

# **IMPROVING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY UPDATE:**

# **ACCUMULATING EVIDENCE FOR EFFECTIVE INTERVENTIONS**

# Improving physical activity through schools: Effective interventions successfully trialled

## This update highlights:

- Obesity in children remains above pre-pandemic levels (**22.1% of 10-11 year olds are obese**) since the Child of the North 2024 report [1] sounded the alarm on record levels of childhood obesity and **frightening levels of physical inactivity**.
- **2.2 Million children and young people in England (29.6%) are classed as inactive**, achieving less than an average of 30 mins of physical activity per day [2].
- **540,000 children in the UK have clinically significant difficulties with their movement skills** which hinders their ability to engage with physical activity and education and **worsens the SEND crisis** [3].
- New findings from the **Join Us: Move Play** programme show: children's physical activity can be increased by over 70 minutes per week; weekend inactivity can be reduced by 21 minutes per day; population-level impact can be delivered; the benefits of **Creating Active Schools** [4].
- The **accumulating evidence** on the need to adopt **World Health Organization recommendations** and implement whole system approaches to physical activity [5].

## Whole-school physical activity

The evidence is clear and there is consensus across experts that a whole-school approach to physical activity is an essential step to building a healthy UK.

In June 2024, over 300 representatives from multiple sectors (e.g., researchers, teacher educators, teachers, National Governing Organisations) from 24 countries gathered in Bradford to attend the Whole-School Physical Activity Conference and co-produce a consensus on future whole-school physical activity priorities.

The recommendations from this diverse, multisector group provide a basis for prioritising and planning future policies, programmes, research, and their implementation to enhance children's and young people's participation in school-based physical activity:

<https://www.wspa2024.co.uk/outputs>

## Movement skills matter

Interviews with people with lived experiences of movement difficulties in childhood have revealed the vast challenges that children with movement skill problems face when trying to engage with physical activity in school (and beyond), but also the lack of support offered to them to overcome such barriers.

Research using the Connected Bradford database has shown that the vast majority of children with clinically significant movement problems are not receiving a clinical diagnosis. In the last 74 years there were only 152 diagnoses recorded. Given a prevalence rate of 5-6%, in 2024 there should have been roughly 9159 within the Bradford population for that year alone.

Key stakeholders in Bradford (e.g. paediatricians, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, specialist teachers, school nurses and school leaders) have recognised the issue and co-produced a new approach to identifying and supporting movement problems. This approach puts education at the fore – providing universal assessment and intervention prior to accessing clinical services.

These findings reinforce the conclusions of the Child of the North report [1]: that schools should not just be sites of learning, but key settings for support and holistic approaches to childhood health.

## School identification of need

FUNMOVES has been developed to empower schools to deliver an assessment of movement skills within a P.E. lesson for all students and identify children struggling to develop the foundational movement skills that are essential for participation in physical activity. FUNMOVES and the associated universal intervention resources (both school and family) are freely available.

New research has shown that FUNMOVES scores align well with clinical assessments and preliminary analyses show that universal intervention is effective at improving movement skills and reducing the number of children that need clinical intervention. FUNMOVES is currently being rolled out in schools across Yorkshire, Birmingham, Black Country, and Shropshire, with more areas wishing to adopt this approach.

**The evidence suggests schools can be effective in identifying the Special Educational Needs associated with movement skill problems, and should be supported in the identification process so that children can be helped to overcome this barrier to physical activity and learning.**

## Learning from WHO consensus

Key learning from 26 different countries has been compiled by Bradford academics for the World Health Organization (WHO) to capture evidence on the national systems and conditions required to support effective whole-school physical activity programmes. **Seven key international recommendations** have been identified:

- Frame whole-of-school provision through the perspective of how it impacts, or is influenced by, people's physical activity choices and behaviours rather than applying a narrow focus, such as sport.
- Rebalance the curriculum to increase the focus on holistic child development, and place a stronger emphasis on health and well-being.
- Develop accountability systems to establish good practices and reward schools that promote the health and well-being of their students.
- Establish authentic and sustained cross-government ministerial leadership to facilitate longer-term planning.
- Understand how education and physical activity systems work and how factors influencing them vary across different contexts.
- Review commitments to invest in and implement whole-of-school physical activity provision.
- Increase the knowledge and skills of school and wider system partners at all levels to design and implement whole-of-school physical activity.

## System-based approaches work

The **Creating Active Schools** (CAS) programme is leading a whole school approach to physical activity and shows how the WHO recommendations can be implemented. CAS identifies and supports the unique needs of each school to create **sustainable change and expand opportunities for physical activity** throughout the entire school day. Key findings from a two year evaluation of CAS [4] are:

- CAS continued in schools beyond the adoption phase, with more staff gaining confidence as advocates for physical activity.
- Schools shifted from launching new initiatives to embedding and sustaining cultural change around physical activity.
- Communities of practice and locality leads are crucial in building resilience, peer learning and agency to sustain the programme, even amid staff turnover and financial pressure.

## Place sensitivity matters

**JU:MP (Join Us: Move Play)** is a place-based pilot funded by Sport England and delivered by Active Bradford alongside research partners (notably Born in Bradford), aiming to increase physical activity among children aged 5-14 years and their families by using a "whole systems" approach.

Schools are a key component of the JU:MP Whole-system approach to physical activity.

Following two years of implementation, the JUMP approach:

- Improved health-enhancing physical activity (MVPA) by over five minutes per day, with stronger effects on weekdays.
- Reduced time spent being sedentary on weekdays by 20 minutes per day.

