

Free play: improving children's physical health

'Local authorities should work with local partners, such as industry and voluntary organisations, to create and manage more safe spaces for incidental and planned physical activity, addressing as a priority any concerns about safety, crime and inclusion, by providing facilities and schemes such as cycling and walking routes, cycle parking, area maps and safe play areas.'

NICE (2006)²

Introduction

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is an independent organisation responsible for providing national guidance on how to promote good health, and prevent and treat ill health. In December 2006, NICE published *Obesity: guidance on the prevention, identification, assessment and management of overweight and obesity in adults and children*, the first clinical guideline of its kind in England and Wales. This briefing summarises the *Full guideline* and *Quick reference guide 1* (for local authorities, schools and early years providers, workplaces and the public) sections of this document.³

The guidance aims to promote policy and practice that will:

- stem the rising prevalence of obesity and diseases associated with it
- increase the effectiveness of interventions to prevent overweight and obesity
- improve the care provided to adults and children with obesity.

The guidance is aimed at health improvement specialists and a wide range of workers in local government, the community and voluntary sectors, and the private sector, which includes staff in early years services, schools, social care, play and youth services. It will also be important for those involved in planning and transport, housing and regeneration and community development.

The guidance supports the implementation of the White Paper *Choosing health: making healthy choices easier*.⁴

It identifies a range of recommendations, each of which has a role to play in managing obesity. The guidelines cover both adults and children over the age of two, and include advice on:

- primary and secondary care
- clinical management and prevention of obesity in people who are currently a healthy weight.

This briefing focuses on recommendations made to local authorities, early years settings and schools on how to increase physical activity levels in children and young people.





In this section, NICE states that the recommendations apply to:

- senior managers and budget holders in local authorities and community partnerships who plan and commission services such as transport, sports, play and leisure and open spaces (not just those with an explicit public health role)
- staff providing specific community-based interventions.

Suggested action

Target	Suggested action
Policy and planning	<p>Work with the local community to identify environmental barriers to being physically active through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an audit focusing on barriers: the audit should involve PCTs, residents, businesses and institutions • assessing (ideally by health impact assessments) the impact of policies on children and young people's ability to eat healthily and be physically active • facilitating links between healthcare professionals and others to ensure that local policies improve access to healthy food and opportunities for physical activity.
Encourage active travel in the community	<p>Provide facilities and information such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tailored active travel plans • cycle lanes and cycle parking • walking routes, including area maps and pedestrian crossings • traffic calming measures • improved street lighting.
Promote and support physical activity	<p>By:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • providing safe play areas • supporting local physical activity schemes.

Local authorities and their partners in the community

The guidance points out that the environment in which children and young people live may influence their ability to maintain a healthy weight. Access to safe space, the volume of traffic and fear of crime can all influence children and young people's ability to be physically active. Planning departments and planning decisions, therefore, have an impact on the health of the local population. Effective interventions require multidisciplinary teams and the support of a range of organisations. Local authorities, together with primary care trusts (PCTs) or local health boards, and local strategic partnerships should ensure that preventing and managing obesity is a priority through community interventions and policies.

Recommendations

NICE suggests that local authorities should work with local partners, such as industry and voluntary organisations, to create and manage more safe spaces for incidental and planned physical activity, addressing as a priority any concerns about safety, crime and inclusion, by:

- providing facilities and schemes such as cycling and walking routes, cycle parking, area maps and safe play areas
- making streets cleaner and safer, through measures such as traffic calming, congestion charging, pedestrian crossings, cycle routes, lighting and walking schemes
- ensuring buildings and spaces are designed to encourage people to be more physically active.

Implementing the recommendations is likely to help contribute to meeting targets contained in Local Area Agreements (LAA) and other targets. Play England has produced two briefing papers that focus on how to include play indicators in LAAs. To access the briefing papers, please see 'Play in LAAs' in the Further information section at the end of this briefing. The need to work in partnership should be reflected in the integrated regional strategies and regularly reviewed.

Key message for the play sector, local authorities and their partners in the community

Local authorities should work with local partners, such as industry and voluntary organisations, to create and manage more safe spaces for incidental and planned physical activity. In order to meet these recommendations, health professionals, local authorities and their partner agencies, and the play sector should work together to link health strategies with local play strategies.

Play has huge health benefits. The *British Medical Journal* reported in 2001⁵ that there is 'an obesity epidemic in young (pre-school) children'. The report identifies that 'opportunities for spontaneous play may be the only requirement that young children need to increase their physical activity'.

Early years childcare providers

The pre-school years are a key time for shaping children's attitudes and behaviour. The NICE guidance notes that early-years childcare providers should provide opportunities for children to be physically active.

Recommendations

NICE states that nurseries and other childcare facilities should:

- minimise sedentary activities during play time
- provide regular opportunities for enjoyable active play and structured physical activity sessions.

The recommendations in this section of the guidance apply to:

- directors of children's services
- children and young people's strategic partnerships
- staff, including senior management, in childcare and other early years settings, children's trusts and centres, Healthy Start and Sure Start teams
- trainers working with childcare staff, including home-based childminders and nannies.

Suggested action

Target	Suggested action
Improve physical activity levels	By: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• providing regular opportunities for enjoyable active play• providing regular opportunities for structured physical activity sessions.
Involve parents and carers	By: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• involving parents and carers in any activities aimed at preventing excess weight gain and improving children's diet and activity levels by encouraging active play.

Key message for early years childcare providers

Childcare providers need to recognise the importance of enabling play and encouraging families to provide for play. Free play in early childhood is a vital experience through which children learn social, conceptual and creative skills, as well as increasing their knowledge and understanding of the world around them.

