



PLAYGROUND RULES

Promoting physical
activity in schools

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Foreword

The habits we form in childhood last a lifetime. Whether it is healthy eating, mental resilience, or avoiding addictive habits, the largest difference we can make to lifetime health comes by ensuring that the next generation see healthy behaviours as the norm, rather than something unusual.



Nowhere is this clearer than when it comes to physical activity. Children who are physically active – whether that is active play, competitive sport, or even just walking to school – are more likely to continue these habits into adulthood with all of the health benefits which they bring.

Despite this, more than half of our children and young people don't meet the guidelines set for physical activity. We are failing to put in place systems which mean physical activity is the default for every young person.

Tackling this is not easy and is already a key focus of organisations from schools and nurseries to sporting governing bodies. What is clear is that it is not sufficient to improve the provision of PE lessons, and hope that will be enough. Instead, we need a holistic approach that starts in school but extends to cover everywhere children spend time.

As one of the UK's leading public health bodies, the RSPH is committed to playing our part in ensuring that schools, school staff, and families have the support they need to get their children moving. Whether it is giving schools the funding flexibility they need to invest in modern facilities, or ensuring parents can see what their child's school is doing to promote physical activity and wellbeing, the changes we identify will all nudge behaviour further in favour of physically active childhoods – helping to build healthy habits which will last a lifetime.

William Roberts

Chief Executive, Royal Society for Public Health

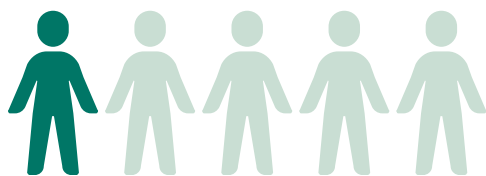
Facing the Future

If we want to improve the health of our country, we should start with our children. It may sound trite to say that they are our future, but that makes it no less true. With the NHS under historic levels of pressure, and demographics only set to make it harder to meet these, we need to do everything we can to ensure that the next generation is as healthy as it possibly can be.

In some areas, we are already taking the action that is needed – the generational smoking ban being a prime example of the kind of step change that can deliver outcomes not just now, but for decades to come.

At the same time, children today are facing complex and evolving health challenges – most notably with rising rates of both obesity and mental health conditions. These are health conditions which do not just impact on children at some abstract future point, but are actively holding them back today.

One in five children and young people have a probable mental health condition¹. Among older teenagers, eating disorders remain a major concern. One in eight 17-19 year olds have an eating disorder – a fifteen fold increase on the number less than a decade ago². Disaggregating exactly what causes these challenges is difficult, but we do know that 35% of teenagers say that their body image causes them to worry ‘often’³.



ONE IN FIVE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE A PROBABLE MENTAL HEALTH CONDITION

Alongside mental health, we are facing a clear obesity crisis. NHS data points to one in eight toddlers and primary school aged children being obese⁴. Among secondary school pupils it is one in five. When you include children who are only overweight, 27% of all children between the ages of 2 and 15 are struggling with their weight.

We cannot afford to put off action to tackle this. Based on current trends, more than 90% of local authorities will see the percentage of children leaving primary overweight or obese increase over the next decade⁵. Nationally, as many as 41% of children aged 10 could be

¹ NHS England (2023) [One in five children and young people had a probably mental disorder in 2023](#)

² Ibid.

³ Mental Health Foundation (2019) [Body Image Report](#)

⁴ NHS England (2024) [One in eight toddlers and primary school aged children obese](#)

⁵ RSPH analysis of [PHE data](#)

overweight in 2030.

Alongside diet, physical activity plays a key role in weight management and their broader wellbeing. The World Health Organization have set a clear guideline that children should be taking part in 60 minutes of moderate or vigorous physical activity every day. This is not just about sport (although sport can play a large role) but encompasses everything from walking to school to physical play at break times.

In the most recent data available, fewer than half of children meet this standard⁶. Almost one in three children do less than half as much physical activity as is recommended. This translates to almost 4 million children not seeing the health benefits – from reduced body fat and stronger bones, to better mental health – that exercise can offer.

