

How schools can help children eat well and be active

May 31 2024



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The health of children and young people in the UK is getting worse, with children's education, health and well-being affected by inactivity and unhealthy diets, [new research](#) has found.

The latest report by the Child of the North research group, which includes academics from the N8 Partnership universities, including the University of Leeds, and the think tank Centre for Young Lives, sets out recommendations for schools to improve provisions for physical activity and healthy nutrition, in a bid to tackle Britain's child obesity crisis.

Professor Mark Mon Williams, Child of The North report series editor, and Chair in Cognitive Psychology at Leeds, said, "The links between health and education are illustrated perfectly through the negative impact on learning created by a malnourished child. A healthy country needs to invest in its future workforce, and this means supporting schools to help children eat well and be active. The paltry costs necessary to ensure children learn effectively would be swamped by the long-term savings the NHS would make if it wasn't picking up the obesity problems created through the first two decades of someone's life."

Key findings

Physical activity and a [healthy diet](#) in childhood have been shown to improve educational attainment, and physical and mental health outcomes.

However, since 1995, physical activity levels have been decreasing, and diet quality has decreased, with an increased intake of processed foods and reduced intake of fruit and vegetables.

"A greater focus on physical activity in school is long overdue, as are the

resources and specialist staff to deliver rich physical exercise experiences. We need to better recognize those schools which are placing a greater importance on improving physical activity, healthier diets, and well-being by recognizing their endeavors through the schools' inspection system." says Anne Longfield, executive chair of the Centre for Young Lives.

Highlights

- Almost 4 million children are not physically active for the recommended 60-plus minutes a day.
- Children and young people from the least affluent families are the least likely to be active, with fewer than half meeting the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines
- 4,000 hours of PE were lost from the curriculum in state-funded [secondary schools](#) in 2022–23.
- 250,000 eligible children are missing out on Free School Meals due to the out-dated opt-in system, and 900,000 children living in poverty in England do not qualify for Free School Meals at all due to restrictive eligibility.
- 18% of households experienced food insecurity in 2022–23.
- 82% of 5–15-year-olds do not consume the recommended five daily portions of fruit and vegetables, and children aged 4-10 years are consuming almost double their recommended daily sugar limits.
- Fewer than 2% of packed lunches meet the government's School Food Standards.

The report also highlights the challenges facing schools as they try to provide healthy food on tiny budgets.

It included research studies which showed how children on free school meals often faced restricted choices, having to opt for meal deals,

including a main, a dessert, and a drink, even though in some instances, non-meal-deal items offered healthier alternatives.

There was a lack of fruit, vegetables, and salad in all schools, and portion sizes were often not filling, leaving children hungry.

Such limitations around school meals have a negative impact on children's educational success and mental and physical well-being.

The combination of inactivity and an unhealthy diet is also fueling the obesity epidemic, with long-term negative impacts on physical and mental health, and the additional pressures this puts on the NHS. Currently, obesity rates are costing the NHS around £6.5 billion a year and obesity is the second largest preventable cause of cancer.

Evidence-based recommendations

The report sets out evidence-based recommendations to give schools powers to develop their own holistic approaches to improving healthy diets and physical activity.

The authors also urge the government to support schools to diversify curriculum and teacher training, placing the health and well-being of pupils at the center of teaching and school life.

The report—the fifth in a year-long series of joint Child of the North/Centre for Young Lives reports—argues that schools should be crucial environments for boosting healthy eating and physical activity, and highlights overwhelming evidence of the need to empower schools to devise their own whole-school approaches in collaboration with their local communities. The report also recommends the need for:

- Introducing clear nutrition standards for all food and drink

available at school, including school meals, snacks, and vending machines, and supporting schools to promote physical activity throughout all areas of the school day

- Extending free school fruit and vegetables provision to all school-year groups and expanding the provision of school breakfast clubs.
- Widening entitlement to Free School Meals and the provision of the Healthy Start scheme, which provides weekly food vouchers for pregnant women and families with children under four years, in low-income households.

The report urges government to:

- Establish whole-school approaches for physical activity and healthy nutrition, bringing together health and education to better support childhood health and well-being. Every school should be able to tailor its own approach based on its unique local circumstances.
- Support schools to deliver an ethos where the health and well-being of pupils is central to teaching practices and the wider school environment, and encourage Ofsted to recognize schools that emphasize the importance of activity and healthy eating.
- Support schools to work alongside local higher education institutions, to draw on research expertise, including expertise on [physical activity](#) and healthy nutrition, to highlight the most effective interventions and use local and national data to guide good practice, in coordination with local communities.

More information: [An evidence-based plan for supporting physical activity and healthy nutrition with and through education settings](#) (2024)

Provided by University of Leeds

Citation: How schools can help children eat well and be active (2024, May 31) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-schools-children.html>

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