

Schools are a crucial place for physical activity programmes – here's how to make them work

January 24 2019, by Michaela James And Sinead Brophy



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

The importance of promoting activity in young people cannot be overstated. It is a [public health priority](#). And yet [a new study](#) reports that school-based physical activity programmes are ineffective at improving the activity levels of young people. The review found that in 17

international studies of a variety of school-based physical activity interventions, there was little or no change in the amount of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) the young people did throughout the day.

This finding paints a dire picture of current efforts to get [children](#) moving, and suggests that we are failing to address a very serious issue. But it can't be used to say that all projects aimed at getting children moving don't work. Finding a solution requires some [creative thinking](#) – one scheme will definitely not fit all.

If evidence shows that placing activity schemes in schools is not working then surely the community and home would be the next best place. Recent findings from our [ACTIVE Project](#) show that there are some very early home life factors which can be addressed to improve activity levels. By linking with routine health data, we have found, for example, that being the first born child and not being breastfed has negative impacts on heart health and fitness. So [supporting breastfeeding](#) and promoting opportunities for play and socialisation among first time parents could help improve activity levels of the children in later life.

But that is not to say that schools should be cut out of the equation. In fact, we think they should remain a priority alongside other places. Interestingly, our research also found that home factors such as being more deprived has no detrimental impact on activity levels and fitness of children. In fact, more deprived children were less sedentary. Yet, attending a more deprived school as a teenager actually has a negative impact on fitness levels and heart health. If we ignore this fact, and do no school-based activity work, there is a real risk that the health of [young people](#) from deprived homes will be damaged.

What young people want

We've found that one of the best ways to find out what works for different children is to ask what they want in terms of exercise provision. The young people we have spoken to are disappointed with what is on offer for them in terms of school activity. [They say there is not enough choice](#), and that the same sports (netball, football, rugby, athletics) are continuously cycled throughout their school life.

They also say that schools do not allocate enough time to exercise. Other core subjects take priority and there are less opportunities to play as [primary schools remove break times](#) and support staff to increase teaching time and save money. This leaves little room for young people to explore different activities and find what they like.

As curricula in UK schools [undergo a key period of change](#), now is the best time to rethink how we approach physical activity. And as physical activity has been shown to improve concentration, attention and memory, it is in schools' best interests that they help children move more and sit less.

Another perspective

But just as [school settings](#) cannot be ignored, this is not something that can be solved by simply restructuring different activity schemes. Another issue that we need to address is the emphasis placed on moderate-to-vigorous activity (MVPA). [Global guidelines](#) suggest that young people should do an hour of MVPA every day, and different schemes encourage this as a high priority. However, there are health benefits associated with [all types of activity from light to vigorous](#). By focusing on MVPA, we might be missing the benefits that come with less conventional types of activity such as cycling or skateboarding.

Thinking outside the box, and looking at other opportunities to get young people moving, such as encouraging easy changes like walking to school,

can go some way towards improving their activity levels. Active travel has been associated with [healthier body composition and fitness in children](#). Yet it would not meet the MVPA criteria. Moving in any way is better than not moving at all. And by encouraging life adjustments like this we could also help combat the idea that activity needs to be high exertion to be effective, something that often puts young people off.

While we can't ignore that research has found school activity schemes to be ineffective so far, we shouldn't give up. Our evidence shows that the [school](#) remains an important setting, particularly for deprived children. Instead of changing settings, perhaps the way researchers and practitioners approach physical activity needs to change. We should stop quantifying activity and start asking what evidence and support is needed for different schools and children with different needs.

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