This inactivity is not evenly distributed. Girls are noticeably less likely to be active than boys, and those from the highest income backgrounds are far more active than their less wealthy peers. The only time these patterns changed was during the Covid pandemic – when the gender divide disappeared for one year, before reopening in 2021/22.



⁶ Sport England (2024) [Active Lives Children and Young People Survey](#).

Get Moving

Being physically active is straightforwardly good for our health and wellbeing. This is not just about participation in sport – any physical activity which raises the heart rate has clear benefits.

Studies carried out in schools looking at physical activity programmes show how stark an impact these interventions can have. Children who receive targeted interventions to boost their levels of vigorous activity see their BMI z-score⁷ fall significantly – indicating that the intervention reduced levels of obesity, with the impact persisting beyond the end of interventions⁸.

Increasing the time spent taking part in physical activity has a double benefit. Firstly, it directly improves fitness and helps mitigate against any excess consumption. But, at the same time, it means that children spend less time in a sedentary manner – whether that is sitting in a classroom, or on the sofa after school.

These benefits can accumulate for decades after the intervention. Obesity is persistent, and many people struggle to break out of a damaging health cycle. If someone is obese when they are still at school, then they are five times more likely to be obese as an adult than if they were a healthy weight as a child. With 1 in 3 children leaving primary school last year overweight or obese, our failure to get to grips with this challenge is saving up huge costs – both personal and societal – for years to come.

The benefits are not just confined to children's wellbeing. Where children are more engaged in physical activity, we see clear benefits to their academic outcomes – whether that is higher GCSE scores⁹, or improved focus in the classroom¹⁰. This impact is particularly pronounced in maths outcomes – something which cannot be overlooked given the importance of maths skills and the public policy focus on improving these across the course of children's education¹¹.

Improving levels of physical activity in schools isn't a silver bullet, and we cannot pretend that there will not be far more work to do. But, as we consider how to ensure the next generation is happier and healthier than those before it, this must be one of the tools which we seek to use.

⁷ A measure of weight which accounts for their age and level of physical maturity

⁸ Jurado-Castro, J. et al (2020) [Evaluation of Physical Activity and Lifestyle Interventions Focused on School Children with Obesity Using Accelerometry](#).

⁹ Youth Sport Trust (2020) [The Link Between Physical Activity and Attainment in Children and Young People](#)

¹⁰ Norris, E. et al (2020) [Physically active lessons in schools and their impact on physical activity, educational, health and cognition outcomes: a systematic review and meta-analysis](#)

¹¹ Dong Li et al (2023) [Effect of physical activity interventions on children's academic performance](#)

Shifting the Dial

We can see that schools currently have a small but tangible impact on physical activity, with the pandemic providing a natural experiment in what happens when children are not receiving interventions in this setting. The proportion of children meeting physical activity guidelines fell slightly when schools closed and returned to former levels when all children were back in school full time¹².

To make a meaningful difference to health outcomes, we need to do more than this. For the half of children who currently do not meet physical activity guidelines, it is clear that a new approach is needed to ensure they realise the benefits that such activity can bring.

This is not a challenge which schools can solve alone. The entire school system is facing a number of challenges, with teachers reporting burnout and budgets – as with the entire public sector – coming under increasing pressure. If we are to create a system which actively facilitates children living active lifestyles, then we must include schools – but we can't stop there.

Whether it is the steady closure of playing fields and public playgrounds over recent years, or the trend towards socialising over social media rather than in person, there are many factors which can be seen to influence rates of inactivity. However, we do not need to fix every element of the system completely in order to make a difference – instead, we need action so that there is a clear direction of travel.

IF WE ARE TO CREATE A SYSTEM WHICH ACTIVELY FACILITATES CHILDREN LIVING ACTIVE LIFESTYLES, THEN WE MUST INCLUDE SCHOOLS – BUT WE CAN'T STOP THERE.

When promoting physical activity, there will not be a one size fits all approach that works for every child. For every child who loves games, and wants nothing more than to be allowed to chase a football around at lunch, another will need time and support to find what works for them – even if it is just walking to school rather than getting dropped off by car. In most cases, encouragement should be sufficient. Putting in place a supportive environment, so that being active becomes the easy choice for children to make, has potential to lead to major change. But we have to recognise that there may be some cases where more is needed – schools cannot fix every problem with society, so there may come a point where they need to enforce their approach. This need not be punitive, but interventions such as school streets not only encourage activity, but make inactivity far harder.

