

Physical (in)activity – is it time to get Welsh children moving?

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Many of us are aware of the importance of exercise and encouraging our children to be more active too. But what exactly are the potential benefits of physical activity in childhood? How much are children exercising in Wales today, and how much should they be physically active to stay healthy?

As the Assembly's Health, Social Care and Sport Committee launches its consultation on physical activity in children and young people (0–18 years), this article outlines current physical activity levels in children in Wales and gives an overview of the measures which have been implemented in Wales to promote higher levels of activity

How active are Welsh children today?

Although the then Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport [stated in 2006](#) (PDF, 572KB) that it was 'time to set up from base camp to higher ground to secure a better, fitter and healthier Wales', the truth is that Wales as a whole is not as fit as it should be.



The World Health Organisation defines physical activity as "all movements in everyday life, including work, recreation, exercise and sporting activity". This means that active travel, such as walking or cycling to school, and active play all contribute to children's daily physical activity as well as more organised sporting activities.

Guidelines and Statistics

In 2015, the [School Sport Survey](#) (PDF, 280KB) published by Sport Wales showed that 93% of children enjoy physical education and revealed a positive trend with the number of children 'hooked' on sport (i.e. exercising three or more times a week outside of curricular PE lessons) having increased from 27% in 2011, to 40% in 2013,



and to 48% in 2015. On the other hand, the 2015 [Welsh Health Survey](#) (PDF, 680KB) revealed that only 36% of children engaged in physical activities for at least one hour every day over the previous week. As these figures are based on **self-reported data**, we might not have a fully accurate picture of activity levels among children in Wales. A key question therefore is how do these levels compare to the current guidelines of recommended amounts of physical activity in children?

The [Start Active, Stay Active report](#) issued by UK's four Chief Medical Officers provides evidence-based guidelines on the volume, frequency and type of physical activity required at different stages of life. For children and young people (5–18 years of age), 60 minutes and up to several hours a day of moderate to vigorous activity are recommended, with vigorous activity (i.e. when one is unable to sustain a conversation while exercising) engaged in at least three times a week to promote bone and muscle health. **The conclusion is that a majority of children in Wales are much below the recommended amount of daily activity.**

Regarding early childhood (under 5 years of age), the guidelines recommend at least 3 hours of physical activity spread throughout each day, including floor-based and water-based movements for those not yet walking. There is little evidence showing whether or not Welsh toddlers are sufficiently active, and this is more difficult to measure; yet [it is reported](#) that 91% of children in the UK aged 2–4 are not meeting the guidelines of 3 hours of activity a day.

If children are not sufficiently active today, it is also the case that the generations above them are not setting an example when it comes to physical activity. Indeed, the 2014 [Special Eurobarometer Sport and Physical Activity report](#) (PDF, 7.8MB) showed that 55% of adults in the UK seldom or never exercised or played sport, and 9% of British adults had not walked for 10 minutes at a time during the previous week. The report concluded that a significant segment of the population remained unaware of the importance of physical activity for health and wellbeing. Accordingly, Public Health Wales and Sport Wales highlight in their 2017 joint report [Getting Wales Moving](#) that a shift in attitudes is necessary:

Today, being inactive is perceived as normal by a large proportion of people. This passive attitude towards levels of activity, where movement and exercise

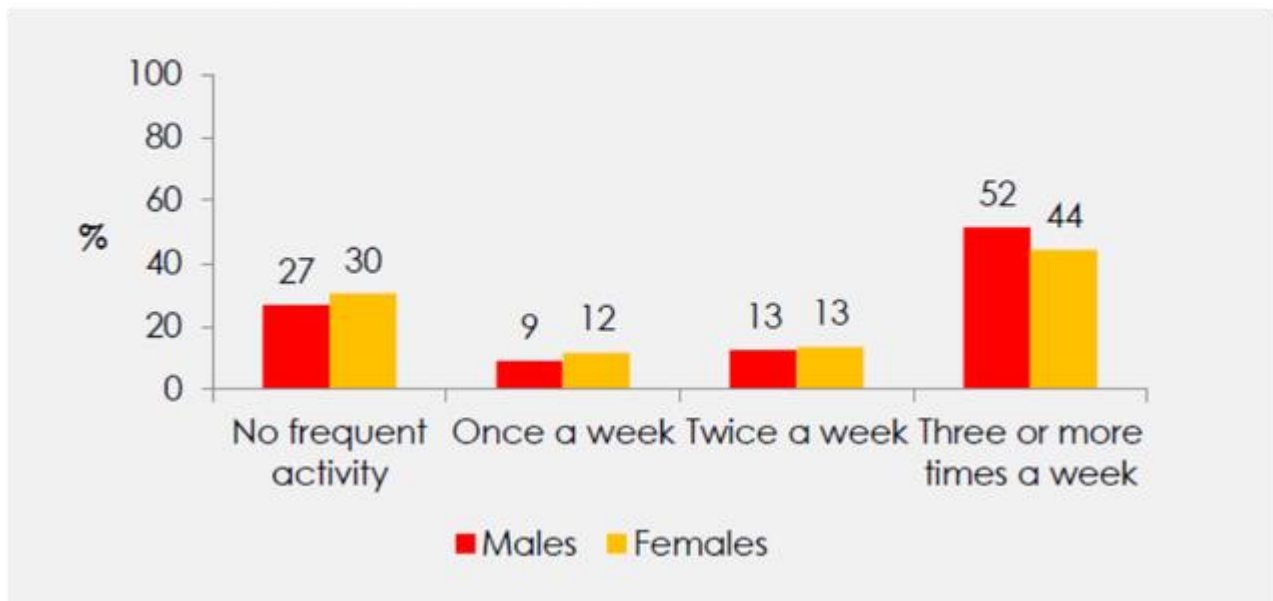


is viewed as simply a personal choice is not sustainable in the 21st century Wales and is an issue that urgently needs to be addressed [...].

