



# Physical Activity and Body Image in Children



A report by Make Time 2 Play with contributions and recommendations by Linda Papadopoulos, Ambassador for Make Time 2 Play

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## Introduction

The end of the school summer term is just around the corner and many children across the country are looking forward to weeks of getting outside in the sunshine and participating in long days of endless play activities. This is also the time of year when many schools hold their annual sports day. This is a great opportunity for children to really express themselves, burn off energy and have fun. For many children however, the thought of taking to the track, field or court fills them with fear and dread. Putting on sports kit and participating in physical activity does not come naturally to all children and some may be fearful of feeling exposed and self-conscious about their body shape and physical capabilities.

This paper focuses on and draws together existing research on the benefits of taking part in sport, play and physical activity from a young age and explores the reasons why some children might be put off the prospect of physical activity due to concerns about their body image and the concomitant effects on confidence. It examines the positive role of active play in tackling issues at an age when play is a natural part of daily activity and explores opportunities to prepare children in terms of social skills and the resilience they may need as they get older and makes recommendations on how to make change.

Dr Linda Papadopoulos, Ambassador for the Make Time 2 Play campaign, offers her expert advice on how parents can help children who might not be naturally inclined to take part in physical activities to overcome their fears and benefit from the many advantages that regular exercise and active play has to offer.

Dr Papadopoulos is a respected and popular counselling psychologist known for her work on children's issues and the effects of media and societal change on children's social and emotional development. In addition, Dr Papadopoulos has written extensively on how to transform negative body image into positive self-esteem.



## What is body image?

The term *body image* refers to how an individual relates certain factors such as their height, weight, shape, skin colour and wider appearance with how they feel they look, their level of attractiveness and how they are perceived by others. Social and cultural forces play an

important role in determining someone's perception of their body image combined with an individual's personal experiences and personality.

## Body image in childhood

Although body image concerns are often more commonly associated with older, adolescent children, research has shown that anxieties over how a child's body image might be perceived by others starts to manifest itself at a much younger age. Nicky Hutchinson and Chris Calland (2011), two behaviour specialists and educational consultants, reported that three quarters of ten to eleven year olds interviewed said that they would like to change their body image. These anxieties can often extend into adulthood and it is important to prepare and advise children from an early age to help them to become resilient.

An All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) carried out a study on body image in 2012 and found that two out of three people in the UK are not happy with their body. It also found girls as young as five years old have concerns about how they look. Indeed, children and adolescents are two of the groups most likely to have concerns about their appearance. At the age of five, children start to notice differences among themselves and realise that they could be judged because of their appearance and this can develop into real concerns later in life. Authors of the report from the Centre for appearance research commented that:

*“There is quite a lot of evidence that body dissatisfaction has emerged by about the age of 7 or 8 in both boys and girls.”*

Hutchison and Calland observed that:

*“By the end of primary school, at a time when children naturally put on a bit of weight, there was a real dip in body confidence.”*

The APPG's study also revealed that over half of girls and a quarter of boys think their peers have body image problems and one in five people have been victimized about their weight. Furthermore, between one third and half of young girls fear becoming fat and engage in dieting or binge eating, with girls as young as five years old already worried about the way they look and their body size. The research found that one in four 7-year-old girls have tried to lose weight at least once and that one third of young boys aged 8-12 are dieting to lose weight.

Celebrity culture (68%) was revealed as the most influential factor in shaping children's negative body self-image.

Self-awareness of one's appearance and unhealthy body image messages can start surprisingly young, as such it is important to teach children positive messages to overcome body image issues early on. One way of preparing children early is to encourage as much active play as possible. Play comes naturally to children and can be used to get children active and can be the catalyst for reinforcing the positive body confidence messages which can potentially help children to become more resilient to negative body image influences in later life.

## Body image as a barrier to getting children active

Children's attitudes to what represents "healthy" are important factors in getting young people active. If children are too self-conscious to engage in physical activity they are likely to be less healthy both as children and as they grow into adulthood. It is important to ensure children perceive and engage with their bodies as *functional as opposed to* merely focusing on the *aesthetic*.

