

Children's Physical Activity: The Damage Done and How to Address It

Presentation to the APPG

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There is a lot of talk these days about levelling up.

In his book, *The Great Leveller*, Scheidel argues that throughout history, inequality has only been reduced by warfare, revolution, state collapse and **plague**.

The benefits of PA, just like any other resource, are clearly unevenly distributed

One of the things that makes it particularly difficult to level up is the shocking **lack** of live data collected about physical activity.

In an age when Covid and much other data is given to single digit accuracy, we **need** to KNOW which children are active and which are not. The World Health Organisations Global Action Plan calls for countries to develop **better** ways of collecting physical activity data.

“Beyond continuing to measure young people's activity through the Active Lives Children and Young People survey, there appear no new plans for government to **collect and collate information to understand and improve provision in schools.**”

Dr Iain Lindsey, Durham University
Sport Think Tank Blog 17.07.2019

A message echoed by many experts in the field....we need new ways to collect and collate data

miMove addresses this. We currently have just under 100,000 C&YP using the app. It is a platform on which young people easily record their PA and schools and other organisations have affordable, easy access to this data to plan, celebrate and support. We can literally tell you who was active today, what they did, the duration, how it made them feel **and** analyse this data by demographic indicators such as gender and ethnicity.

Without using such data we will continue spending £m's of public and private money without sufficient knowledge about impact. Consider London 2012, the Daily Mile, and a plethora of other initiatives – what effect did they have on youth PA and where's the evidence? Imagine the CEO of Macdonalds not knowing the impact of a marketing campaign on burger sales. We need to up our game. miMove allows us to do that.

Damage is structural, complex and well-reported as illustrated here, Yet solutions always tend to be simplistic.

Covid, presents us with a rare opportunity, albeit one that nobody would have wished for, to reflect upon and review PA policies and practices

The Damage has not just been done....it has been ongoing for a long time and Covid has just exasperated it. I'll focus on 3 factors to discuss.

It would be absurd not to start by recognising the relationship between physical activity and wider issues that have a significant bearing on hundreds of thousands of children.

Precarity is an all too prominent feature of modern life with the changes in employment security.

The Impact is an increase in uncertainty, more chaos and of course less expendable income, therefore less opportunity for organised participation

What can be done?

Accelerate the existing calls to create community sport and physical activity hubs based in each school

Provide support and infrastructure for informal participation

Sport and physical activity providers need to consider creative ways to provide access and minimise cost for those who can't afford it.

I should highlight the work of UK Active Kids in lobbying for schools to be far more widely used out of term time.

And once again, the impact of any initiative needs to be closely monitored and evidenced.

The lockdowns have created increased anxiety about time / catching up / lack of 'fitness' / weight gain. As a result, 'solutions' look to avert these [quote unquote] imminent crisis and fix deficits in young people.

Damage is being done by enhancing the pre-existing and misguided focus on short term fixes.

We need to shift attention from content to process to ensure young people fall in love with PA and continue building a better relationship with their physical selves. Shift from functional to meaningful, joyful movement.

Physical activity habits are created via the social and emotional not the scientific, which brings me onto the 3rd concern....

Personally, I feel uncomfortable when the words children, fitness and exercise appear together. I'm more comfortable with words like play and active, meaningful and immersive. This space has become dominated by people with deep but peripheral expertise and limited direct experience in the field such as doctors & scientists. If you view the body as a socially isolated machine, the logical people to work on the machine are fitness professionals. We should not need reminding that children are not mini-adults so they should not be treated as such.

Absolutely we need to, harness charismatic presenters, great PR and the power of social media, but can we please do so to deliver developmentally **appropriate** and **educationally sound** experiences... for this, I draw your attention to recent developments in New Zealand

We've learnt a lot about clear messaging over the last year. Our field needs a consistent and straight forward message. We could do a lot worse than start with this adaptation of one by the Swedish researcher Mikal Qunnerstedt

The only goal of youth PA is to ensure youngsters do more PA.

With more young people being more active, more are likely to be healthy. Health here is an outcome not the driver of behaviour...but the assumption is often made that young people are active **to be** healthy.

With such a clear destination we can use data to ensure that young people are on track.

Do we have cause for optimism? – the upheaval caused by the pandemic has offered us an opportunity to review and reflect.

But we need to start doing things at least **better** if not differently if we are going to arrive at different outcomes and support a generation of young people who have in many ways taken the social brunt of this virus

So, we need a clear message delivered by education and all physical activity/sport providers Inactivity is to us what illiteracy is to English teachers and just as damaging to an individual's life

We now have the capability to move beyond statements of intent and use evidence and data to help us work better and smarter so that every child finds a place for meaningful physical activity in their lives.

Thank you so much for listening and I'm happy to field any questions after Jackie has presented.

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