



Synopsis

Assessing the impact of COVID-19 on the physical activity of 10–11-year-old children and their parents: Active-6 a mixed-methods study

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Published November 2024

DOI: 10.3310/WYHT5821

Plain language summary

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Public Health Research 2024; Vol. 12: No. 16

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NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk

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Why did we do this study?

Physical activity can improve children's health, learning and quality of life, yet only 41% of year 6 children (aged 10–11 years) in the UK were meeting physical activity guidelines before the pandemic. COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions meant children were unable to be active in their normal ways. We expected these restrictions to reduce children's activity while they were in place. The Active-6 project wanted to know whether any changes to children's activity lasted after the restrictions had gone.

What did we do?

We used devices called accelerometers to measure Year 6 children's activity in 2021 and 2022. We compared this information with data collected in 2017/18 from year 6 children from the same schools. We also interviewed parents, children and school staff to find out about their experiences and why they felt any changes had happened.

What did we find?

In 2021, children's activity was significantly lower than before the pandemic. The time children spent sedentary, not moving at all, was higher. By 2022, child activity returned to pre-COVID levels but their sedentary time remained high. We found that the ways in which children are active have changed since the COVID-19 lockdowns. Children spend less time doing active play and now rely more on structured activities like sports clubs. The gap in how active children are seems to be widening, with girls and low-income families being less active.

What does this mean for child physical activity?

It took almost a year with no restrictions for children's physical activity to recover, and sedentary time remains high. Despite this recovery, 59% of children do not meet activity guidelines. Children now rely more on clubs for their activity, and it is hard for some children and families to take part in these. Strategies are needed to increase child physical activity for all.

Public Health Research

ISSN 2050-439X (Online)

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This article

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the PHR programme as award number NIHR131847. The contractual start date was in April 2021. The draft manuscript began editorial review in June 2023 and was accepted for publication in March 2024. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The PHR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' manuscript and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this article.

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