Medical Xpress

Sitting it out

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Youngsters in Norway today are not as fit as earlier generations, and even the best perform less well. Researchers now warn that a wave of inactivity could have a major long-term health impact.

The conclusions about the physical condition of young people build on a survey of Norwegian schoolchildren's performance in the 3 000-metre race from 1969 to 2009.

Associate professors Leif Inge Tjelta and Sindre Dyrstad at the University of Stavanger (UiS) have drawn on notes kept by a number of physical education teachers.

Their work has confirmed a modern prejudice – that today's Norwegian children run more slowly than people of their age did in the past.

Dramatic

Based on roughly 5 000 trials covering pupils in Stavanger, the results of the study are depressing – and worse than the researchers had feared.

They show that physical endurance levels among schoolchildren remained stable until the end of the 1980s, but have worsened dramatically since 1990.

The main findings show that boys running the 3 000-metre now take one minute and 20 seconds longer on average than earlier generations.

Girls, on the other hand, require an extra minute to complete the race, giving gender-specific increases of 10 and six per cent respectively.

Depressing

Published in the Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports, the study shows that the most depressing results are among schoolchildren with the weakest performance.

"Results for this group are far worse than before," comments Prof Tjelta. "These children are exposing themselves to a great health risk.

"There's a potential danger that their low level of activity will have long-term consequences for their physical condition unless they do something about it.

"But the best 10 per cent are also in worse shape than before. That even extends to schoolchildren who're pursuing sports at a high level in their own time."

Sedentary

Norwegians have become more sedentary in a relatively short space of time, Prof Dyrstad notes. "They sit still for longer periods and drive to get from one place to another.

"Since the 1990s, we see that youngsters in Norway who were previously outdoors in the afternoon are increasingly sitting in front of a computer.

"Since these activities appeal more to boys than to girls, the former are hardest hit by the wave of inactivity. That conforms with findings from other studies."

Downgraded

The two researchers believe that physical exercise has been downgraded in terms of the priority given to it by schools.

"The gymnastics timetable has been cut to the bone, and many schools offer physical activities which provide in reality too little motion," says Prof Tjelta. "Daily exercises with well-qualified teachers can be very important, and should accordingly be on school timetables right down to nursery level.

"Failure to do this will have a negative effect. The politicians must be willing to invest in physical education."

Training teachers

He points out that boys can easily take control of the choice of activities in the lesson if the teacher lacks the expertise needed to create a proper plan.

The danger is that girls then lose interest in the subject. Prof Tjelta hopes that more local authorities will give priority to providing continuing physical education classes.

Prof Dyrstad, who has worked as a PE teacher himself, believes that children and young people should have one hour of physical activity in every school day.

"Since it's the most sedentary who're the hardest to get involved in such activity, having professionally trained PE teachers in schools is important," he says.

Too much driving

The researchers urge parents to make a bigger commitment to getting their children to be physically active in their leisure time.

Research shows that Norwegians are increasingly driving to places, even if these are less than three kilometres from their homes.

"Parents have great freedom of action in inspiring physical fitness, including such measures as cycling around the neighbourhood rather than driving," says Prof Dyrstad.

"People must discover the pleasure of physical activity, that it's fun to get into shape. We must all think creatively and innovatively."

Motivation

Prof Tjelta adds that obesity problems are growing in Norway as the body weight of youngsters rises. "But it wouldn't take much to change that.

"We also know that children who're very physically active in their early lives continue to be so when they reach adulthood.

"Unfortunately, today's social structure encourages parents to drive their children to sporting and leisure activities. It's particularly important to motivate those who don't do sport outside school."

Call for campaigns

Prof Dyrstad believes that lessons could be learnt from earlier Norwegian campaigns to persuade people to stop smoking, which have

proved fairly effective.

"We now need to become aware of the passivation of society. Being in good physical shape is actually the most important factor in reducing the risk of illness and early death."

Provided by University of Stavanger

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