

HEALTHY BODIES HEALTHY MINDS

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY & MENTAL HEALTH
IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
PRACTITIONERS BRIEFING



Practitioners Briefing

Physical activity and mental health: The role of physical activity in promoting mental wellbeing and preventing mental health problems in children and young people.

Introduction

This briefing is for practitioners who work with children and young people. It outlines the key findings of a report (Whitelaw et al, 2008) which examined the relationship between physical activity and mental health improvement. The best available evidence shows that engaging children and young people in physical activity can:

- promote mental wellbeing (e.g. good mood, feeling positive about ourselves and about life, good relationships with others, sense of purpose)
- prevent mental health problems (e.g. depression and anxiety).

Below is a list of activities that may be helpful, plus information on why physical activity can make a difference and who can benefit. Also included are tips on how to encourage young people to take up physical activity, and where to go for further information.

WHICH physical activities might be helpful?

All types of physical activity have the potential to promote mental wellbeing and prevent mental health problems, as long as they are appropriate to the age group and health status of the individual. These include activities ranging from playing with friends, to sports and group activities, as well as endurance, flexibility and strength training. Offering **choice** and **variety** will help individuals find an activity they will **enjoy**. Having fun is important!

- Running, walking, dancing, aerobic exercise and circuit training are generally considered helpful, while resistance training is particularly good for improving body image and self-esteem. Activities such as skateboarding, playground games, mountain biking, computer games that involve exercise (e.g. Wii™), and so on, may be more appealing to children and young people.
- Group recreational sports and activities have a positive impact with social and mood benefits.
- Sports and vigorous activity can be helpful, particularly for those already involved in this level of activity.

HOW can physical activity help?

Physical activity can promote mental wellbeing and prevent mental health problems by:

- raising confidence and improving self-esteem
- improving thinking skills, particularly in younger children
- encouraging more social behaviour and inclusion
- promoting positive mood
- developing general competence and skills, as well as physical activity skills.

WHY does physical activity make a difference?

Physical activity has the potential to promote mental wellbeing and prevent mental health problems through:

- changes in the body, for example increases in endorphins and serotonin levels which enhance mood
- giving the feeling that the body is fitter or more 'toned', so increasing confidence
- improving self-worth and personal control by mastering an activity
- distracting from more stressful parts of life
- giving a sense of belonging, having fun, being active as a group.

HOW can you engage children and young people in physical activity?

The report outlined the following as important:

- Supporting individual choice.
- Setting realistic goals, again based on each individual.
- Making fun the main focus of the activity.
- Getting peers, family or friends involved.
- Rewarding all round accomplishments, not just winning.
- Encouraging life-long practice and life-long enjoyment.
- Increasing access to a range and variety of activities.

WHO can benefit?

All children and young people can benefit from physical activity appropriate to their age and health status. It may be particularly beneficial to engage teenage girls and vulnerable groups, such as looked after children.

WHEN?

Now! Any amount of physical activity can make a difference to promoting mental wellbeing and preventing mental health problems.

The recommended guidelines for children under 16 are to build up to at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity each day. People aged 16 or over are recommended to build up to at least 30 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity at least five days of the week (Department of Health, 2004).

WHERE?

Anywhere... but, ideally:

- in high quality and safe local facilities – this could include community venues, at home, in school or in natural outdoor environments
- delivered by teachers, coaches, or informal leaders who have an understanding of how physical activity can help mental health.

See the Active Scotland website www.activescotland.org.uk for links to opportunities in your local area.

References

Department of Health (2004). *At least five a week. Evidence on the impact of physical activity and its relationship to health.* Department of Health, London.

Whitelaw, S., Swift, J., Goodwin, A. and Clark, D. (2008). *Physical Activity and Mental Health: The role of physical activity in promoting mental wellbeing and preventing mental health problems. An Evidence Briefing.* NHS Health Scotland, Edinburgh.

Further information on mental health improvement:

NHS Health Scotland's Mental Health Improvement pages:
www.healthscotland.com/mental-health.aspx

Well Scotland website:
www.wellscotland.info/index.html

Further information on physical activity:

Physical Activity and Health Alliance website:
www.paha.org.uk

The full report on which this briefing was based can be found at:
www.healthscotland.com/physical-activity-research.aspx