current levels of physical activity in the early years

## Research findings of physical activity levels

- Results from a recent review found the amount of time children (age 3-6 years) spent in moderate to vigorous physical activity each day was:
  - 54.4 minutes in boys, equating to 7.1% of their day
  - 45.4 minutes in girls, equating to 6.3% of their day.
- These results are slightly higher in comparison to an earlier review which reported children spent 20-30 minutes per day (2-4% of their day) in moderate or vigorous intensity physical activity.

## Population level surveys of physical activity levels

- Based on the 2008 Health Survey for England, the percentage of children exceeding 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day was:
  - 43% of boys and 35% of girls age 2 years
  - 36% of boys and 33% of girls age 3 years
  - 28% in both sexes by age 4 years
  - 32% of boys and 31% of girls at age 5 years.

- Total accelerometer assessed physical activity (light, moderate and vigorous intensity combined) was reported in the 2008 Health Survey for England. Findings indicated:
  - Boys aged 4-7 years were active for 397 minutes (6.6 hours) per day.
  - Girls aged 4-7 years were active for 375 minutes (6.3 hours) per day.
  - Approximately 70% of this activity was of light intensity, for both sexes.
- The Scottish Health Survey 2008/09 included the proportion of children who exceeded 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous physical activity (based on parental report) in children aged 2-4 and 5-7 years. Finding showed:
  - At age 2-4 years, 72% of boys and 67% of girls exceeded 60 minutes per day.
  - At age 5-7 years, these figures increased slightly to 77% of boys and 75% of girls.
- There is currently no appropriate data for Wales and Northern Ireland.



# Effects of physical activity on health outcomes and future behaviours

Even in young children, physical activity (sometimes referred to as physically active play for this age group) is shown to be important for their immediate health and in developing a long term pattern of physical activity. Evidence suggests physical activity helps support:

## Maintaining a healthy weight

- Children who display high levels of physical activity have a lower risk of becoming overweight/obese in the next few years.
- Physical activity programmes do not always have the same effect on every child. Even when using the same activities changes, in BMI have differed between boys and girls and those of different ethnicities.

## Developing motor skills

- It is difficult to determine if improved motor development is a cause or consequence of physical activity. Children with higher levels of physical activity often have better developed motor skills.
- In children lacking well-developed motor skills, physical activity has been shown as a way of promoting motor development.

## Building strong bones

- Physical activity in the early years is linked with good bone health. For example, children who took part in a specially tailored jumping programme were found to have stronger bones in their legs than those who did not take part.

## Psychological and social health

- Physical activity has a positive impact on self-esteem and social and emotional competence. There is, however, little evidence to suggest physical activity has any relationship with self-perception.

## Cardiovascular disease risk factors

- Physical activity is linked to favourable cholesterol levels, while the impact of physical activity on blood pressure is uncertain.
- Children who participated in an aerobic physical activity programme were found to have higher levels of fitness than those who didn't.

## Improving cognitive functioning

- Physical activity promotes exploration. Movement helps children understand the world around them and is beneficial for later cognitive development and understanding abstract concepts.
- Movement also helps to promote the organisation of spatial information, and later achievements in mathematics and language are related to advanced motor skills.

## Developing good patterns of physical activity over time

- There is some evidence to suggest physical activity patterns developed during the early years will be persistent over the course of the next three years. Children who had greater levels of physical activity between the ages of three and five years tended to maintain these levels at the start of their primary school years. Currently there are no studies which assessed the persistence of physical activity in the early years into adolescence or adulthood.

## References

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

T: 01509 226421 F: 01509 226420

[www.bhfactive.org.uk](http://www.bhfactive.org.uk)



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