JU:MP has shown that place-sensitive approaches ensure interventions tackle the real constraints of families' daily lives (e.g. affordability, safety, access to facilities) rather than assuming barriers are the same everywhere. JU:MP has highlighted how socioeconomic deprivation and cultural diversity shape children's opportunities to be active and this is why whole system approaches are essential.

## Conclusion

The 2024 report described frighteningly low levels of physical activity by the UK's children.

One year later, the evidence suggests **cautious optimism is warranted**. Whole-school approaches are showing promise, and Creating Active Schools can improve physical activity levels. But the system is not yet delivering at the scale needed and needs **national support** to achieve healthy activity levels in children.

### **The lesson is clear: schools matter.**

Movement skills and physical activity needs to be supported in schools beyond Early Years, and teacher training needs to have more of a focus on physical development to enable teachers to help children to thrive.

**The next phase must be about learning** – systematically evaluating what works, and ensuring that children in disadvantaged areas where needs are greatest - such as the North of England - are not left behind.

**The challenge now is to turn promising evidence into practice.**

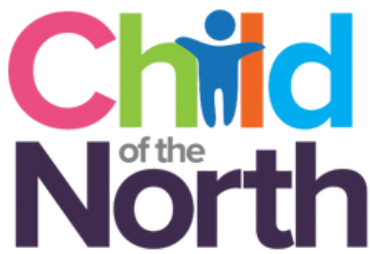
**""We've worked with families, schools and communities to co-create opportunities for movement. When children move more, they thrive, physically, emotionally and academically."**

- Dr Anna Chalkley, Senior Research Fellow

# References

---

- [1] Eddy, L., Bryant, E., Daly-Smith, A., Wood, M. et al. (2024). A country that works for all children and young people: An evidence-based plan for supporting physical activity and healthy nutrition with and through education settings [doi.org/10.48785/100/264](https://doi.org/10.48785/100/264)
- [2] Sport England. (2024). Active Lives: Children and Young People Survey, academic year 2023–24 report. Sport England. NHS England. (2024) Mental Health Services Monthly Statistics Dashboard. Available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/taskforce/imp/mh-dashboard/>
- [3] Eddy, L. H., Staniforth, C. E., Wood, M. L., Hill, L., & Mon-Williams, M. (2025) Exploring diagnosis of Developmental Coordination Disorder and Specific Developmental Disorder of Motor Function: a secondary data analysis using Connected Bradford, version 1, PsyArXiv (OSF Preprints), [https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/e87ft\\_v1](https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/e87ft_v1)
- [4] Silva ECM, Helme ZE, Silva DRP, et al. Creating Active Schools: What Influences Continuous Implementation Following Adoption?. J Phys Act Health. Published online September 22, 2025. doi:10.1123/jpah.2025-0075
- [5] World Health Organization, Regional Office for Europe. (2025). Whole-of-school approach to the promotion of physical activity: Using research, policy and practice to understand system's needs and structures (WHO/EURO:2025-12499-52273-80389). World Health Organization.



This report is a collaborative programme of work between Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives.

### **A note about language**

Please note that this report often uses “schools” as shorthand for “schools, nurseries, and other educational settings such as pupil referral units and special schools.” One central message of this report is the need for a “whole system” approach that includes all relevant stakeholders, and this includes all parts of the education system.

### **About Child of the North**

Child of the North is a partnership between the N8 Research Partnership and Health Equity North which aims to build a fairer future for children across the North of England by building a platform for collaboration, high quality research, and policy engagement. [@ChildoftheNort1](#) [@childofthenorth.bsky.social](#)

### **About the N8 Research Partnership**

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research-intensive Universities in the North of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York. Working with partner universities, industry, and society (N8+), the N8 aims to maximise the impact of this research base by promoting collaboration, establishing innovative research capabilities and programmes of national and international prominence, and driving economic growth. [www.n8research.org.uk](http://www.n8research.org.uk) [@N8research](#) [@n8research.bsky.social](#)

### **About the Centre for Young Lives**

The Centre for Young Lives is a dynamic and highly experienced innovation organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK – particularly the most vulnerable. Led by former Children’s Commissioner, Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, who has been at the forefront of children’s issues for decades, the Centre’s agile team is highly skilled, experienced, and regarded. It is widely known and well respected across government departments, Parliament, local and regional government, academia, the voluntary sector, and national and local media. The Centre wants to see children and young people’s futures placed at the heart of policy making, a high priority for government and at the core of the drive for a future for our country which can be much stronger and more prosperous. [www.centreforyounglives.org.uk](http://www.centreforyounglives.org.uk) [@CfYounglives](#)

## Editorial Team

Eleanor J. Bryant – University of Bradford

Andy Daly-Smith – University of Bradford

Lucy Eddy – University of Bradford

---

**Cite as: Eddy, L., Bryant, E., Daly-Smith, A. (2025).** Improving physical activity update: Accumulating evidence for effective interventions. N8+ Research Partnership

---

### Acknowledgements

This report is dedicated specifically to all the children in the North of England who have not had the life chances that they deserve and, in general, to every child who faces disadvantage within the UK and throughout the world. We are grateful to politicians from all parties who fight for justice and work diligently to create a better world for children. This report is based on numerous scientific studies funded generously by taxpayers and charity donations (via research grants) and we thank our many funders. The research involved tens of thousands of willing citizens (many facing significant problems in their lives). These individuals gave up their time to engage with researchers, co-produce research, and gift their time, information, and insights because they wanted (and want) to give the next generation the best chance of living healthy, happy lives. This report would not exist without the kindness of these participants, and we cannot thank them enough for their ongoing support.



**Scan here**  
to learn how  
you can help!

### Building a country that works for all children and young people

A major new campaign setting out practical, evidence-informed ways in which everyone can work together to break the link between a child's background and their life chances

### Actions that can break down barriers to opportunity



