

Summary of evidence

Evidence shows that physical activity behaviours are often established in childhood. It is critical therefore to engage children in physical activity from early years onwards to establish healthy physical activity levels for life and thereby prevent and reduce child obesity. Physical activity in children is crucial in reducing the effects of risk factors for disease; including avoiding raised blood pressure, avoiding weight gain and achieving high peak bone mass. Evidence also shows physical activity can improve emotional wellbeing, educational attainment and increase self-esteem and confidence in children.

Recommendations on minimum physical activity levels to benefit health from Chief Medical Officer are that all children and young people should engage in moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity for at least 60 minutes and up to several hours every day (Department of Health, 2011) Most children in Leeds and nationally do not achieve the recommended physical activity levels and addressing this is a key government priority.

Epidemiology

Physical activity levels are a challenge to measure and no standardised measures are used nationally. Robust national research using accelerometers shows that only 51% of children met the recommendation of at least one hour of physical activity a day, with girls (38%) less active than boys (63%) (Griffiths et al., 2013).

The Leeds My Health My School survey provides a relatively robust measure of children's self-report of physical activity levels and though this does not equate to any national comparators it does provide a picture for Leeds. My Health My School survey findings suggest that at least half of all children in Leeds are not achieving the levels of physical activity needed to benefit their health. This includes sports, active recreation, play and active travel such as walking to school. All measures of physical activity in the survey show similar patterns with boys being more active than girls at all ages and secondary school age young people less active than primary school age children. Secondary school age girls are particularly inactive. Children from socio economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more inactive than other children. The only significant difference in physical activity levels across ethnic group is with Asian girls who are significantly more inactive than any other group. Key Findings are

- 60% of Primary school age children and 46.9% of Secondary school age children report doing at least 7 hours a week of physical activity
- Only 39.5% of girls of secondary school age report doing 7 hours a week or more of physical activity
- Asian girl's levels of physical activity are significantly lower (41.2%) than other girls (49.9%)
- 60% of children report doing less than 2 hours a week of physical activity in school lesson time
- 53% report doing less than 2 hours a week of physical activity in school but not in lesson time.
- 42% of children report doing more than 4 hours of physical activity outside of school
- 31% of secondary school age children and 26% of primary school age children report doing less than 2 hours of physical activity outside of school.