

Study finds physical activity outside of school is vital for child health

September 15 2017



Credit: University of Bristol

Children who do activity outside of school in addition to during school hours are much more likely to meet the Government's physical activity guidelines, according to new research from the University of Bristol.

The results, published today in *BMJ Open* and funded by the British Heart Foundation (BHF), suggest that current efforts to increase exercise

during the school day won't be enough for children to meet the recommended one hours of physical activity a day, set by the Chief Medical Officer.

Researchers looked at the time Year 4 children (aged eight to nine) spent doing physical activity outside of school, including after school clubs, playing in the neighbourhood and playing in the home.

The key findings from the study, which looked at 1,223 pupils from 47 state-funded primary schools, were:

- Children who attended sport / exercise clubs five days per week were 67 per cent more likely to meet the Chief Medical Officers recommendation of an hour of physical activity per day than those who never attend.
- Children who regularly attended after-school physical activity programmes obtained around an extra 7.5 minutes of physical activity per day than children who do not attend.
- Playing in the neighbourhood or garden was associated with comparable increases in physical activity as attending after-school clubs.
- The more types of activity at school, outside of school and in the neighbourhood in which children engage the more active likely they are to meet public health guidance.

To track the children, the team used an accelerometer, a smart device which gives an accurate measurement of movement. They used this to measure mean minutes of moderate to [vigorous physical activity](#) (MVPA) and sedentary time every day for a week.

In order to find out what sort of activities were linked to children being more active, the researchers compared the accelerometer results with a questionnaire. Children answered questions on their attendance at

organised physical activity in the school or community outside school hours, and neighbourhood play.

The findings point to an alternative to the current efforts to fit additional physical activity into school hours, which have been difficult to implement as a result of the already-full school curricula.

Professor Russ Jago, Professor of Paediatric Physical Activity and Public Health at the University of Bristol, who led the study, said: "This research highlights the importance of physical activity outside of school hours. It is already clear that reaching the recommended [physical activity](#) levels solely during school hours is a near-impossible goal.

"Parents should encourage their children to attend after-school clubs, attend community groups and play in their neighbourhood. All four types of activity contribute equally so parents should find the best balance for their children."

Dr Mike Knapton, Associate Medical Director at the British Heart Foundation, which funded the research, said: "Being physically active improves children's health, helps them maintain a healthy weight, aides learning and development, and it also builds social skills. This research should give impetus to parents and teachers to give children opportunities to be physically active throughout the day, whether it's encouraging them to attend an after-school club or replacing screen time with a run around in the park.

"Habits developed in childhood can last a life time. Encouraging more [children](#) to stay active outside of [school](#) will undoubtedly improve the future cardiovascular health of our population."

More information: Russell Jago et al. Associations between participation in organised physical activity in the school or community

outside school hours and neighbourhood play with child physical activity and sedentary time: a cross-sectional analysis of primary school-aged children from the UK, *BMJ Open* (2017). [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2017-017588](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2017-017588)

Provided by University of Bristol

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