

National Heart Alliance

Position Paper On Physical Activity for Children and Young People

July 2001

Introduction

- The National Heart Alliance is an independent non-governmental organisation which aims to increase co-operation among organisations involved in the fight against heart disease.
- The National Heart Alliance includes representation from a wide range of medical and health professional organisations including cardiology, physicians, health promotion, public health, occupational health, Health Boards, Irish Heart Foundation, Irish Sports Council, Healthy Cities, and Health Promoting Hospitals Network.

Benefits of Physical Activity

- Regular physical activity encourages young people to develop active lifestyles that can be maintained throughout adult life thus reducing the risk of cardiovascular and other chronic diseases of adulthood. Regular physical activity in childhood and adolescence
 - improves muscular strength and endurance;
 - helps build healthy bones and muscles;
 - helps maintain healthy body fat/lean ratio;
 - reduces anxiety and stress; increases self-esteem;
 - may improve blood pressure and cholesterol levels.

Health Behaviour of School-Aged Children

A recent health and lifestyle survey⁽¹⁾ reveals that

- only 40% of 15-17 years olds in Ireland are taking part in regular physical activity;
- participation in regular physical activity decreases from 63% of 9-11 year olds and 58% of 12-14 years olds to 40% of 15-17 year olds.
- this decrease is particularly noticeable among girls, dropping from 59% of 9-11 year olds, to 26% of 15-17 year olds.

National Heart Alliance Recommendation on physical activity

- With the aim of promoting improved heart health amongst young people, the National Heart Alliance recommends that ***all young people (5-18yrs) should participate in physical activity of moderate intensity for at least one hour each day.*** ^{(2) (3)}
 - Activity of *moderate intensity* might be expected to leave the participant feeling warm and slightly out of breath.
 - Young people who are currently very inactive should participate in physical activity of moderate intensity for at least half an hour every day.
 - The activity may be performed in a continuous fashion (e.g. cycling for one hour) or accumulated intermittently throughout the day.
 - The activity might be carried out as part of occupational activities, active transportation, physical recreation, physical education, games, sport or structured exercise.

Key Principles

“What is most important is to introduce young people to a range of activities and provide them with enjoyable activity experiences which are likely to motivate them to continue an active lifestyle” ⁽⁴⁾

- To increase physical activity levels amongst young people it is important to ensure that patterns of regular physical activity are established in early childhood and continue throughout the growth period. Physical activity for young people should
 - be fun and enjoyable;
 - de-emphasise competition;
 - offer opportunities for social interaction;
 - offer adventure and challenge;
 - be less structured than events and programmes with an adult focus;
 - be accessible to all.

Policy Recommendations

The National Heart Alliance makes the following recommendations.

The Education Sector

- ◆ The Department of Education and Science should:
 - Expedite the delivery of the new Primary and Secondary Physical Education Curricula;

- Provide the support necessary (training, equipment, etc) to ensure that a high-quality physical education programme is an integral element of the programme of every school;
 - Support the development and delivery of health-related physical activity initiatives (e.g. Action for Life);
- ◆ Schools should:
- Adopt an "active school" approach with the aim of providing an ethos and environment conducive to healthy physical activity rather than just promoting sport and competition.
 - Work with parents, pupils and the local authority to develop a school travel plan that favours safe walking and cycling over car/bus travel.
 - Programme opportunities for each pupil to be active within each school day through physical education and/or play, and/or physical recreation, and/or exercise and /or sport.
 - Provide Physical Education as a core element of the school syllabus for each pupil.
 - Develop sustained links with local *providers* (sports clubs, youth organisations, adventure centres, recreational groups, fitness clubs, health professionals, etc) to extend the activity options available to pupils.

The Health Sector

- ◆ The Health Promotion Unit of the Department of Health and Children should:
- Develop and implement, with the support of the Physical Activity Steering Group of the Office for Health Gain, programmes geared to promote the "one hour per day" message to parents, teachers and children, etc.
 - Support, through the Health Boards and other agencies, strategies geared to increase physical activity levels of young people;
 - Play a lead role in researching participation rates and patterns amongst young people and in evaluating the effectiveness of interventions that target young people. This should include research into barriers to physical activity particularly as related to girls.
- ◆ The Health Boards should:
- Develop and implement a joint, co-ordinated programme with the aim of increasing physical activity levels amongst young people.

