

WORKPLACE

FOCUS



*Rather than only monitoring children's physical activity, shouldn't we be also measuring mental health too, asks **Sheila Forster***

LOOKING AT MORE THAN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

2 019 marks the third full year of Sport England's Active Lives Survey, which replaced the Active People Survey in 2016. One of the key differences is that the ALS introduced, for the first time, the capacity to monitor how active children are, as well as adults.

This is a great step forward. Countless studies have shown that regular physical activity has a positive impact physically, mentally, emotionally and academically.

However, alternative studies have argued that physical activity is dropping in children. For example, a 2019 study by the British Heart Foundation showed that children become less active each year of primary school. Measuring and monitoring children's physical activities is therefore key. But it is of limited use. And this is because it is a process – not an outcome.

By measuring only physical activity, we are measuring the process, but we are not measuring whether, and to what extent, it is bringing about desired outcomes such as better physical and mental health, improved fitness, energy levels and academic performance.

We are doing the equivalent, for example, of simply counting how many statins are being taken and not whether our cholesterol levels have declined.

Additionally, measuring physical activity tells you only one thing – how

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much physical activity you are doing. But there is a lot it doesn't tell you.

For example, it won't tell you:

- how healthy you are
- how fit you are
- your physical literacy or physical competence
- your levels of mental health.

Because it has been shown that physical activity can bring about these outcomes, for example, if a child's physical activity has gone up, we can assume perhaps their physical literacy has too. But this is a big leap.

Equally, there is not always a correlation between increased physical activity and mental health.

Mental health is an immensely complex subject, and for children, particularly adolescents and those going through puberty, there are many pressures which can affect mental and social health.

So if we want our children to be fit, physically literate and mentally healthy,

we need to measure these directly. This would give us the ability to monitor our children's health and development in the areas which matter.

Crucially, it would also provide us with good insight into what programmes are working and what aren't.

This is relatively straightforward – the National Child Measurement Programme, which measures obesity, has managed to consistently measure children's BMI at Reception and Year 6 across England since 2007.

Fitness assessments and mental health monitoring are quick and easy to carry out and can provide a wealth of useful data. They can provide key information about the affect of teaching programmes, and a detailed understanding of natural strengths and weakness. For children, they can provide new understanding and motivations for PE and physical activity.

At policy level, data about children's health and fitness can provide key insights for understanding health patterns and trends, and data to support and design interventions.

The most common criteria for success is if a process achieved the desired outcomes. But measuring physical activity alone does not do this. It simply records the process by which we hope to achieve the outcomes – without noting if those outcomes have been achieved.

We all want children who are mentally healthy, physically fit and able to achieve their best. But if we aren't measuring these, how do we know if they are? 🧐

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