

# PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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Physical activity should be a normal part of growing up for young people. Babies learn and develop physical capabilities through play; toddlers develop key social skills through games with others and young people develop basic skills and an understanding of rules and team membership through sport and physical education.

Unfortunately as children get older and into teenage years, levels of activity decline and interim results from a major study by Dublin City University (DCU)<sup>1</sup> show that 65% of adolescents (15-17 year olds) - 70% of females compared to 58% of males - classified themselves as not regularly active. Higher proportions of 17 year olds (70%) are inactive compared to 63% of 15-16 year olds, a trend noted in the National Health and Lifestyles Survey (SLAN).<sup>2</sup>

The DCU study, a component of the Take PART project, shows that adolescents who felt they received higher family support and higher peer support for involvement in physical activity or sport were significantly more likely to be regularly active than children who perceived low social support. In both cases, boys perceived this support more than girls.

## Why should young people be physically active?

Regular physical activity for young people embraces informal play, games, physical education, sport, walking and cycling as transport or more formal exercise. Regular physical activity will help enhance social, physical and cognitive development and quality of life. It will help modify the evolution of risk factors and protect against future disease and helps establish a healthy lifestyle, aiming to optimise the likelihood that this will be carried through into adult life.

## Physical inactivity in young people and risk to health

The direct relationship between physical activity and heart disease is less clear for young people than for adults, partly because of methodological problems but primarily because heart disease, which is influenced at least in part by a sedentary lifestyle, has not had long enough to develop. The main exception to this is childhood obesity, a risk factor for heart disease, which can be considered a health problem in its own right. Although physical inactivity does not on its own cause obesity, there is a correlation between sedentary behaviours and levels of overweight and obesity. Persistent obesity in childhood may increase the risk of developing many chronic diseases in adulthood. These include cardiovascular diseases, non-insulin-dependent diabetes

(now occurring in children), osteoarthritis and colon cancer, as well as psychological problems.



What type and level of activity do children and young people need? Children and young people should aim to participate in activity of at least moderate intensity for one hour every day.<sup>3</sup> Activity can be built up through the day with several shorter sessions of play, physical education, sport or walking to school.

At least twice a week, some activities should help to enhance and maintain muscular strength and flexibility and bone health. These activities would include climbing, skipping, jumping or gymnastics.

Levels of physical activity among Irish young people SLAN<sup>2</sup> asked 5,712 young people (10-17 years) about the level of activity outside of school. Forty-nine per cent of young people (59% of boys and 38% of girls) are exercising four or more times per week. This is a small decrease on 54% in 1998 (62% of boys and 45% of girls).<sup>4</sup>

There are few differences across social classes but activity decreases with age, more noticeably among girls, especially over 15 years. In 2002, 22% of girls aged 15-17 took exercise outside of school less than weekly.

In 2002-3, the first Take PART study<sup>1</sup> was undertaken by

DCU in the East Coast Area Health Board. A total of 940 students (15-17 year olds) participated in this study.

- 65% of adolescents were not regularly active (70% of females compared to 58% of males).
- Adolescents who perceived higher family support for involvement in physical activity or sport were significantly more likely to be regularly active. Boys perceived this support more than girls.
- Regularly active adolescents perceived higher peer support for involvement in physical activity than not regularly active adolescents, and again this support was perceived to be higher in boys than in girls.
- 25% were categorised as either overweight or obese, according to age-specific BMI categories<sup>5</sup> and this compares to 15% of American adolescents overweight in 1999.<sup>6</sup>

Influences on young people's participation in physical activity

- Enjoyment, perceived competence and positive attitudes to physical activity.
- Gender and age – boys are more active than girls and, as young people get older, levels of activity decrease.
- Boys are more likely to enjoy competition, although reward and participation rather than beating opponents are more positive for the majority of children.

In addition, there are many social and environmental influences on participation.

Parental influence through support for exercise: verbal encouragement, assistance (e.g. transport) and economic help. Family activities also increase levels of physical activity. Parental support can also be negative if parents arrange transport, e.g. taking the car instead of walking/cycling decreases activity for children.

Peer group can influence participation as follows. Mutual influence into starting physical activity: friends may already be active; can make friends in different social circles; peer influence can affect participation through imitation and social reinforcement; adolescents tend to participate in physical activity in groups, therefore team sports are more popular and can be a form of social activity.

At school

Emphasis on competitive team games in school may decrease female interest in physical activity. Low levels of physical activity in adulthood can be related to negative experiences/memories of physical education in school. Other school-based barriers to physical activity include unattractive gym kit or showering facilities.

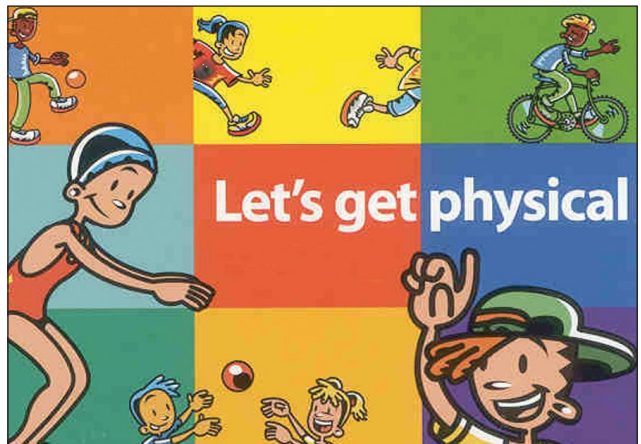
In the media

Young people can be influenced more by what they watch rather than for how long. The increased popularity of elite sports in the media may result in more positive attitudes to physical activity and increased participation levels. On the other hand, decreased participation may result due to the portrayal of sport as entertainment, encouraging a passive

outlook or as unrealistic and demotivating.

Location/facilities

Proximity to services and facilities can influence young people's participation in physical activity. Time spent outdoors is related to increased activity, and the computer and TV as a means of recreation is also a factor. Removing the TV from a child's bedroom can increase physical activity.



References

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5. Cole TJ, Bellizzi MC, Flegal KM, Dietz WH. Establishing a standard definition for child overweight and obesity worldwide: international survey. *BMJ* 2000; 320 (7244): 1240.
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Recommended reading

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