

Active play and travel

The benefits of independent active play and active mobility in childhood

INFORMATION SHEET FH13

Foreword

“The Government is determined to make this the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up. Integral to this is that children should have the time and the places for safe, independent active play – it is vital to their physical, emotional, social and educational development.

Equally, a key expectation is that local authorities should develop safe routes and access to play spaces, taking account of sustainable development and active travel. Walking or cycling to school or play areas is a key way to improve children’s health and to reduce obesity, while at the same time reducing pollution, and increasing road safety and community cohesion.

The devolved administrations, local authorities and voluntary organisations are all working to help see this objective delivered. Our success in enabling children to enjoy the benefits of independent active play and active travel will play a central part in giving them the best possible future.”

Baroness Delyth Morgan
Children’s Minister
Department for Children, Schools and Families



Introduction

Children seem to be born with an instinctive love of physical activity⁽¹⁾ but play, an important element of physical activity from early childhood, has become ever more restricted. At home, sedentary activities increasingly dominate while more formal play facilities tend to be at a distance from the home and often accessed by car. From across the developed world there is strong evidence that compared with previous generations, children spend less time playing outdoors and that they walk and cycle less.

Children seek contact with their friends through play activity outdoors and to achieve this they need to be able to move around their local environment as

widely and safely as possible from an early age. An illustrative study of children living on housing estates found that streets and pavements were the most frequently used locations for play, because this is where children can meet up in a spontaneous way, and also because a significant amount of play involves moving around the estate, on foot or by bicycle, either for its own sake or to call on friends⁽²⁾.

It has been proposed, in the context of the current levels of childhood obesity that ‘opportunities for spontaneous play may be the only requirement that young children need to increase their physical activity’⁽³⁾.

Sustrans is the UK’s leading sustainable transport charity and works on practical projects to encourage people to walk, cycle and use public transport to benefit health and the environment.

Sustrans, 2 Cathedral Square, College Green, Bristol, BS1 5DD

The importance of physical activity from early life

In children the main benefits of physical activity are reductions in risk of numerous diseases such as many forms of cancer, coronary heart disease, diabetes and avoidance of weight gain, as well as achieving a high peak bone mass, and mental well-being⁽⁴⁾. Other factors include developing muscle strength, and contributing to optimal growth and development. Children and young people should achieve a total of at least 60 minutes of at least moderate intensity physical activity each day. At least twice a week this should include activities to improve bone health (activities that produce high physical stress on the bones), muscle strength and flexibility⁽⁴⁾.

Studies of calorific expenditure and school travel report higher energy expenditure among children walking and cycling than travelling by car⁽⁵⁾. Walking to school has also been associated with higher overall moderate to vigorous physical activity throughout the day compared with travelling by car, bus, or train⁽⁶⁾ – this suggests that travelling actively sets children up for an active day.

The benefits of play

Defining play, active play and independent mobility

Play can be loosely defined as what 'children do in their own time, for their own reasons', and is recognised by academics and professionals alike as an essential part of the healthy development of children and young people⁽⁷⁾. Over recent decades social and economic changes have interacted to reduce children's ability to travel about alone and with friends, to get to both structured activities such as music, art or football without parental assistance, and to enjoy free play –

children using their free time and space in their own way.

Active play and travel, and social interaction

Children seek stimulation and, perhaps most importantly, they seek to interact with other children. Environments that do not consider the needs of children may become areas that are run down, neglected and vandalised. Public spaces designed with children in mind will be safer and more appealing for the rest of the community and so improve social interaction and reduce crime. Moreover, attractive and appealing local environments can improve physical activity levels⁽⁸⁾. Safe local streets and parks are highly valued by children⁽⁹⁾ and encourage communities to take responsibility for their surroundings.

Greater community cohesion is also likely to be fostered where children are able to meet with their friends and where parents mutually agree to 'keep an eye' on children playing. Ensuring there are opportunities for people of different ages and backgrounds to interact encourages mutual respect and care.

Feelings of trust, sense of belonging and mutual support are more likely to build up in a place where face-to-face contact on a regular basis is possible⁽¹⁰⁾. Studies have reported that where walking is an option, the ability to socialise with friends living nearby results in higher levels of walking, especially for girls. For boys, having lots of children the same age to socialise with is also associated with more walking, and with cycling for transport where the journeys are no more than a mile in length⁽¹¹⁾.

Psychological and emotional development

Play contributes heavily to children's development, not only physically but also from the emotional and cognitive point of view. The motor skills and predilection towards a healthy, active lifestyle acquired in childhood may be important not only for their physical benefits but for attitudes and



behaviours in later life. Positive play experiences are one of the best ways for a child to improve self-concept, body perception, and relationships with others⁽¹²⁾.

Independent mobility, growing with age and maturity, allows children to learn about exercising judgements on risk. The home range tends to extend significantly between the ages of 8 and 9 years, particularly when children are in the company of other children⁽¹³⁾. Mild risk-taking behaviour is an intrinsic part of development. It often involves learning new skills and helps children to become more independent.