Play underpins delivery of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and must be provided for children using both indoor and outdoor space. A condition made within the EYFS is that early years providers must offer children access to outdoor space on a daily basis.



Schools

The NICE guidance suggests that improving physical activity levels should be a priority for schools, because it helps children and young people develop a healthy lifestyle that will prevent them from becoming overweight or obese in adulthood. Other benefits include higher motivation and achievement at school, and better health in childhood and later life.

Recommendations

NICE recommends that headteachers and chairs of governors, in collaboration with parents and pupils, should:

- assess the whole school environment and ensure that the ethos of all school policies helps



children and young people to maintain a healthy weight, eat a healthy diet and be physically active. This includes policies relating to building layout and recreational spaces, school travel plans and provision for cycling, and policies relating to the National Healthy Schools Programme⁶ and extended schools.

NICE states that the recommendations in this section apply to:

- directors of children’s services
- school staff, including senior management
- school governors
- healthcare professionals working in or with schools
- children and young people’s strategic partnerships
- children’s trusts.

Key messages for the play sector and schools

Schools should work with local partners, such as voluntary organisations, to create and manage spaces for play and recreation for children and young people. The National Union of Teachers (NUT) believes that play is an essential part of growing up and states that ‘all schools should support and facilitate children and young people’s play’.⁷

Schools should also ensure that the building layout provides space for recreation. *Schools for the future; designing school grounds*⁸ acknowledges the value of play to children and young people’s development and learning, and offers guidance as to how well-designed school grounds can support children and young people’s play. It states that physical activity and active play should be encouraged by providing ‘a variety of active play opportunity...using “active features” such as traversing walls, playground markings, fixed play equipment, temporary play equipment, ball walls, balancing beams, fitness trails, logs and stepping stones’.⁷

NICE recommendations for children and young people

How to keep physically active:

- Make activities – such as walking, cycling, swimming, aerobics or active play – part of your everyday life. Small everyday changes can make a difference.
- Avoid sitting in front of the television, computer or playing video games for too long.
- Participate in active play, such as skipping, dancing or ball games.
- Be more active as a family, by walking or cycling to school, going to the park, or swimming together.
- Take part in sport inside and outside school.



Suggested action

Target	Suggested action
School policies and school environment	Ensure school policies and the school’s environment encourage physical activity by considering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building layout • the provision of recreational spaces • the curriculum, including PE • school travel plans, including provision for cycling • extended schools.
Staff training	Teaching, support and catering staff should be trained on how to implement healthy school policies.
Links with relevant organisations and professionals	Links should be established with healthcare professionals and those involved in local strategies and partnerships to promote sports and recreation for children and young people.



Play sector messages

Different providers within the play sector will have a variety of different relationships with schools, local authorities, early years providers and healthcare professionals. Whatever the relationship, it is important that the professionals are aware of the guidance and its recommendations.

It is also essential that the play sector encourages local authorities to include play indicators within their LAAs as these will help them to meet their obesity targets. In addition, play strategies should link with the PCT's health strategies.

The play sector can work with healthcare professionals to increase children and young people's physical activity levels. Within the NHS, the mechanism for improving the health of children and young people is the National Service Framework (NSF) for Children, Young People and Maternity Services, launched by the Department of Health in September 2004. The NSF is a 10-year programme designed to bring about sustained improvement in children and young people's health and well-being.

The 28 Strategic Health Authorities (SHAs) created by the government in 2002 to manage the local NHS are the key link between the Department of Health and local NHS trusts.

They are responsible for developing plans for:

- improving health services in their area
- making sure that services are of a high quality and performing well
- increasing the capacity of local services so that they can provide more facilities
- making sure that national priorities are integrated into local health service plans.

The Children Act 2004 requires all partners in a local area – including SHAs and PCTs – to cooperate with the local authority in making arrangements to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people. A key element of these arrangements is joint planning and commissioning by the partners involved; in particular, working together on the new plan for children and young people. The children and young people's plan, health plans and strategies should be linked to a local area play strategy.



Further information

Play in Local Area Agreements

For further information on play in LAAs, please visit the Play England website www.playengland.org.uk/resources/

Play and health

Fact sheet of information produced by the Children's Play Information Services (CPIS) on the health benefits of play can be found at www.ncb.org.uk/cpis/

Published November 2007. Play England responses to subsequent changes in guidance will be published on our website. For the latest information, register for our email newsletter.

¹National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2006) *Obesity: guidance on the prevention, identification, assessment and management of overweight and obesity in adults and children*. NICE Clinical Guideline 43. London: NICE.

²As above (p. 8).

³National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2006) *Obesity: quick reference guide 1 for local authorities, schools and early years providers, workplaces and the public*. NICE Clinical Guideline 43. London: NICE.

⁴Department for Health (2004) *Choosing health: making healthy choices easier*. London: DfH

⁵Diez, W.H. (2001) *The Obesity Epidemic in Young Children*. *BMJ* Vol. 322, no 7282 (pp. 313–314).

⁶National Healthy Schools Programme: www.wiredforhealth.gov.uk/cat.php?catid=842

⁷NUT (2006) *Time for Play*. The National Union of Teachers: Ruskin Press.

⁸Department for Education and Skills (2006) *Schools for the future; designing school grounds*. London: The Stationery Office.

Lisa Davis
Policy Officer, Play England
November 2007

Play England
8 Wakley Street
London
EC1V 7QE

Tel 020 7843 6003
Email playengland@ncb.org.uk
www.playengland.org.uk


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children's
bureau

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Play England is a project of the Children's Play Council, part of the National Children's Bureau, and is supported by the Big Lottery Fund. Published by the National Children's Bureau 2007. Registered charity number 258825.