

# New study finds children become less active each year of primary school

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A new study from the University of Bristol has revealed a dramatic drop in children's physical activity levels by the time they finish primary school. Between the ages of six and 11, children lost on average more than an hour of exercise in the week, with an even greater fall on weekends.

Monitoring the behavior of more than 2,000 children from 57 schools across South West England during primary [school](#), the study found children became 17 minutes less active per week every year.

Children wore an accelerometer for five days, including two weekend days, which provided an accurate assessment of how many minutes per day the children participated in moderate to [vigorous physical activity](#) (MVPA) – enough to get them slightly out of breath and sweaty.

The U.K. Chief Medical Officers recommend that children do an hour of MVPA every day.

This study, funded by the British Heart Foundation (BHF) and published in the *International Journal of Obesity*, found 61 percent of children in Year 1 did at least an hour of MVPA per day, but by Year 6, only 41 percent achieved the target. The drop was particularly steep for girls, who fell from 54 to 28 percent by the time they finished primary school.

Led by Russ Jago, Professor of Paediatric Physical Activity & Public Health at the University of Bristol, the research also examined how body mass index (BMI) is associated with [physical activity](#) in childhood, and if associations change as children age.

Professor Jago said: "Evaluating patterns of physical activity across childhood is an important way to identify key ages in which to intervene to change behavior—and establish healthy habits for life.

"These numbers prove that more needs be done to ensure children keep active as they approach adolescence. This isn't about getting children to exercise more, but rather maintaining their activity levels.

"Developing early intervention strategies that help children retain activity levels could include after school physical activity programs,

focusing on participation and enjoyment in addition to popular sports—and a greater emphasis on promoting weekend activities."

It comes as data from the 2017/18 National Child Measurement Programme shows that 10 percent of four to five-year-olds in England were obese—doubling to 20 percent for 10 to 11-year-olds, while 90 percent of children who are obese at age three remain overweight or obese in adolescence.

Evidence shows the less time children and adolescents spend inactive the better their physical and psychological health is, but it's unclear if these associations are independent of physical activity.

Professor Jeremy Pearson, BHF's Associate Medical Director, said: "Almost a third of children in the U.K. weigh more than they should, while one in four [primary school](#) children are not meeting the recommended levels of exercise.

"We know that [children](#) living with obesity are more likely to become [obese adults](#)—putting them at increased risk of developing heart and circulatory diseases and their risk factors, such as type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure, later in life.

"Staying active must be combined with policies that help families make healthy and informed choices, such as a 9pm watershed on junk food marketing and restricting the promotion of unhealthy foods."

**More information:** Russell Jago et al. Association of BMI category with change in children's physical activity between ages 6 and 11 years: a longitudinal study, *International Journal of Obesity* (2019). [DOI: 10.1038/s41366-019-0459-0](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41366-019-0459-0)

Provided by University of Bristol

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