Studies report a consistent positive relationship between physical activity and well-being with strong evidence for self-esteem in young people⁽¹⁴⁾. The importance of independent journeys, such as to school, in promoting self-esteem, a strong sense of identity, creative use of one's mind and the capability to take responsibility for oneself is widely noted⁽¹⁵⁾⁽¹⁶⁾.

Children need more physical activity

There is a widely recognised need to increase physical activity levels among children and young people. Objective measurement of children's physical activity levels suggests that a large majority of UK children are not active enough⁽¹⁷⁾. Reductions in physical activity during the course of normal daily activities are likely to have reduced the amount of energy expended and contributed to the current levels of obesity⁽⁴⁾. This includes reductions in active travel and outdoor free play opportunities.

By 2006 30% of 2-15 year olds were either overweight or obese. Obesity is now the most common disorder in childhood and adolescence⁽¹⁸⁾. Tackling overweight and obesity is a national priority and in 2007 the Government announced the ambition for England to be the first major country ever to reverse the rising tide of obesity and overweight in the population. The initial focus is on children: by 2020 the aim is to have reduced the proportion of overweight and obese children to 2000 levels⁽¹⁹⁾.

Decline in children's physical activity levels

One of the main measures of children's travel behaviour change available over recent decades is the school journey. In the 1975/76 year, 61% of all 5-15 year olds' journeys to and from school were on foot and 11% by car⁽²⁰⁾. Thirty years later walking to school had declined to 46% among 5-16 year olds while car use had almost trebled to 30%⁽²¹⁾.

Increasing car ownership over recent generations has increased sedentary travel, and along with the increased allocation of urban space for motor vehicles makes the environment less appealing for walking, cycling and play. Fear of traffic, among both parents and children, remains a major deterrent to outdoor play and active travel, despite falling child pedestrian fatalities. Indeed, it is likely that one reason for the decline in these casualties has been because parents withdrew their children from the perceived danger of motor traffic⁽²²⁾.

Walking and cycling have been suppressed, and so too has children's independence. The National Travel Survey shows that 59% of adults accompany their primary aged children to school because of perceived traffic danger⁽²¹⁾. Today's children are allowed much less independence than their parents enjoyed⁽²³⁾. Play England report that 71% of adults could play and explore daily in their local neighbourhoods when they were children, whereas just 21% of children can do so today⁽²⁴⁾.

The 'retreat from the street'

Research suggests that over recent decades parents have increasingly tried to avoid risks to their children from outside the home by creating barriers to their children's independent mobility⁽²⁵⁾. This 'retreat from the street' removes a crucial initial step for children's active independence. Moreover, in this environment where perceived traffic danger is a major concern, adults often want to segregate children from risk, to 'park



them' in safe places and to set controls on where they can play or go and how they get there⁽⁹⁾. Letting children roam or play outside unaccompanied is now sometimes judged as an indication of neglectful and irresponsible parenthood⁽²⁶⁾.

For those families with cars the evidence is of increasing car use to ferry children to organised leisure activities, perhaps partly because these are often further way from the home⁽²⁷⁾⁽²⁸⁾. This move towards more leisure trips and structured play at distances requiring car use is denying children the routine enjoyment of physical activity and play with their circle of friends and in their local environment.

Playable and activity friendly environments

Children have an urge to know the physical world in order to feel comfortable with it⁽²⁹⁾. The outdoor environment (built and natural) is a favourite setting for active play⁽³⁰⁾ such as running, jumping and climbing. It allows children to challenge themselves in relation to the physical environment and natural elements⁽³¹⁾. However, it is not the formal outdoor environments that most appeal; children tend to spend relatively short amounts of time (less than 15 minutes) at play in these when given the choice. The majority of time spent outdoors involves children moving around the whole of their outdoor environment and playing en route⁽³²⁾.

Traffic speed and volume, and active access

Since neighbourhoods play such an important role in children's daily lives, planners should give special attention to children's needs⁽³³⁾. This should address the factors which currently limit the freedom of children to play and to travel actively, not least traffic speeds and volume and the potential for independent walking and cycling access.

There is ample evidence that neighbourhood parks and play space may stimulate physical activity that does not rely on adult transport⁽³⁴⁾

and we expect Play Ranger programmes to have a similar positive impact. Independent, active access is also crucial – fewer road traffic hazards (ie roads to cross, traffic density/speed) have been found to be key⁽³⁵⁾. Planners should, therefore, give greater focus to the provision and maintenance of local parks for children, and high quality walking and cycling access⁽³⁶⁾.

Despite repeated calls for 20mph speed limits to become standard across residential streets⁽³⁷⁾⁽³⁸⁾ and widespread public support⁽³⁹⁾ few highway authorities have taken this step to address perceived and actual safety concerns. More 20mph zones are an important measure in reducing child road traffic casualties but still greater protection needs to be afforded to children: slower speed zones such as home zones enable children to use their local environment for play and local travel, as millions of children do in continental Europe.