In its 2012 study on Girls Attitudes, the Girl Guides found that 23% of girls aged 7-21 who were interviewed responded that they do not participate in exercise because they are unhappy with their body image. In the same study, 62% of girls interviewed understood that being healthy meant taking part in lots of exercise. Furthermore, 29% of girls admitted that they were either "not very happy" or "not happy at all" with how they look. This compares with an equivalent figure of 17% for boys.



There is also the perception among some girls that participating in active play and physical activity is not seen as a particularly feminine pursuit. The Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation found that 48% of girls thought that getting sweaty from taking part in sports is unfeminine and nearly a third of boys thought that girls who are sporty are not very feminine.

The former Chair of UK Sports, Baroness Campbell commented in 2012 that many girls drop out of sport in their early teens because they start changing shape and they're less comfortable in their body (BBC website, 8 March, 2013) and the All Party Parliamentary Group study on body image observed that 60% of girls avoid certain activities because of

the way that they look.

While body image concerns have traditionally been viewed as an issue associated with girls and young women, it would be incorrect to assume that boys do not suffer from the same anxieties about their bodies which prevent them from taking part in sports and physical activities.

The hyper-masculine ideal is becoming commonplace and tends to dictate to boys from a young age what it means to be a man. Boys are told that being muscular and competitive even aggressive are aspirational qualities. For many boys who do not conform to these supposed ideals, this can lead to feelings of a lack of self-worth and anxieties over their body shape. The problem is made worse by an increased likelihood that boys are less inclined to discuss their emotions and concerns particularly when these are in relation to their bodies (Kehler and Atkinson, 2010; Hargreaves and Tiggeman, 2006).

A 2008 Canadian report entitled “It’s time to un-plug our kids,” noted that although rates of girls participating in activity as they enter adolescence remained fairly stable over time, the rates of boys participation at the same age is actually declining, although total levels of boys remained higher than girls. Michael Kehler and Michael Atkinson (2010) argue that as boys enter adolescence they do not demonstrate the body image that society tells them is desirable i.e. athletic and muscular which can leave them “vulnerable and open to scrutiny and ridicule by a privileged and powerful few.”

## Learning to combat unhealthy body self-image

So what can be done to try to ensure children grow up to be happy and healthy adults? Psychologists have suggested that two of the factors that most affect body image are self-esteem and mastery over the body (Grogan, 2002).

Self-esteem is all about how people value themselves, the pride they feel in themselves, and how worthwhile they feel. It is important because it affects how a person acts, how they regulate their behaviour and how they relate to others.

For many people, particularly younger people, body image can be closely linked to self-esteem. As children develop into adolescence, they care more about how others see them.

Positive self-esteem is key to psychological well-being. Children who have positive self-esteem are better able to cope with wins and losses in games and in life. These enhanced coping skills can translate into lifetime benefits including:

- Better mental health
- Better social skills
- More positive engagement with the world around them
- Less chance of conforming to social pressure
- Better body image

Getting involved in physical activities and active play can put children in touch with their body—they learn what their body can do and what it can't. Active play teaches a child, from the earliest stages of its life, what its body is capable of; the development of physical skills, increased levels of achievement (in strength, speed, balance and dexterity) and an understanding of the functionality of its body – with a child never realising that this is something they are learning.

Referring specifically to girls, the United States Sports Academy commented:

*“Participating in sport is one way that girls can develop physical competence. Girls learn to appreciate their bodies for what they can do, instead of the perceived appearance by oneself or by others.”*

Physical activities also create self-esteem through team building and healthy competition. When children are given the opportunity to reach out of their comfort zone to try something new, beyond what they already know they can do. As they compete, they see themselves mastering new skills, which will give them the confidence to reach further and higher. Even when they don't win, they have the satisfaction of knowing they tried their hardest. This has a positive effect on resilience and self-esteem.

