

Activities for Children

Twenty-five years ago, children in London walked to school and played in parks and playing fields after school and at the weekend. Today they are usually driven to school by parents anxious about safety and spend hours glued to television screens or computer games. Meanwhile, community playing fields are being sold off to property developers at an alarming rate. 'This change in lifestyle has, sadly, meant greater restrictions on children,' says Neil Armstrong, Professor of Health and Exercise Science at the University of Exeter. 'If children continue to be this inactive, they'll be storing up big problems for the future.'

Physical education is under pressure in the UK – most schools devote little more than 100 minutes a week to it in curriculum time, which is less than many other European countries. Three European countries are giving children a head start in PE, France, Austria and Switzerland – offer at least two hours in primary and secondary schools. These findings, from the European Union of Physical Education Associations, prompted specialists in children's physiology to call on European governments to give youngsters a daily PE programme. The survey shows that the UK ranks 13th out of the 25 countries, with Ireland's bottom, averaging under an hour a week for PE. From age six to 18, British children received, on average, 106 minutes of PE a week. Professor Armstrong, who presented the findings at the meeting, noted that since the introduction of the national curriculum there had been a marked fall in the time devoted to PE in UK schools, with only a minority of pupils getting two hours a week.

A Prevention survey found that children whose parents keep in shape are much more likely to have healthy body weights themselves. "There's nothing worse than telling a child what he needs to do and not doing it yourself," says Elizabeth Ward, R.D., a Boston nutritional consultant and author of *Healthy Foods, Healthy Kids*. "Set a good example and get your nutritional house in order first." In the 1930s and '40s, kids expended 800 calories a day just walking, carrying water, and doing other chores,' notes Fima Lifshitz, M.D., a pediatric endocrinologist in Santa Barbara. "Now, kids in obese families are expending only 200 calories a day in physical activity," says Lifshitz, "incorporate more movement in your family's life – park farther away from the stores at the mall, take stairs instead of the elevator, and walk to nearby friends' houses instead of driving."