Home zones

Home zones involve the design or re-designing of street space so that the layout gives residents, pedestrians and cyclists an evident priority over motor traffic. The Department for Transport's monitoring of 9 pilot Home Zone schemes being taken forward in 1999 showed that mean motor traffic speeds were reduced by about 5mph to less than 15mph. Adults spent slightly more time outside the home – to talk with neighbours, do gardening, and watching children play. On-street play increased slightly once the zones were implemented. Children themselves reported improvements in perceived road safety and street appearance⁽⁴⁰⁾. A review specifically focused on the impact on children's lives reported that the home zones pilots indicated a positive impact on children's play⁽⁴¹⁾.

A cross-sector strategic approach

Sustrans is now working with Department of Health South West, local authorities and the NHS on a programme to implant active play and active travel into transport, planning and other strategies. This will build a coordinated cross-sector programme of work to create

Useful reading

- NICE, 2008** Physical activity and the environment
- NICE, 2009** Promoting physical activity for children and young people
- DCSF, 2008** The Children's Plan
- DCSF, 2009** The Play Strategy
- DH/DCSF, 2009** Healthy lives, brighter futures: the strategy for children and young people's health
- DfT, 2007** Manual for Streets
- DH, 2009** Be active be healthy, a plan for getting the nation moving
- WHO, 2002** A physically active life through everyday transport: with a special focus on children and older people and example and approaches from Europe
- Children's Play Council, 2008** Planning for Play: Guidance on the development and implementation of a local play strategy
- Play England/Sustrans, 2008** Places to Go: A summary of research evidence
- Play England, 2008** Design for Play: A guide to creating successful play spaces
- Play England, 2008** Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide
- Play England, 2008** Play for a change - Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives
- Play England, 2006** Planning for Play
- Play England, 2008** Play: child-friendly extended schools
- Play Scotland, 2007** Local Authority Play Provision in Scotland 2006
- Play Wales, 2008** Children's Play - Health and Wellbeing
- Mayor of London, 2008** Supplementary Planning Guidance: Providing for Children and Young People's Play and Informal Recreation
- National Children's Bureau, 2007** Free Play in Early Childhood
- Gill, 2007** No fear. Growing up in a risk averse society
- CABE, 2007** Living with risk: promoting better public space design
- CABE, 2008** Inclusion by design
- GLA, 2008** Supplementary planning guidance: providing for children and young people's play and informal recreation
- DCSF, 2009** (forthcoming) Implementing the play strategy
- Demos, 2007** Seen and heard: reclaiming the public realm with children and young people
- TCPA/CLG, 2008** design to delivery: eco towns transport worksheet
- Sustrans/Association of Directors of Public Health et al, 2008** Take action on active travel
- Sustainable Development Commission, 2007** Every Child's Future Matters

the conditions for more active travel and play. The work, initially in Bournemouth and Poole with the local authorities and PCT, aims to coordinate and implement a range of both environmental and motivational interventions which help children and their families become more active.

Recommendations

The clear and central recommendation drawn from the evidence collected here is that we must roll back the developments which have driven children from our streets and public realm.

Some of these developments, such as the progressive centralisation of services into ever more distant zones, often only really accessible by car, will be hard to address. Others, such as the domination of our streets and public spaces by speeding or inconsiderately parked motor vehicles, can and should be addressed more quickly.

Sustrans believes that the mere implementation of existing official guidance, such as from the Department for Transport (DfT), Communities and Local Government (CLG), Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), would be sufficient to create the conditions for significant growth in children's active play and active travel.

We urge professionals in all relevant disciplines, including spatial planning, development control, transport, housing, children's services, health and leisure, to consider in particular two pieces of guidance from NICE:

- Physical activity and the environment
- Promoting physical activity for children and young people.

This guidance is compatible with guidance in other disciplines, such as the DfT Manual for Streets and The Town and Country Planning Association/CLG guidance on eco-towns transport, but explicit in recommending measures such as:

- “ensure open spaces and outdoor facilities encourage physical activity”

- “ensure public open spaces ... can be reached on foot [and] by bicycle”
- “identify ... transport policy which discourages children and young people from ... walking and cycling ... [eg] policies to keep traffic moving may make it difficult to cross the road. Consider how these policies can be improved to encourage active travel”
- “re-allocate road space to support physically active travel ... [eg] by widening pavements”
- “introduce traffic-calming schemes”.

It will be noted that these recommendations, and others in the guidance, will also contribute to the achievement of targets in other areas such as climate change emissions reduction, social inclusion and addressing anti-social behaviour. These advantages should be explicitly noted in planning and evaluation of strategies to promote healthy active play and travel.



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Further information

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www.sustrans.org.uk

0845 113 00 65

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