

Are you sitting comfortably? Social marketing and physical activity among schoolchildren



Department of Health guidelines on the amount of physical exercise children should undertake increasingly seem at odds with the modern world. This is not a criticism of the guidelines: rather, it is a criticism of the worryingly sedentary routines that now dominate so many youngsters' lives.

Physical activity's positive effects on health outcomes for adults are well known, but less understood are its relationships with health and fitness in children. Research by the University of Exeter is exploring these relationships through a social marketing approach, identifying the motivations for and barriers to a switch to more active lifestyles both inside and outside school at a time when lack of exercise among the population as a whole is estimated to cost the NHS up to £1.8bn a year.



Overview

"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. Vigorous-intensity activities, including those that strengthen muscle and bone, should be incorporated at least three days a week. All children and young people should minimise the amount of time spent being sedentary (sitting) for extended periods."

These are the Department of Health's key recommendations for children and young people – that is, those aged from five to 18. The official guidelines include bike-riding and playground activities as examples of moderate-intensity exercise, while running, swimming, football, gymnastics and tennis feature in the vigorous-intensity category.

Alarming, many youngsters' overriding notion of any of these activities is likely to be its PlayStation or Xbox incarnation. This, after all, is the era of gaming consoles, smartphones, text-messaging, the internet, MSN, Facebook and near-countless television channels.

The Department of Health plainly acknowledges as much when it advises: "Minimising sedentary behaviour may include reducing time spent watching TV, using the computer or playing video-games."

In light of these concerns, an ongoing study by the University of Exeter is exploring the role of social marketing in promoting physical activity among schoolchildren. By surveying 1,200 pupils at eight schools in the Exeter and Devon areas, as well as interviewing stakeholders such as head teachers, PE staff, parents and local authority policymakers, it aims to produce a rich picture of youngsters' attitudes to exercise in an age when increasing obesity and related diseases are presenting major challenges to a sustainable society.

The data derived from the survey will be analysed to produce a lifestyle segmentation model for each school and the sample as a whole. Further interviews with pupils will provide additional data and help develop social marketing strategies to improve attitudes to physical activity among children. In the end the overarching question is perhaps as simple as this: how do we make exercise "cool" again?

KEY FACTS

- Physical activity's positive effects on health outcomes for adults are well known, but less understood are its relationships with health and fitness in children.
- Department of Health guidelines currently urge youngsters to "reduce sedentary behaviour" and participate in an hour's worth of exercise a day.
- Research by the University of Exeter is exploring why so few schoolchildren meet these recommendations and examining what they regard as the major barriers to their increased involvement.
- The study will ultimately investigate the role social marketing can play in encouraging children to engage in more physical activity.
- The findings will therefore be of interest to policymakers, head teachers, sports coordinators and even parents.

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Are you sitting comfortably? Social marketing and physical activity among school children (cont.)



Comments and implications

"We need new methods of changing youngsters' behaviour if the Department of Health's targets for the number of children participating in at least an hour's worth of physical exercise a day are going to be met," says PhD researcher and ESRC CASE studentship award holder Samantha Parnell.

"A lot of children have a completely inactive lifestyle nowadays. Around half of them don't even walk to school. They don't do out-of-school activities. They don't go out to play. They come home from school and spend time playing with their games consoles or their computers or their phones. Even their PE lessons can be quite sedentary.

We're already at the point where the shift in attitudes will have to be huge. There's a lot of work to be done, not just in terms of implementation but also in terms of research. We need a real understanding of what makes children want to engage in physical activity and what makes them want to avoid it."



Pupils who took part in the survey that underpins the study were presented with a range of questions about their current involvement in sport and exercise and their attitudes towards taking part. For instance, they were asked to identify "barriers" to their participation – including embarrassment, a lack of interest, an absence of skills, a "hostile environment" or even their parents.

"One important potential role of social marketing is that it could help make more kids see exercise as 'cool' again," says Parnell. *"In turn, that would lead to a boost in physical activity not just within schools but in home and community settings. We need campaigns that adopt a holistic approach – reducing the emphasis on using the car for the school run, increasing cycling and walking, creating an environment in which pupils fully engage in PE lessons and after-school activities."*

The research is embedded within a national policymaking framework for sustainability. This emphasises the value of social marketing in changing attitudes towards physical activity and the environment. *"The findings of this study will be of interest to head teachers, sports coordinators and decision-makers,"* says Parnell. *"It's going to require an enormous effort to bring about the necessary change, but there's no doubt that it needs to be done."*

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Samantha Parnell
ESRC Researcher

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Department of Health guidelines on physical activity for five-to-18-year-olds

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