Taking an encouraging approach also means not simply leaving physical activity to PE

¹² Sport England (2024) [Active Lives Children and Young People Survey](#).

lessons and teachers. While there will be some children for whom this is sufficient, it is clear that there are many more who need a different approach. Physical activity is not all about running around and serious exertion. More genteel activity can have real benefits, and may appeal to different cohorts – making it as important a part of the right approach.

At the same time, being active outside of school is harder than ever. Since 2010, 926 playing fields across the country have closed¹³. Safety concerns often deter children from using public play equipment such as that provided in parks¹⁴. The cost-of-living crisis makes paid-for activities out of reach for some families. The net effect of all of these challenges, combined with the opportunities to socialise online, is that fewer children play outside their homes than in previous generations¹⁵.

None of these challenges are insurmountable. Doing so requires concrete action, not just from national or local government, but from businesses and the VCSE sector.

One of the biggest challenges we face is boosting girls' participation in physical activity. While this has historically been an issue which mainly opened up in secondary schools, differential trends now mean the gender gap in activity levels is relatively consistent across all school age children¹⁶. We do not set out here how to solve this, but it is worth noting that many of the barriers identified by groups such as Women in Sport¹⁷ are societal as well as practical.

Changing these social attitudes, whether that is overturning the image of sport as male-dominated, or challenging stereotypes which might deter girls from ethnic minority communities, is work that is being taken seriously by the entire sports sector. We need education settings to ensure that they are part of this effort, and helping to create a system where everyone is not just able but actively encouraged to take part in physical activity. These are not minor barriers to creating a more active society. Shifting the dial so that every child is active will take serious commitment, not just from our schools but from everyone who has an influence on our children's lives.

¹³ GMB (2024) [More than 900 playing fields closed](#)

¹⁴ ESP Play (2024) [Playgrounds are no-go areas for one in two UK kids](#)

¹⁵ Save the Children (2022) [Only One In Four Children Play Out Regularly On Their Street Compared To Almost Three-Quarters Of Their Grandparents Generation](#)

¹⁶ Sport England (2024) [Active Lives Children and Young People Survey](#).

¹⁷ Women in Sport (2008) [Barriers to sports participation for women and girls](#)

Inside the School Gates

The reality is that current approaches are not doing enough to support all children to be physically active. While levels of physical activity have increased over recent years, current trends mean that we will not see all children meet the current physical activity guidelines until the next century. More immediately, without a step change in how we approach this, we will still see fewer than 6 in 10 children living ‘active’ lives by 2040.

Changing this means embedding the principle of physical activity across our schools – ensuring that keeping children moving is not something which is left solely to be dealt with during PE lessons. Instead, repeated studies have shown that a whole-school approach – such as that provided by the Active Schools Framework – helps to ensure that this does not get left to PE lessons.¹⁸

Active Schools					
Active Learning		Active Play		Active Travel	
Strong PE provision	Activity in other lessons	Before and after school provision	Active play during breaks	Supportive physical infrastructure	Making active lifestyles the norm
Families involved and supporting active behaviours					
Children empowered to shape interventions					
Staff trained to implement this approach					
School leadership prioritising physical activity					

Creating a whole school approach to physical activity has to go beyond specific interventions. For it to succeed, every group involved in the school have to buy in, and be given the support they need to make them a success. This can mean anything from parents encouraging their children to walk or cycle to school, or teachers being given training so they are confident running active lessons.

If our entire approach to physical activity is limited to breaktimes and PE lessons, then it is unlikely we will see the results we want.

¹⁸ Graphic adapted from Daly-Smith, A. et al (2020) [Using a multi-stakeholder experience-based design process to co-develop the Creating Active Schools Framework](#)

On average, secondary school pupils spend over 70% of their time in school sat down¹⁹. Even if we successfully get children active at break times, and two hours a week during PE, this still represents a huge amount of their time spent in a sedentary manner. Given that we are unlikely to get every child spending all their non-lesson time in an active manner, it also means we will struggle to meet physical activity targets across the board.