Several studies have attested to the positive effects of physical activity on levels of self-esteem among children, suggesting that physical fitness and vigorous physical activity levels contribute to a significant increase in self-esteem in both boys and girls (Gruber, 1986; Percy, Dziuban and Martin, 1981; Hatfield, Vaccaro and Benedict, 1985; Tremblay, Inman and Wilms, 2000; Schmalz, et al., 2007). Indeed, a report from the National Institute of Health which looked at the relationship between girls (ages 9-13) and their self-esteem concluded that;

*“promoting physical activity among adolescent girls fosters positive self-worth”.*

People who have higher self-esteem tend to be more satisfied with their body image and those who have greater mastery over their bodies i.e. those who use their bodies for physical purposes are likely to be more satisfied with their bodies and more hopeful of attaining an ideal body shape. Even moderate exercise, which focuses on mastering the body rather than

aesthetics, can improve self-esteem and how we view our bodies (Brown and Lawton, 1986; Mintz and Betx, 1986; Furnham and Greaves, 1984; Furnham and Greaves, 1994).

In 2002 Kirkcaldy, Shephard and Siefen of the International Center for the Study of Occupational and Mental Health in Dusseldorf carried out a study on the relationship between physical activity and self-image and problem behaviour among adolescents. The research found that young adolescents who engage in regular physical activity will display a more favourable self-image than their sedentary peers and are less likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.

## How and when to get kids interested in activity

So when is the optimum age to get children active and how do we keep their interest in physical activity into later life?

A 2012 report found that a strong personal interest in sport whilst growing up is the most important driver of taking part in later life. The findings highlighted that children who play sport regularly, build a strong attachment to sport from secondary school age. The type of sport they play at school is irrelevant – it is the passion for sport and physical activity in the early years that counts (YouGov, 2012).

It is crucial that children are encouraged to build this strong attachment to physical activity, as research suggests that children with body image concerns are those who tend to be most anxious and resistant to engaging in sport. An interest in physical activity should be encouraged early in life when young children are keen to run around and be active, without thinking about it. At a very young age children may not have the co-ordination and dexterity (they have not yet fully developed motor skills) to take part in structured activities and sports. However they will be able to take part in play activities which help to develop these skills. A baby crawling after a ball is building muscle strength and in a basic form learning to “chase” the ball. A toddler might begin to try to kick and throw the ball building dexterity and an understanding of what their legs and arms are capable of as their balance and agility develop. Children should be encouraged in as much activity as possible – using a bat and ball to develop motor function and hand-eye co-ordination and kicking balls, throwing beanbags and running and skipping – anything that gets their bodies moving, elevates their heart rate, and teaches them about their body in terms of how it functions.

Studies show that physical activity presents a physiological stress to the brain that, when balanced with recovery, promotes adaptation and growth, preserves brain function, and enables the brain to respond to future challenges (Mattson, 2004).

Aerobic activity also stimulates the release of neuronal growth factors (molecules that help neurons survive and thrive), promotes synaptic plasticity and long-term potentiation (dynamic modifications of the connections between neurons), and stimulates the growth of new neurons in the hippocampus (a brain region primarily involved in learning and memory) (Hillman, 2008). Physical activity helps children to develop mentally.

Healthy emotional development takes many forms and will vary between children but it can help children to build resilience in areas that they may find challenging as they get older.

The American Psychological Association (APA) describes resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress. It means “bouncing back” from difficult experiences”.

The APA suggests that one of the ways that children can develop resilience is by undertaking regular exercise. This resonates in the work of the children’s charity Barnado’s which suggests that self-esteem is a key element of resilience (Barnado’s, 2009).

By engaging in activity from a young age children gain the numerous physical benefits of active play and sports, such as building muscle strength, improving cardiovascular fitness, developing co-ordination, developing dexterity, improving balance and agility and increasing endurance and speed (Goldstein, 2012). Not all children will take to structured activity like sports and this could be due to their age, preferences and access to facilities. Indeed unstructured activity is as important for children as learning the skill involved in sports. Active play is one way of building physical activity into the lives of all children.

