



# Young people: Practical strategies for promoting physical activity



BHF National Centre  
**physical activity+health**

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The purpose of this briefing is to provide commissioners, physical activity and health professionals and school staff with evidence-based recommendations and practical strategies to consider when planning, developing and delivering activities to promote physical activity in young people, ie, those aged 11-18 years old.

This practice briefing focuses on young people aged 11-18 years. For more information on children aged 5-11 see the children's practice briefing available at [www.bhfactive.org.uk](http://www.bhfactive.org.uk)

## 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 in young people aged 11-18 years old.

Most of the current research into physical activity programmes for young people has been carried out in a school setting. While more successful programmes often combine the school setting with a home or community based element, there is little research evidence on successful physical activity initiatives delivered in these other settings. Until more evidence is gathered from community and family programmes, evidence from schools may offer valuable insight into components that might help build more successful initiatives in a home or community setting.

Key recommendations and practical strategies for how best to incorporate the current evidence around physical activity promotion in young people 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 that are often repeated in successful research projects, as well as using experience from practice.

The recommendations are provided in two sections:

- Section 1 - Promoting physical activity to young people in schools and the community
- Section 2 - Promoting physical activity to young people specifically within the school setting



At the end of the document there is also a summary of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) 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 and 2 when formulating physical activity initiatives.

In July 2011, the Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) from the four home countries of the UK launched new physical activity guidelines for children and young people. For more information on these guidelines, see the joint CMO report *Start Active, Stay Active*.

To help senior management teams and physical activity and health professionals 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.

## Section 1 - Promoting physical activity to young people in schools and the community

This section outlines evidence based recommendations for actions that should be taken or components that should be put into place when planning and developing physical activity initiatives which are targeted at young people aged 11-18 years, regardless of the setting.

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

### Use a multi-component approach to promote physical activity in young people

It is important to ensure physical activity programmes use a multi-component approach. This may be, for example, making changes to the local environment, implementing changes to the school curriculum and including activities for the whole family to do together.

Successful programmes have often tended to include within their multi-component approaches element such as: offering a combination of additional physical education (PE) lessons, teaching self-regulatory behaviour skills (ie, goal setting and self-monitoring) and creating time before or after school for young people to be active.

In contrast, programmes that have used an education only approach, have demonstrated no effect on physical activity levels in young people. This may be because classroom-based lessons tend to focus on conveying information rather than also offering young people the opportunity to experience or practice the activities.

#### Strategies

- Use a multi-component approach to promoting physical activity to support change and development.
- Use strategies that combine educational, curricular and environmental elements, for example,

additional PE lessons, cross curricular activities and information on safe walking routes.

- Focus on increasing the variety of physical activity opportunities available throughout the day, for example, measures to increase active commuting, offering activity clubs at lunchtimes and giving physical activity homework.
- Include elements of behaviour change such as goal setting and self-monitoring alongside additional physical activity opportunities.

### Aim to improve total physical activity levels by fostering positive attitudes to physical activity

To date, most studies in schools that have focused on increasing physical activity levels have only been successful at increasing levels during the school day. Furthermore, a number of programmes promoting physical activity in schools have actually focused on activities which increase fitness rather than physical activity. Activities such as timed runs or aerobic conditioning may not inspire positive attitudes towards physical activity or lifelong behaviour changes, which may be why some programmes are not successful at changing total physical activity levels. It may, therefore, be more important for programmes to focus



on fostering positive attitudes in young people towards physical activity in the hope of influencing overall physical activity levels rather than aiming to influence fitness or other such indicators.

#### Strategies

- Create a physical activity experience that is fun and focuses on young people feeling good, gaining confidence and enjoying what they do.
- Create programmes which encourage young people to increase their physical activity levels throughout the whole day, not just at school.
- Promote a ‘mastery climate’, ie, an environment where young people are encouraged to develop their individual skill levels and personal best.
- Provide opportunities to try a wide variety of activities including some which are more likely to be attractive to those who are less sporty, such as creative activities like dance or cheerleading.
- Ensure activities are developmentally appropriate and use positive reinforcement to recognise effort and progress.

#### Create programmes that specifically focus on physical activity behaviours

While it is undoubtedly important to address other health behaviours such as nutrition, smoking and sexual health, there are concerns that focusing on multiple health behaviours may hinder the success of physical activity programmes.

Therefore when looking to change physical activity levels, it may be important to have a specific focus on changing a more limited range of behaviours and create programmes which specifically focus on changing physical activity behaviours in children and do not try to address multiple behaviours.