There is evidence that a physically active approach to learning improves outcomes on academic performance, while increasing physical activity levels among children²⁰. On a basic level, this means designing lessons so that children are required to move around as a natural, integrated part of the activities. There are schools which already adopt this approach²¹, showing that it is possible to adopt physically active learning within the current curriculum requirements.



As the Government seeks to expand the provision of wrap-around care, schools should also recognise that this is an opportunity to get children active before they step foot in a classroom for the day. Given the benefits of physical activity to children's focus and attention spans, this also has the potential to improve the quality of learning which happens in the first hour or two of the school day.

The Youth Sport Trust already produce guidance on how to implement physical activity approach in breakfast clubs²², and schools that have adopted these approaches have seen their outcomes improve. This can cover a range of activities, from offering table tennis to children who come in for breakfast, through to setting up 'Just Dance' sessions after they have eaten.

As breakfast clubs are rolled out as a universal offer, it is important that schools are encouraged and supported to implement this approach – ensuring that children get more than just a meal when they come to school early.

Lastly, schools can only promote physical activity if they have the facilities to do so. There is clear evidence that, where children have access to greater numbers of outdoor facilities, their levels of physical activity increase substantially²³.

¹⁹ Schwekne, P. et al (2022) [Influence of Sit-Stand Tables in Classrooms on Children's Sedentary Behavior and Teacher's Acceptance and Feasibility](#).

²⁰ Chalkley, A. et al (2023) [Reframing physically active learning as movement-centred pedagogy](#).

²¹ Orchard Primary Academy (2025) [Physical Active Learning](#)

²² Youth Sport Trust (2025) [Active Breakfast Clubs](#)

²³ Haug, E. et al (2008) [The characteristics of the outdoor school environment associated with physical activity](#).

While they are thankfully rare, examples of schools built without access to playgrounds represent the extreme of this problem²⁴ – with no outside space, it is inevitable that children will be sedentary for most of the day. This is clearly not a situation that should be encouraged, and more needs to be done to support the schools in this situation to access outside space.

But the problem is broader. Converting space to encourage physical activity – whether that is traffic calming on the street outside, or installing new playground equipment – is a costly intervention at a time when school budgets are stretched, and many are facing serious health risks as a result of low maintenance budgets. Despite this, it is clear that investing in this fixed capital is crucial to improving levels of physical activity.

Implementing these shifts represents a burden on schools – albeit one that should be more than worth it in the long term. For almost a decade now, the PE and Sports Premium has been distributed to primary schools to encourage them to invest in stronger provision in this area, but it is poorly monitored, and evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions is patchy.

Last year, this distributed £320 million across primary schools to be spent on a narrowly defined set of activities – training for existing staff is allowed, but not recruiting new, specialist staff. At the same time, maintenance of existing assets is allowed, but not investment in new fixed assets which could transform the provision of physical activity.

When looking at school funding in the round, the PE and Sports Premium is not a major factor, but it provides a strong basis through which we could spread, and fund, best practice to ensure that more children are supported to be physically active at school.

²⁴ The Guardian (2024) [Indoors at breaktime](#)

Opportunities for Every Child

Given that this best practice exists, and there are schools who already do amazing work in promoting physical activity, the public policy challenge confronting both Government and the public health world is how to spread this approach so that every child receives the same opportunities.

Over the last 15 years, our education system has demonstrated beyond doubt that those things that get measured are the ones that get done. When league tables measures the proportion of children getting ‘good’ GCSEs, there was a clear incentive to focus on margin cases, where an investment of energy would push a child over the line²⁵. However, this reductive measure often meant that children who could go from good to outstanding – or simply poor to middling – were neglected.

The current inspection regime places a clear premium on academic success. Schools are judged primarily by the results they get in exams. Safeguarding remains important but are a binary – you have to do them to the required legal standard, but there are few rewards for going above and beyond.

In such a system, there is a real danger that health and wellbeing are not a top priority. Ensuring that children are happy, and will grow up to be well rounded people, is secondary to ensuring that they perform in their GCSEs or SATs. If we want to change this, we need to change the incentives – by actively measuring children’s wellbeing, and judging schools on it, we can help make it a priority.

