

Supporting health and activity in schools

Being physically active and having a healthy diet are important for children's health and combating obesity. Many aspects of the environment in and around schools influence how active children are and what they eat.

Department of Health guidelines recommend 60 minutes of physical activity every day for children and reduced sitting time. However, many children in the UK are not meeting these recommendations.

Concerns persist over children's diets and food consumed in and around school. Standards for food provided in state-maintained schools in England are set by the government, but compliance is not universal and standards do not apply to the new Academy Schools. Sixty per cent of children do not eat school meals, and packed lunches have been shown to be of lower nutritional quality than school lunches.

SPEEDY (Sport, Physical activity and Eating behaviour: Environmental Determinants in Young people) is a study of Norfolk primary school children from Year 5 (aged 9-10) onwards by the Centre for Diet and Activity Research. It aims to help us understand what influences children's diet and physical activity behaviours and how these behaviours change over time.

The study, together with evidence reviews, shows that there are many aspects of the learning environment, beyond just the availability and type of food, which are associated with children's diet. They include teaching about nutrition or the use of a school garden. Although most schools have policies on physical activity or active travel, there is still limited evidence that this alone is enough to achieve higher activity levels.

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Key findings

- Food eaten at school lunchtime makes a significant contribution to overall diet, providing around a third of daily energy intake among children of primary school age.
- On average, those usually taking school meals met current food-based standards for school lunches – but the food choices of packed lunch eaters were typically less healthy.
- Sixty-nine per cent of Year 5 children were meeting current physical activity guidelines, but this declined between school years 5 and 6. This rate of decline could lead to a reduction in total activity per day of 20 minutes by the time they leave school.
- The decrease occurred mainly in children's free time, such as during breaks, after school and at weekends.
- Playgrounds with good quality sports and play facilities generally encourage physical activity. However, on wet days children encouraged to play outside are less active during breaks than those allowed to pursue active games indoors.
- Children who walk or cycle to school are more physically active overall, indicating that children do not 'compensate' for more activity during travel by being more inactive at other times. School crossing patrols, walking buses and cycle racks in schools are key factors which support active travel.



Policy relevance and implications

- New Academy Schools should be encouraged to reach the national school food standards. In schools meeting these standards, a move from packed lunch to school lunches or promotion of healthy packed lunches has the potential to improve overall diet quality. Both parents and schools have a role to play in encouraging these changes.
- Meals eaten at school represent a large contribution to overall nutrition, and present an opportunity to influence calorie intake and diet, for example through portion control.
- Schools shape attitudes to food and its availability. Changes to food provision should be considered in conjunction with changes to the teaching curriculum.
- Targeted education programmes, agreements with local retailers, or developing walking and cycle routes that pass fewer food outlets could be considered to combat exposure to unhealthy food during travel to and from school.
- Encouraging children to walk or cycle to school may increase their activity levels. Children living further away could be encouraged to walk or cycle at least part of their journey.
- Schools should provide children with opportunities and encourage them to be physically active during break times. In bad weather, indoor play may help them be more active. Late primary school (Year 5 onwards) may be an important period to intervene to support maintenance of activity levels in children.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

The SPEEDY study (Sport, Physical activity and Eating behaviour: Environmental Determinants in Young people), supported by the National Prevention Research Initiative and the Medical Research Council, is carried out by researchers at the ESRC-supported Centre for Diet and Activity Research (CEDAR). It is an ongoing population-based study involving 2,064 pupils in 92 primary schools in Norfolk to identify the factors that influence children's diet and physical activity behaviours, and how these behaviours change over time.

On average, while school meals met current food-based standards, packed lunches were typically less healthy. Sixty-nine per cent of Year 5 children met current physical activity guidelines, but this declined between school years 5 and 6.

Web: www.cedar.iph.cam.ac.uk/research/directory/speedy

FURTHER INFORMATION

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CEDAR is one of five UKCRC Public Health Research Centres of Excellence. The ESRC is one of the research centre's core funders.

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