

Kimberley Hill takes a look at obesity and children's play.



Picture courtesy of Playdale Playgrounds

Fat chance

Childhood obesity is a serious problem with profound health and social consequence. It is estimated that up to 15 per cent of children in the UK are overweight or obese (BUPA Report Feb 2004), a figure that has been rising steadily over the past 20 years.

Being obese can lead to problems such as heart disease, strokes, diabetes and arthritis, memory problems and headaches. More than 30,000 deaths a year are caused by obesity in England alone. Most children are overweight due to poor diets and lack of physical activity and there is national concern that children will grow up with a poor level of fitness. Regular physical activity is vital to ensure a healthy future and positive experiences of physical activity in childhood will lay valuable foundations for lifelong participation.

Have a heart

The British Heart Foundation recommends that children and young people should aim to participate in activity of at least moderate intensity for one hour a day, starting initially with a target of 30 minutes. Examples of intensity activities include active play, walking, cycling, dance and most sports and games.

Outdoor play has developmental and therapeutic benefits for all children. Children have high-energy requirements because they are growing and a play area is a great form of exercise and a way to release their energy. All children have the right to play and while playing, children unconsciously strengthen the large muscle groups in their bodies. During play, children repeat, adapt and refine all types of movement in various

combinations thereby cultivating their physical skills, development and health. Play also improves hand-eye and foot-eye co-ordination.

Children gain numerous physical benefits from outdoor play as they balance, walk, run, climb, swing, throw and so on. Play activities greatly enhance children's physical and perceptual motor development. It helps them become more aware of their own bodies and the relationship of their bodies to others and the world around them.

Children have lots of free time after school, at weekends and in the school holidays. These are ideal opportunities for children to participate in physical activities and play. Encouraging children to play outdoors may be a task in itself, however and BUPA recommend making exercise into a treat and taking trips to adventure play parks.

Increased physical activity amongst children burns more calories and has additional health benefits such as improved cardiovascular and gross motor benefits. However, less obvious is the role of play in children's cognitive, emotional and social development, which also is significantly improved by children playing.

Developmental benefits

Good quality play opportunities have a significant impact on children's development. Play encourages physical activity in children, building a healthy heart and developing strong muscles and bones. Climbing up ropes and nets, as well as jumping and hanging, swings and slides, balance beams and climbing frames are all

suitable playground activities for the training of basic movements such as crawling, swinging, jumping, throwing and catching.

Children enjoy activities designed to get them moving and developing their sporting interests. Playgrounds can provide children with realistic challenges, which are suitable for their individual abilities and developmental levels and, most importantly, for keeping children active. Play can focus on the fun element of exercising and can be used to build skills and self esteem. Play encourages health benefits such as aerobic and muscular endurance, strength and flexibility and an improvement in the function of children's vital organs.

The nation's concern over the increasing obesity levels in children is still apparent in today's society. The solutions to combat this include dietary and physical activity changes in children's lifestyles. The playground is a great form of exercise; play is fun and involves the whole child.

Prevention is better than cure and to prevent the increasing obesity levels amongst children, outdoor play should actively be encouraged in all households. ■

Kimberley Hill is the marketing manager for Playdale Playgrounds.

For a copy of the current API Directory of members or further information contact: Deborah Kirby, Association of Play Industries, Federation House, Stoneleigh Park, Warwickshire, CV8 2RT. Tel: 024 7641 4999 ext 208 Fax: 024 7641 4990 Email: deborah@sportslife.org.uk Website: www.playindustries.org