This isn’t about piling more pressure onto teachers and heads. There are only so many hours in a week, and an increased focus on wellbeing will require trade offs elsewhere. Given the benefits on attainment that flow from physical activity and strong mental health, this should have a long-term benefit, but in the short term we cannot take a punitive approach which simply pushes more school staff to the edge of burnout.

A better approach is to set a national direction of travel, and then provide schools with the support that they need to deliver on these ambitions. A system which solely sets targets, then takes no interest in why they are or are not met, is never going to develop. The Department for Education has already recognised this, with a new approach to underperforming schools where they are given intensive support from expert teams²⁶. This is not just useful for academic performance, but could allow schools who are struggling to boost physical activity to learn from those who are performing better.

Another key element is recognising that schools have different needs, and will require

²⁵ Nuffield Foundation (2024) [School accountability and fairness](#)

²⁶ Department for Education (2025) [RISE teams](#)

different solutions. Ultimately, school leaders have the best understanding of the micro-conditions which impact on their students. Whether it is local traffic patterns deterring active travel, or the closure of sports teams in the area, tackling these conditions is crucial to securing improved outcomes.

To make this a reality, schools need to be given meaningful flexibility to try new things and move away from national schemes where appropriate. To give just one example, if a school feels the major barrier to boosting physical activity is a lack of capital infrastructure, they should be allowed to use the PE and Sports Premium to address this – focussing their spending on what will make the greatest difference, even if it might not align with Treasury spending norms.

This will not always work. The point of giving schools flexibility while holding them accountable for outcomes is to identify the best approaches. If a school tries something and it works, then the Government should seek to spread that best practice. If it doesn't work, then they should work with the school to understand why not, and implement a more effective approach.

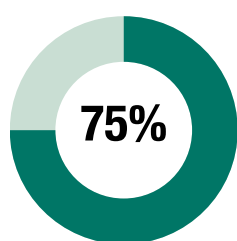


Supporting School Staff

None of this will work if it is simply a new burden on teachers and school staff. Over recent years we have seen falling the number of school staff outpaced by changes to the number of children, at the same time as schools are having to manage multiple new – and often competing – challenges. From rising levels of mental ill-health, to a current crisis in school readiness among Key Stage 1, these mean that there is not scope to put anything new into the list of jobs schools are doing.

But promoting physical activity does not need to mean individual staff taking on any more tasks. Instead, we need to ensure that they are doing their current jobs in a way which facilitates active lifestyles. It doesn't inherently take longer to plan a lesson which incorporates physical activity than it does to plan a lesson which is entirely sedentary. Indeed, given the benefits seen from implementing these changes, they could end up reducing the burden on staff as children are more focussed and engaged.

We also know that parents in particular value school staff having this expertise. Polling carried out for the RSPH in early 2025 identified that 75% of parents felt that there should be more training in health and wellbeing for school staff²⁷ – ensuring that their children are able to get the low level support which is so important when it comes to building healthy habits. At the moment, this support is often patchy. Surveys suggest that as few as one in three teachers have received specific training in how to support their student's mental health²⁸. Physical health is often isolated within the PE and PSHE curriculums, rather than being embedded across every element of the school.



**OF PARENTS FEEL THAT SCHOOL
STAFF SHOULD HAVE MORE TRAINING
IN HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

As has been referenced, teachers face a workload crisis, with many simply unable to take on new responsibilities. It is vital that a focus on wellbeing is achieved through doing things differently, rather than simply doing more. In this way, the Making Every Contact Count approach has much to recommend it²⁹. In other settings, MECC training has been used to support staff to integrate health promotion into conversations they are already having on a daily basis. At RSPH, we have seen examples where this approach has been used – to great effect – in schools in order to improve student mental health.

²⁷ RSPH (2025) [What Are You Talking About?](#)

²⁸ Early Intervention Foundation (2022) [Teachers need mental health training to best support their students](#)

²⁹ RSPH (2025) [What Are You Talking About?](#)

This training would also offer a clear route to career progression – whether that is support staff taking on new responsibilities, or teachers demonstrating their suitability to move into pastoral leadership roles. In common with much of the wider public health workforce³⁰, what is needed is both clear signposting to the training which is available, and support from employers to access the training which is relevant to their jobs.