- Provide support for local well-planned, sustainable initiatives and interventions relating to physical activity and young people;
- Engage in the Irish Sports Council' sponsored Local Sports Partnerships as they evolve within their regions, encouraging multi-sectoral efforts to target young people;
- Work to influence physical activity levels amongst young people with special needs (e.g. overweight or obese, asthma, diabetics, physical disabilities, mental disabilities, etc) through their substantial network of health care professionals (including doctors, nurses, community health workers);
- promote peer leadership training opportunities - involving young people in the planning and implementation of physical activity strategies.
- Educate parents on the benefits of physical activity for their children, and train them in the organisation of appropriate activities through their various *parenting* programmes;

The Sports Sector

- ◆ The Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation should:
 - Ensure that long term capital funding for all sports facilities is allocated.
 - Provide the necessary financial resources to enable The Irish Sports Council to implement its recently published strategic plan *A New Era for Sport* and, in particular, strategies contained within the document relating to sport for young people.
- ◆ The Irish Sports Council should:
 - Ensure that those involved in sport for young people (coaches, leaders, youth workers, etc) are appropriately trained and qualified for their roles.
 - Publish at the earliest opportunity the *Code of Ethics and Good Practice for Children* and implement education awareness programmes for all those involved in organising sport;
 - Provide support for the creation of the greatest number of Local Sports Partnerships (proposed within the strategy document) and Sport Development Officers at the earliest possible opportunity.
 - Provide support to sporting organisations to ban smoking by spectators during sporting events
- ◆ The National Governing Bodies of Sport should:

- Ensure that all those who work with young people through their club structures are aware of health-enhancing physical activity issues as they relate to young people;

The Local Authorities

- ◆ All Local Authorities should:
 - Develop policies that promote health-enhancing physical activity amongst young people;
 - Provide a range of safe, accessible and attractive environments appropriate to the playing needs of children and young people. This might include parks, playgrounds and open spaces.
 - Promote the concept of *active transportation* by incorporating safe walking and cycling routes into local development plans, and providing safe routes to school through improved routes and road junctions, and school wardens as required.
 - Play a lead role in the establishment of Local Sports Partnerships as proposed within The Irish Sports Council's Strategic Plan.

Parents

- ◆ Parents should
 - Promote the *one hour a day* message and ensure a balance between TV viewing, video games, computers, homework and physical activity.
 - Integrate physical activity into the daily life of themselves and their children.
 - Advocate for the inclusion of a physical education programme in their children's schools, and encourage their children to participate in extra-curricular activity through local sports clubs, etc.

⁽¹⁾ Friel, S. Nic Gabhainn, S. & Kelleher, C. *The National Health and Lifestyle Surveys: Results from SLAN and HBSC*. Centre for Health Promotion Studies, National University of Ireland, Galway. 1999.

⁽²⁾ British Heart Foundation. *Couch kids the growing epidemic*. May 2000.

⁽³⁾ Northern Ireland Health Promotion Agency *Physical Activity Strategy Action Plan 1998- 2002*.

⁽⁴⁾ Health Education Authority (UK) *Young people and Physical Activity-promoting Better Practice* 1997.

National Heart Alliance
Chairman: Prof David Kennedy

Participant organisations

ASH Ireland
Dental Health Foundation
Dublin Healthy Cities
East Coast Area Health Board
Eastern Regional Health Authority
Environmental Health Officers Association
European Society of Cardiology/EAS/ESH Task Force on Coronary Prevention
European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions
European Institute of Women's Health
Food Safety Authority
Food Safety Promotion Board
Institute of Community Health Nursing
Institute of European Food Studies
Irish Cancer Society
Irish Cardiac Society
Irish Congress of Trade Unions
Irish Heart Foundation
Irish National Health Promoting Hospitals Network
Irish Nurses Organisation
Irish Nutrition and Dietetic Institute
Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association
Irish Practice Nurse Association
Irish Sports Council
Joint Managerial Body Secondary Schools
Midland Health Board
National Sudden Infant Death Register
National Youth Council
North Eastern Health Board
North Western Health Board
NUI Galway - Dept of Public Health
Occupational Health Nurses Association
Royal College of Physicians
South Eastern Health Board
Social Personal & Health Education – National Co-ordination
St Vincent's University Hospital - Dept of Preventive Medicine & Health Promotion,
The Institute of Public Health in Ireland
Western Health Board

For further information please contact:

Marie Therese Crotty
Co-ordinator National Heart Alliance
Irish Heart Foundation, 4 Clyde Road, Dublin 4
Phone: 01 6685 001 / e-mail: mcrotty@irishheart.ie