Early forms of physical activity start with repetitive, rhythmic movements, such as clapping hands to music. As children get older this develops into dancing to music, rough and tumble play, and later on, participating in sporting activities. For some children, structured sports will form an integral part of their daily lives but for others, sporting activities may not grab their enthusiasm. Allowing children the space and opportunity to just run around and play can give children unstructured benefits even if they are not “sporty”. A major benefit of participating in regular physical activity is an improvement in a child’s fitness levels and physical wellbeing (Goldstein, 2012).





In play, children learn how and when to express or control their emotions (Power, 2000). Rough-and-tumble is probably the most fundamental form of physical and active play in childhood. It includes activities such as running, chasing, play wrestling. Even play fighting requires a good deal of self-control and restraint, serving as practice for exercising restraint in more serious contexts (Power, 2000; Galyer & Evans, 2001).

For some parents it can be difficult to witness rough-and-tumble as it can be difficult to distinguish from aggressive behaviour. Aggressive play is not the same as aggressive behaviour. It is important not to equate play-fighting with serious fighting and not to label a child as “aggressive” simply because he or she prefers a particular kind of play (Power, 2000). In rough-and-tumble, children will be smiling and laughing, and they will remain together once they’re finished playing. Children who are really fighting will separate once the fight is over (Reed, 2005). It is important to look out for signs that both children are having fun and the “fight” is equal. If one child looks like they are being overpowered and not enjoying the play then it may have gone too far but normally children will tell each other when they have had enough and they learn clues from each other about how and when to stop.

Rough-and-tumble usually involves playing with others and is related to social skills, status and emotional control (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Reed, 2005). This kind of active play, especially outdoors, burns more calories than other forms of play. It allows a physical release and may also help promote co-operation and facilitate friendship and prosocial behaviours. (Scott & Panksepp, 2003).

## Physical activity and emotional development

The many benefits of play and sport extend beyond the physical factors and research shows the potential impact on intellectual, emotional and social development- increased levels of creativity, greater willingness to take risks, improved emotional self-regulation and generally increased levels of happiness and confidence (Goldstein, 2012).

In one study, 44 preschool children (22 boys, 22 girls) were interviewed about their understanding of emotion and the amount of pretend physical play with a same-sex friend from their preschool classroom was assessed. The findings suggested that emotion regulation and emotion understanding (part of what is meant by ‘emotional intelligence’) make unique contributions to teacher ratings of children's emotional competence with peers.

Different patterns of associations were found for boys and girls. High levels of pretend play were associated with greater emotional understanding for both boys and girls, and with

greater emotion regulation and emotional competence for girls. Physical play was associated with boys' emotional competence with peers (Lindsey & Colwell, 2003).

## Involvement in physical activities in childhood

Young people's anxieties related to their body image can translate through to an unwillingness to participate in physical activity and hence missing out on the many benefits that it has to offer. However, moderate exercise which places the focus on enjoying and mastering the body, rather than appearance and weight is an important step to improving body image (Grogan, 2002).

There are a number of factors which may predispose a child to be more engaged in activity.



The activity level of parents will have an impact on their child's activity. In one study, children of active mothers were found to be 2.0 times as likely to be active as the children of inactive

mothers. When both parents were active, the children were 5.8 times as likely to be active as the children of two inactive parents. The study suggested the relationship between parents' and child's activity levels included the parents' serving as role models, sharing of activities by family members, enhancement and support by active parents of their child's participation in physical activity, and genetically transmitted factors that predispose the child to increased levels of physical activity (*Moore et al., 1991*).