³⁰ RSPH (2024) [The Unusual Suspects](#)

A Plan to Get Moving

There is no one solution to the crisis of physical inactivity among our young people. Many organisations, from the Youth Sports Trust and StreetGames to the education unions, have made clear and specific asks around this issue which should be taken seriously by everyone responsible for our children's wellbeing.

However, it is clear that there are a few major gaps in our current system which could be easily addressed. These changes would shift both the incentives and powers available to schools, helping them to prioritise physical activity and improve health outcomes for students.

As we look at the health problems facing our country, it is clear that this must be one of the highest priorities for Government. If we let child health deteriorate, then this will bleed into poor adult health, trapping us in a cycle of poor outcomes. Action to address this cannot be put off any longer.

The Government should publish a national Youth Physical Activity strategy, setting out what is expected from both schools and other parts of the public sector

This should be owned by the Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, with input from other Departments – particularly the Department for Education. While school physical activity should be a major element of this, it is important that any strategy brings together elements such as the broader sports sector and active travel.

As a minimum, this strategy should make clear what the Government expects each part of the system to do. This should not be limited to the public sector, but should bring in sports governing bodies, the gym industry, and others, to create a whole systems approach to youth physical activity.

Any strategy will succeed only if staff on the ground are empowered and supported to deliver it. As such, the Youth Physical Activity strategy should identify the different workforces with a role to play – from teaching assistants to youth workers – and set out the support which will be made available to them. This should at a minimum include access to the training they need to support higher levels of physical activity.

The New Ofsted Inspection Framework should foreground the work schools do to promote wellbeing and physical activity.

Ofsted are in the process of overhauling their report system, moving away from single-word judgements towards providing a more nuanced, information-rich dashboards on each

school. These dashboards should prominently set out what schools are doing to promote the physical and mental wellbeing of their students – including what they are doing to promote physical activity across the school day.

The reality is that what gets measured gets done. While some in the education sector have expressed concern about these report cards increasing pressure on teachers, they should instead provide an opportunity for schools to showcase the things that they do best. Where this includes physical activity, it gives school leadership a clear opportunity to communicate this to current and prospective parents – rather than it being buried beneath an over-simplistic headline grade.

The PE and Sports Premium should be revised to encourage a specific focus on increasing physical activity across the school day, with reducing obesity a specific target for spending.

While PE and sport play a major role in getting children active, they don't represent the totality of what should be done. When the ringfenced funding for physical activity is focussed on PE, it is not surprising that other ways to encourage activity lose out. The Government should revise the guidance supporting the grant, to make clear that schools can and should use this to fund a range of interventions which go beyond the narrow confines of PE lessons.

At the same time, the Government should consider whether accounting rules can be amended to allow schools to invest in fixed assets – allowing them to construct new facilities or invest in their environment to support active travel.

Finally, the current distribution means that every school gets the same per-pupil funding. This overlooks that some schools – and some areas of the country – need more support to ensure children are both physically active and healthy. A funding formula which takes into account these needs and existing outcomes would be vital to ensuring that the Premium provides maximum value for money.

Playing Our Part

Addressing the challenges facing our young people is vital to improving the health of the nation. As an education charity, the Royal Society for Public Health has a role to play here – we cannot simply make a call for action then expect others to do the work.

We will provide support to school staff to [equip them to have meaningful conversations about health](#), whether that is mental or physical wellbeing. Recognising that school staff are already overburdened, we will look at ways we can support them to have these conversations without adding to their workload.

We will work with the third sector and private providers to [ensure they are supported to increase rates of physical activity among children](#). Whether it is gyms, sports clubs, or youth centres, the people who run these anchor institutions have huge influence over young people, and should be empowered to maximise the benefits of this.

We will [carry out further research around social media use and mental health](#), to identify where further action is needed to ensure that our education system is not just physically healthy, but promotes the highest standards of mental wellbeing.

We will [campaign for an education system which prioritises children's wellbeing](#), engaging with every part of the system to ensure that they are involved and empowered to help make this change.

If you want to be part of any of this work, please reach out to us at policy@rsph.org.uk.