#### Strategies

- Create programmes that have a specific focus on changing physical activity levels.
- Establish a high profile for physical activity by providing supportive and consistent messages regarding being physically active.

#### Include a family or home-based element

Involvement by parents and carers has also been demonstrated to be an integral part of any school-based programme promoting physical activity. Furthermore perceived levels of parental support and encouragement can influence young people’s physical activity levels, with greater levels of perceived support linked with greater levels of physical activity.

There is mixed evidence on the effectiveness of sending written information home to parents and carers. A few studies, however, have found examples of effective home-based elements to be: family involvement in creating a supportive environment, homework assignments to complete with parents and carers and monthly newsletters to parents and carers to help encourage activity interactions with their child.

#### Strategies

- Encourage parents/carers to support their children in being active by providing opportunities for their children to be active at weekends and during holidays, promoting active travel to and from home and by being a physical activity role model for their children.
- Distribute physical activity information to parents including ways in which participating in physical activity will benefit young people.
- Involve parents in the provision of out of school activities, for example, invite parents to physical activity or sports days and offer them opportunities to be involved in providing help.
- Set an activity or challenges which a young person participates in with the whole family.

#### Involve the young people you are targeting to help determine appropriate provision and activities

It is important to promote independence and encourage young people to take responsibility for their own participation in physical activities. This could be done through offering young people a chance to choose the activities in which they wish to take part.

This element of choice seems particularly important for adolescent girls. By giving young people a voice, it can help to highlight their preferences, identify barriers to participation and suggest changes to increase and sustain activity levels.

### Strategies

- Give young people a voice by consulting with them on all aspects of provision.
- Work with the target group to help them develop independence and a sense of responsibility for their own physical activity levels.
- Work with the target group to identify what encourages them to be physically active.
- Carry out an audit of current provision and involve young people in the process to help with decision making and structuring of activities.
- Give young people a choice of what activities they would like to take part in.



### Provide activities that are specifically focused on girls or cultural groups

There is some evidence to suggest that it is important to offer physical activities which specifically target young women. This could be done through offering opportunities for a 'girls only' PE or exercise class or offering 'non-traditional' alternatives to PE, such as a dance class which also links in elements on positive body image. Furthermore, it is important for girls to have peers to share their activity time with to help maintain participation.

There is also limited evidence that suggests it may be valuable to provide culturally appropriate activities which appeal to your target group, such as traditional bhangra dancing.

### Strategies

- Consult with the girls in your target group to find out what sorts of physical activities they would prefer to do.
- Create opportunities where girls can be active without the presence of boys, such as a girls only after school gym session.

- Provide alternative activity sessions that are specifically aimed at different cultural groups, such as culturally specific dance classes.

### Provide young people with opportunities to participate in a variety of activities throughout the day

It is important to provide young people with a variety of activities and times throughout the day when they can be active. Often successful programmes have created opportunities right before or after school, either at the school or within the community, when young people can participate in physical activity.

Furthermore, successful programmes often promote physical activities which can be done within or starting from the family home.

### Strategies

- Provide opportunities to try out and experience a wide variety of activities, including some that offer opportunities to be creative, eg, dance and cheerleading.
- Provide both structured activities (eg, PE lessons and activity/sports clubs) and unstructured

activities (eg, opportunities to be active at break times) during and outside of school.

- Offer access to school and community facilities and equipment before and/or after school.
- Develop cross-curricular links to increase the amount of time allocated for physical activities and provide different environments to be active.
- Introduce active classroom breaks which give young people a chance to move around during a lesson.
- Develop a school travel plan that supports the promotion of walking and cycling to and from school.
- Offer school and community participation-based clubs which are informal and offer young people the chance to 'have a go'.

### Provide young people with access to active facilities and resources

Studies have shown that young people are more likely to be active when they have access to a variety of facilities at school and in their neighbourhood. This is especially important when promoting physical activity to adolescent girls.

During breaks in the school day, young people have been found to be more active when they have better access to sports equipment, such as balls, and permanent activity structures, such as basketball hoop.

#### Strategies

- Provide young people and their parents/carers with information on and directions to local sports and recreation facilities.
- Consider creative use of non-traditional spaces for physical activity, eg, car parks outside of working hours.
- Offer access to play and recreational facilities before and after school.
- Provide appropriate sports and activity equipment, such as balls and hoops, and/or mark out zones to separate different types of activity, eg, ball games, active games, dance and skill-based games.