Early introduction to active play and the activities chosen may also have a bearing on later activity participation. Studies have shown that girls who engage in active play as children are more likely later to be involved in sport. Eighty-four American female university students (40 competing athletes and 44 non-athletes) completed a questionnaire that measured their adult experiences with sports as well as their childhood play activities. The results revealed that playing with 'masculine' toys and games, playing in predominantly male or mixed-gender groups, and being considered a 'tomboy' distinguished between women who later became college athletes and those who did not. These findings suggest that childhood play activities should be considered, along with other agents of socialisation (family, peers, coaches), as important factors in predicting future sport participation by females (Giuliano, 2000).

A child's personal involvement in physical activities is determined by a number of factors including genetics, the environment- including society, family, school and peers, emotional stability and hormone levels.

## How to make change

Increasing levels of physical activity among children in schools is complicated. According to a report from the Children's Institute of Learning & Development (2004), schools under pressure to academically achieve are decreasing children's opportunities to participate in break periods and physical education.

However, while it might be the case that schools may not be providing children with as many opportunities to play in a structured fashion – during PE lessons or breaks from lesson – a study in 2012 by the British Toy and Hobby Association and Loughborough University's Institute for Youth Sport found that even when children were given these opportunities, they did not engage in as much moderate to physical activity as they did when they were given time to simply enjoy unstructured play with an activity toy or toy substitute such as a cardboard box. PE lessons teach children new skills to engage in sports but may not necessarily give children the opportunity to be extremely active (particularly for an entire lesson). The important lesson learnt was that children were more active when they were simply given the time to enjoy play free of restrictions and structure.

Schools can play a vital role in educating and preparing children for body awareness issues and cover some of the issues through the curriculum - with a possible qualification in body image being launched in 2013. Resources such as Media Smart's body image lesson also help children to understand the issues and discuss them in schools.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport, as part of the government's Body Confidence Campaign, has hosted a series of roundtable discussions on women's participation in sport and is continuing its work in this area by hosting workshops on promoting sports as a lifestyle choice for young women. More could be done by acknowledging active play as part of that activity mix in order to target younger children and those who do not necessarily want to take part in structured activity.

Parents can help children outside of the school environment by showing children that taking part in physical activities can be rewarding and enjoyable and does not require Olympian standard physical attributes or an overly competitive nature.

Play in its many forms should be encouraged both in and outside the school. A variety of activities can help children to discover what they do and don't like. The nature of the activity is irrelevant as the studies show that active children have more chance of developing into physically and psychologically healthy adults.

Teaching children to value their body for "what it can do" not simply for "how it looks" is an important way of combatting potential unhealthy body image. If children understand the concept of body function they look at themselves for what they can do rather than what they look like. Children should be taught that their bodies are fast, strong, flexible and agile rather than just pretty or handsome.

Recognising the warning signs of an unhealthy body image in children can help parents identify problems early. Parents should watch and listen out for certain factors such as the language children are using – are they frequently commenting on their body size or appearance or indeed those of others? Do they have low self-esteem? Also, parents should look out for behaviour that might suggest that their child is trying to change their body shape – are they avoiding meal times and embarking on excessive dieting? (*womenshealth.gov, 2013*)

Parents can also help children overcome a negative body image by speaking to their children and helping them understand that there is no ideal body image. Try to avoid any pressure being put on children to conform to a certain ideal and be mindful of the language used to discuss images which can influence body image, avoiding negative words. Encouraging

children to participate in organised physical activities as well as unstructured free play is integral to physical and emotional wellbeing as part of a wider healthy lifestyle.

Parents can encourage physical activity by increasing their own fitness levels. Plan activities for the entire family; this might include a walk around the neighborhood, a game of rounders in the park, a water fight on a sunny day or a backyard race.

## Conclusion and comments by Dr Linda Papadopoulos

This report has focused the many benefits that play and physical activity is proven to develop in the physical and emotional growth of healthy children and how participating in these activities on a regular basis can help children to develop healthy levels of resilience, self esteem and confidence- all of which contribute to how they view their bodies. The link between an increase in physical exercise and improved self-esteem, particularly during childhood and adolescence, is supported by a wide body of research. However there is also plenty of evidence to suggest that today's young people are more body conscious than in previous times and becoming so at an increasingly younger age.