Impact of gender, social and cultural background on physical activity

The 2015 [School Sport Survey](#) (PDF, 280KB) confirmed that a gender gap exists, with boys being more likely to regularly take part in physical activity than girls (52% against 44%, respectively), while the [Welsh Health Survey](#) (PDF, 680KB) revealed that only 31% of girls meet the recommended guidelines, against 42% of boys.

Number of occasions per week that pupils take part in extracurricular or community club sport – by gender.



The School Sport Survey also highlighted inequalities in participation levels in sport in Wales depending on ethnicity, with the lowest percentage of children ‘hooked’ on sport being observed in Asian/Asian British pupils (36%) and the highest levels being observed in mixed race and Black/Black British pupils (52%).



Ethnic group	Boys		Girls		All pupils		%
	2013	2015	2013	2015	2013	2015	
	White	44	52	37	45	41	
Mixed Race	46	56	36	48	41	52	
Black/Black British	42	57	30	45	37	52	
Asian/Asian British	37	44	20	28	29	36	
Arab/Other	31	49	26	38	29	39	
All rows	44	52	36	44	40	48	

It also revealed inequalities depending on levels of deprivation, with children from the least deprived families being more likely to be ‘hooked’ on sport than the most deprived children. However, the link between [financial status and levels of activity](#) is still unclear and debated.

Health benefits of physical activity

Today’s lifestyles are increasingly promoting sedentary behaviour and encouraging children to move around less and less: active play has been broadly replaced by time spent in front of a screen (on average, [children watch 2 hours of television daily, while 15 to 16 year-olds spend 4.8 hours online each day](#)), many children are driven to school, even among those who live within walking distance.

It has been shown that physically active [children have a greater chance to become active adults](#) (PDF, 954KB). Knowing that activity has been linked to a decreased risk of developing [dementia](#), certain [types of cancer](#), or chronic conditions such as [obesity in youth](#), [type 2 diabetes](#), [cardiovascular disease](#) or [arthritis](#), it doesn’t come too much as a surprise that physical inactivity is now considered the [4th leading cause of deaths in the world](#). In 2009, the Welsh Government estimated the [cost of physical inactivity to Wales at £650 million per year](#) (PDF, 2.2MB).

In addition to those health benefits, being physically active promotes self-confidence and general wellbeing, and has also been linked to [better educational attainment in children](#) (PDF, 167KB).



Past, present and future initiatives to promote physical activity in children in Wales

Physical education in the school curriculum

Although [PE is part of the national curriculum](#) and mandatory for all pupils of compulsory school age (key stages 2–4), as described in the [PE guidance \(PDF, 950KB\)](#), schools are not constrained to a specific time allocation and are left free to organise and deliver PE in a way that best suits them. The 2015 [School Sport Survey](#) (PDF, 280KB) showed that around 100 minutes are dedicated each week to PE in primary and secondary schools in Wales.

In its 2013 report, the [Physical Activity Task and Finish group](#) recommended that a stronger emphasis should be laid on [physical literacy](#) and that PE should become a **core subject** in the national curriculum. In the [new curriculum for Wales](#), core subjects will not exist as such, and six ‘Areas of Learning and Experience’ (AoLEs) will be introduced instead. PE will be part of the ‘Health and Well-being’ AoLE, but there is so far little information on the priority it will be given and how it will be delivered to pupils.

Regarding teachers’ training, a [study showed in 2012](#) that 38% of primary school teachers in Britain lack the confidence to teach PE, while 47% of teachers report having received less than 10 hours of PE training during their Initial Teacher Training.

Past and current initiatives

Over the years, the Welsh Government and various organisations have taken initiatives to promote higher levels of physical activity in Wales. In 2004, the [Free Swimming Initiative](#) was launched, offering free access to swimming pools at specific times for young people up to 16 years old (and for older people over 60 years). In 2005, [Climbing Higher](#) (PDF, 1.33MB) established the long-term strategic vision of the Welsh Government to place “sport and physical activity at the heart of Welsh life”, which was followed in 2006 by [Climbing higher – Next steps](#) (PDF, 572KB) which outlined further investment plans. The physical activity ‘action plan’ for Wales – [Creating an Active Wales](#) (PDF, 2.2MB) – was published in 2009. In 2013, the promotion of active travel routes was supported by the [Active Travel \(Wales\) Act](#).



Public Health Wales and Sport Wales also recently published their joint report [Getting Wales Moving](#) (March 2017). Other programmes, measures and reports were also implemented or published, some tackling physical activity in the broader context of obesity prevention and promotion of healthier lifestyles.

Many initiatives have therefore been taken to promote physical activity and sport in Wales, but there is limited evidence that children and young people are getting more physically active, and obesity levels are still on the rise.

The Assembly's Health, Social Care and Sport Committee's inquiry aims to examine the evidence. Its terms of reference can be found [here](#) (*closing date of the consultation: Friday 15th September 2017*).

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Source: Sport Wales, [School Sport Survey](#) (PDF, 280KB) (2015).

Source: Sport Wales, [School Sport Survey](#) (PDF, 280KB), Table 1, p.4 (2015).