### Provide safe walking and cycling routes to popular destinations

The presence of attractive destinations, such as shops, has been linked with increased levels of physical activity in young people. They are also more likely to travel actively to places if pavements are available and in good condition and there are appealing destinations to walk or cycle to.

A young person's perception of their safety does not hinder them from being physical active, but they were less likely to walk places if there are more actual road hazards present on their journey, eg, high traffic density or main roads. The presence of controlled crossings, eg, lights or pedestrians crossings, however, have been linked with increased walking and cycling in young people.

#### Strategies

- Work with schools and community groups to develop and implement school travel plans that highlight safe routes for active travel to and from school and other popular locations.
- Provide young people with maps of identified routes to popular destinations such as schools or leisure facilities which are along quieter roads, have good pavements and highlight safe crossing points.
- Identify places, eg, local shops, library or community centre, along routes used by young people that they can visit if they are concerned about safety.
- Work with local planning and transport authorities to develop, implement and promote safe active travel programmes.
- Develop initiatives to ensure the local environment around schools, play areas and other well used destinations are safely accessible to young people via a walking or cycling route.
- Create school challenges which focus on encouraging pupils to walk or cycle to school.

For more information and resources to help promote physical activity in young people, such as Ultimate Dodgeball, Make a Move, Jump Rope or Active Club, visit [www.bhf.org.uk/schools](http://www.bhf.org.uk/schools)

## Section 2 - Promoting physical activity to young people specifically within the school setting

This section outlines the evidence-based recommendations for actions that should be taken or components that should be put into place when planning and developing physical activity programmes for young people aged 11-18 years in schools. These recommendations are in addition to those listed in Section 1.

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



### Develop a whole school approach that supports and promotes physical activity

Evidence suggests that curriculum strategies, when used in isolation from other environmental changes, are not effective for promoting physical activity in young people. In contrast, health promotion programmes in schools that have used multi-component approaches tend to be more successful than those which only use one component. For example, a whole school, ie, multi-component approach, may be using a curriculum approach with modifications to the school culture and environment or with family and community involvement.

Other examples of features of successful school programmes are those which have:

- aimed to change the whole school environment by promoting staff role modelling
- focused on fun and non-competitive activities
- promoted positive attitudes towards physical activity throughout the whole school day
- provided individual support through promoting the use of a buddy
- offered counselling on how to overcome perceived barriers
- created individualised advice on strategies to increase daily physical activity.

The main goal of a whole school approach to physical activity is to create a school ethos and environment which supports and promotes the value of physical

activity in young people. The strategies below are based on the National Healthy Schools Programme, which was a joint initiative between the Department of Health and the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and have been tailored to a physical activity context.

### Strategies

- Ensure the school leadership and management teams support, promote and maintain changes for physical activity across the school.
- Develop a whole school PE and physical activity policy which promotes a range of activities for the whole school community throughout the school day and beyond.
- Plan a curriculum that helps promote physical activity and work with external partners to support its implementation.
- Include physical activity opportunities in all the elements of teaching and learning, for example, physically active games which also develop maths or language skills.
- Build an environment and culture within the school which is supportive of physical activity, such as, providing safe storage for cycles and scooters and developing a culture that supports active travel for the school journey.
- Consult with young people on all aspects of physical activity provision.
- Provide support services for young people, eg, either a specialist or trained sports co-ordinator to run activities at lunchtime break.
- Address staff professional development needs to enable them to promote and deliver physical activity effectively.
- Involve parents/carers and local communities in the planning and delivery of physical activity.
- Assess, record and report on young people's achievements in physical activity.



### Teach elements of behaviour change during PE or PSHE lessons

An educational element focusing on behaviour change is frequently included in successful programmes. This element has often taken the form of educational sessions taught during PE, but elements of behaviour change can also be brought in during other appropriate lessons such as PSHE. Lessons tend to focus on self-



regulatory skills, such as teaching young people about goal setting and how to monitor and evaluate their level of effort, and they provide young people with information on the benefits of physical activity.

### Strategies

- Teach young people how to monitor their level of effort during physical activity session, for example teaching them how to assess their perceived exertion, heart rate or breathing patterns.
- Help young people learn to set realistic physical activity goals.
- Work with young people to help them set physical activity goals and monitor their progress towards achieving them.
- Teach young people why it's important to be physically active and highlight the benefits that are relevant to and valued by the target group of young people.
- Work with colleagues to include elements of behaviour change during a variety of lessons throughout the day.