While it is true that children are now exposed to TV, media, celebrity culture and peer pressure on a level that previous generations were not, which can all play an important role in how they feel about themselves and their bodies, it is apparent that participating in play and physical activities from a young age can overcome many anxieties that might otherwise manifest themselves as children face issues relating to their bodies and their sense of self worth. Certainly engaging in active play and physical activities can teach children about their body for what it can do rather than what it looks like, can teach them about mastering new skills and give them the confidence to stretch themselves, positively impacting on the resilience and self-esteem that may help them overcome later pressures and inhibitions.

It is interesting to note that children who develop an interest in sports from a young age are more likely to retain this interest as they grow into adults. However this does not necessarily mean that children need to be interested in sports to be physically active. What is also worth noting is that when children are simply given the time to enjoy play without rules, restrictions and boundaries, in an unstructured setting, that they are more physically active than during the more traditional times set aside for physical activity such as PE lessons.

It is never too late to get children involved in physical activities – whether this is a sporting pursuit or simply playing more. They do not need to be of Olympian standard and they should not be forced into taking part in activities that do not suit them or make them feel uncomfortable. There is a whole world of activities out there waiting to be discovered that get the heart pumping and the adrenaline flowing.

For parents, the key is encouraging children to find the activity that suits them. When they find this activity that lights a spark inside of them they will soon start to enjoy the many benefits that regular physical exercise has to offer and they will also soon gain an appreciation of what their body can do, rather than what it looks like. This is fundamental to improving how they view themselves and their bodies.

## Recommendations

- 1. The way we value active play, sport and health will contribute to how children value their bodies:** as such, policy that focuses on enhancing children's activity both in and out of school, structured and unstructured, will be integral in getting children to engage more and potentially have a positive impact on their body. Whether it's providing time and space for play or encouraging play and sports ambassadors to inspire children and young people, the promotion of the idea that society values and acknowledges the benefits of activity is important.
- 2. Model appropriate behaviour:** if your children see you being active, and having a positive outlook on physical activity and enjoying what your body can *do* they are much more likely to follow. Playfulness is infectious.
- 3. You don't need to be the best at it to enjoy it:** many kids and even adults shy away from sports and physical activities because they don't feel they can do them well. So speak about activity in terms of it being fun, getting to connect with new people and gaining confidence by testing your physical limits. Don't let the fact that you're not an Olympic level athlete get in the way of enjoying an activity you enjoy – no matter what age you are, a physical activity that you enjoy doing and see as fun is, after all, playtime.
- 4. Beware of how you compliment:** whilst telling children they look nice is fine it's also really important that you validate them for what they can do- how fast they run; how well they throw; what great sportsmanship they show. They need to see and value their bodies for what they can do more than for what they look like- drawing attention to their physical abilities and behaviours and validating them for this is vital.
- 5. You're in competition with no one but yourself:** underscore the idea that physical efforts are about personal goals and that the key to enjoying them and feeling that sense of mastery is through setting personal goals rather than trying to impress or 'beat' anyone.
- 6. Schools need to offer variety:** both in terms of the activities they offer but also in terms of how these are played- for example in some circumstances mixed gender teams may promote a sense of unity while activities that don't have a competitive component can still contribute to an overall sense of well being and accomplishment.

7. **Promoting gender equality:** The idea that there are girls' sports and boys' sports is often promoted from a very early age. It's vital that children are encouraged to play a range of sports and not feel restricted from trying something new because it doesn't fit into a specific gender stereotype.
8. **Policy change to ensure that schools talk about body image in PSHE:** giving children the tools to understand how their body image is affected by the messages they see from the world around them is vital, as is giving them the tools to cope with. Having a structured, developmentally appropriate programme that addresses this in schools could go a long way in addressing issues of self esteem, body image and health.

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