

**0618**

## **School Playtime: A Careful Balancing Act**

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### **Background**

The school has been identified as a key setting for the promotion of health enhancing physical activity to children. The traditional setting for this has been physical education (PE), which suffered a reduction in time allocation over a number of years due to curricular pressures on school timetables. Whilst government policy now recognises the importance of PE as a vehicle for providing weekly activity opportunities to children, the objectives of PE are greater than just physical activity provision. However, since repeated concern has been expressed about the decreasing activity levels of school-aged children, greater attention has been paid to non-curricular settings as contexts for promoting activity. One such context is school playtime, which provides the main opportunity for children to engage in physical activity during school time, and time spent in playtime exceeds that spent in structured PE classes. Indeed, while playtime is a mandatory part of the school day where children spend most of their time on the school playground, until recently it could be argued that it was the under researched part of the school day in relation to activity and health. Moreover, little data was available on the effectiveness and sustainability of playtime interventions. This is an important issue, as it may guide future decisions at a school level as well as a political level in the fight to increase children's physical activity.

### **Research Questions**

The primary focus of this study will be to investigate the impact of playtime and playground interventions on the activity levels of primary school children. Data from different interventions will be presented and discussed, with a particular emphasis on UK based examples. First hand experiences concerning the implementation and effect of the intervention will be shared from both a teacher and a researcher's point of view.

### **Methods**

Current playtime interventions focus on a whole school approach. Measures undertaken include objective assessments of physical activity (e.g. heart rate, accelerometers), interviews, questionnaires, direct observation and write and draw techniques; all of which have been implemented to develop an understanding of the process, successes and lessons to be learnt when conducting playtime interventions.

### **Frame**

The framework used to guide many interventions in this context is the Youth Physical Activity Promotion Model (Welk, 1999), which details the potential relationships between a range of factors and physical activity. There is a developing body of research that discusses factors that enable children to be active during playtime, and discussions will also report on the predisposing and reinforcing factors that are important yet under researched at this stage.

### **Research findings**

Playtime interventions in the UK that involve playground markings have demonstrated that activity levels of both boys and girls can be increased and sustained over a minimum of 6 months. Additionally, while decreases in activity have been observed between 6 months and 12 months, children whose school playground was redesigned still engaged in more activity than schools that received no intervention. While playground markings may be beyond the budgets of some schools,

evidence has been collected about the use of games equipment, for example, and observation studies have provided potential suggestions to help schools manage and implement such interventions so that all children can benefit.

### **Relevance of topic to BERA**

This is likely to appeal to a cross-section of BERA members, as while schools appreciate the developmental benefits of playtime to children, concern has been expressed that playtime detracts from curriculum time, encourages antisocial behaviour and aggression on the playground, and it is the single biggest behavioural problem that schools face during the day. Identifying interventions that have a positive effect on physical activity, but which also have a beneficial effect on children's behaviour both in and out of the classroom, would be of interest to teachers working with all ages across the primary school sector.

### **Significance for Educational Practice, Policy or Theory**

The effectiveness of playtime interventions on promoting physical activity has been acknowledged in current NICE guidance. In addition, UK based playtime interventions are now informing practice and policy internationally, with the role of non-curricular contexts having been recognised in the fight against low activity levels and increasing levels of obesity. The importance of playtime, and in particular, play, will be discussed in relation to educational practice and Every Child Matters.