### Offer opportunities for additional staff training

Programmes which tend to be successful are often implemented by those with additional training on physical activity delivery, such as, a PE teacher or classroom teachers who have received specialist training on physical activity. It may, therefore, be advantageous to provide non-PE teachers or staff who are involved in promoting or leading activity sessions with extra training specifically on how to promote and lead opportunities for physical activity in young people.

### Strategies

- Keep staff informed about physical activity including: the benefits of physical activity, the physical activity recommendations, the school's philosophy and physical activity policy, specific promotions and opportunities for young people and staff to be active.
- Encourage both PE staff and enthusiastic non-PE staff to consider training for relevant awards and or qualifications, eg, National Governing Body sports awards or dance leader qualifications.
- Provide relevant physical activity training and support in leading sessions to all individuals who work with this age group; this could include in-



house training or demonstration lessons by PE staff or the Head of PE and having regular discussion/feedback sessions on activities.

- Provide elements of physical activity promotion as part of a planned annual programme of continuing professional development (CPD) for staff.
- Encourage the sharing of good practice by all staff, eg, adopt a procedure that teachers who attend training report back to other staff on what they learnt.
- Hold regular informal meetings with the Head of PE to discuss opportunities for physical activity throughout the whole day.

For more information and resources on physical activity in young people, particularly about interpreting the physical activity guidelines for this age group, visit [www.bhfactive.org.uk](http://www.bhfactive.org.uk)

There are two NICE guidance documents available relating to young people. For more information on these guidances, search for PH17 (Promoting physical activity for children and young people) and PH41 (Walking and cycling) at [www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)

## Example of current practice

While it is advantageous to include as many recommendations as possible from this briefing when creating initiatives for promoting physical activity to young people, it may not always be feasible to include each one. Below is an example of an after school programme which demonstrates how schools and community groups can work together to promote physical activity in young people.

### Let's Get Fizzical

'Let's Get Fizzical' is a **multi-component physical activity programme** delivered by StreetGames in collaboration with Birmingham City Council as part of the 'Be Active' family. It is one of the many doorstep sport programmes StreetGames delivers which aims to promote physical activity to young people within disadvantage communities by providing activities *'in the right place, at the right time, in the right style and at the right price'*.



The primary focus of this programme was to **foster positive attitudes** by:

- delivering a variety of activities not normally available in schools
- focusing on building confidence and having fun instead of 'being sporty'
- promoting a 'mastery climate' by giving young people a safe community environment to practice new skills they learnt at school.

StreetGames worked with local schools to identify young people who were doing little or no regular physical activity outside of school. The schools also provided the necessary time and delivery space for sessions which took part during the school day.

To ensure it met the needs of the young people involved in their programme, **StreetGames undertook a verbal consultation to understand why these young people were not involved in physical activity.** Young people who took part in the programme were offered:



- six one-hour physical activity sessions at school
- up to ten one-hour multi-sport sessions in a community setting
- a **home-based pedometer challenge**, used as a self-monitoring and motivational tool and a visual reminder for young people's families about being more active.

**The local community-based after-school sessions** provided young people with additional opportunities to practice skills they were introduced to during fun, school based physical activity sessions. A large proportion of the young people involved in the programme were girls or from BME backgrounds, StreetGames **provided activities which took into consideration gender and cultural preferences**, such as, Boxercise, Street Dance and Handball.

To deliver the programme, StreetGames employed coaches with the ability to empathise with 'non-sporty' children and who used non-traditional methods to combine playing and improving skills in a fun and enjoyable way. **They also provided training to coaches to help address additional staff needs.** If possible the same coaches ran both the community and school-based activities to help build rapport with the young people and boost the sustainability of the programme.

### Evaluation

To determine change in physical activity over time, all young people who participated in the school-based sessions completed the PAQ-C Questionnaire at the start of the programme and again at six and 12 months. The results of the questionnaire showed that 73% of participants increased or maintained their participation levels after 6 months.

Also, weekly recorded pedometer readings demonstrated that 69% of the young people increased their step count over the six week school programme.

For more information about 'Let's Get Fizzical', please contact: Paul Jarvis (Head of Sport and Health) at [paul.jarvis@streetgames.org](mailto:paul.jarvis@streetgames.org)

## NICE behaviour change summary

The information on this page is a summary of the NICE Public Health Guidance on Behaviour change (2007). These strategies are important to keep in mind throughout the development, planning and implementation 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, environmental factors, when planning the initiative.
- Include structural improvements, eg, consider how changing the physical environment, access to and provision of services, service delivery may affect participation.
- Create a detailed written plan that:
  - 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, 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).

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