

Parenting

Is your school fit to teach?

WHEN DID you last ask your child's teacher how he or she was doing in PE?

No, I've never asked either. Instead, conversations with primary school teachers are nearly always about reading, writing, maths and behaviour.

"We have to move minds to see physical activity, PE, sport, as a fundamental part of any child's development," says the chairman of the Irish Sports Council, John Treacy. "It is as important as the reading, the writing and the maths."

Treacy chaired a high-level Government taskforce on obesity, which four years ago made 93 recommendations to tackle the escalating problems of overweight adults and, increasingly, children. Research shows that 26 per cent of seven-year-old girls and 18 per cent of boys are now overweight or obese.

A recent progress review of the National Obesity Taskforce's recommendations revealed that less than one-fifth have been fully implemented.

Treacy is particularly disappointed that the recommendation for a minimum of 30 minutes dedicated to physical activity, every day, in all educational settings, has been rejected.

Integrating physical activity in the education sector helps to integrate it in the minds of parents, he points out. "This recommendation is very important in terms of this cultural shift and that's why there is disappointment around it."

Irish schools are bottom of the European league for time given to PE.

In response to queries about the rejection of this recommendation, a spokesman for the Department of Education and Science says while schools can encourage pupils to take physical exercise during breaks, a dedicated period of physical activity would have to be supervised by a teacher.

"There are no plans to extend the length of time for PE in schools. This is not feasible in terms of the range of curricular options which must be facilitated, or the industrial relations and cost implications.

"It should be noted that schools in Ireland have a strong and proud tradition of developing sport outside the school timetable," the spokesman adds.

However, optional, organised sport is not the whole answer. "What we are finding from our research is that kids are involved more than ever in organised sport," says Treacy. "It is the unorganised sport that has gone."

For example, an hour's football training once or twice a week and a match at the weekends does not compensate for



SHEILA WAYMAN

Physical activity is as important as reading and writing so why are Irish schools at the bottom of the European league for time given to PE?

Steps to get you moving

■ Think of all those short trips in the car – to the school, to the shops, to friends' houses, to the park – and start doing some of them by foot, or with children on scooters.

■ These longer evenings are perfect for a walk around the block straight after dinner instead of everybody dispersing to their screen of choice, be it the TV, the computer or a games console.

■ Go out and play with your children, whether it's kicking or throwing a ball, hitting a tennis ball, playing Frisbee or flying a kite.

■ For the next child's birthday, think of buying an active toy such as a trampoline, Frisbee, soccer ball, kite, tennis racquet, badminton set.

■ Look for opportunities to cycle together, even if it means transporting bikes to a safer place.

■ Try going swimming regularly as a family; why should it be just the children who get into the pool?

■ Meet up with another family or two for active outings, such as forest walks or a game of rounders in the park, and it can make it more enjoyable for all.

■ Switch on music and start impromptu dance sessions at home.

■ Encourage your child to try new activities or sports.

■ Turn off the TV.



all those lost hours of kicking a ball around the street or in the park, which children used to do. The challenge facing both schools and parents is to inject physical activity into the sedentary daily lives we have created for our children.

That's why some parents were out stretching and jogging with the 400 pupils and teachers in Mount Anville Primary School in Stillorgan, Co Dublin at 8.50am each day last week, as they marked Active School Week. Daily warm-ups, extra PE classes, tennis, yoga and dance sessions, an evening family walk and educational packs for parents were just some of the activities.

The theme of the week-long programme was "Energy In, Energy Out", and teachers encouraged children to keep "energy diaries" logging what food they were putting into their bodies and the activities they were doing. There was a focus on the scientific rationale behind healthy eating messages, explains one of the parents who helped co-ordinate the week, Sheena Horgan.

The all-girls school did its own form of Olympics, in which pupils earned points for participating in five different activities, including swimming and skipping. Parents also went in to lead active games in the school yard during break times.

"We seem to have lost our drive to be physically active," says Horgan, a mother of four girls aged three to 10. "There are lots of reasons: schools have lost playing fields; we have more sedentary lifestyles in

terms of new media and technology; there's the fear factor of letting our kids walk to school on their own; and we are obsessed with our cars."

Targeting primary school children is crucial because up to the age of 11, the influence of parents and teachers is supreme, points out Horgan. It's the best time for embedding good habits in children for life. Not surprisingly, research shows that children whose parents are active are more than five times as likely to be active than those whose parents are not.

She was adamant that all teachers at their school had to wear trackuits and trainers for Active Week. "After the parents, they are the biggest role models. If you see the headmistress and the teachers dancing their hearts out, and having fun with it, that's what the kids are watching.

"The simple initiative of Active School Week has been 'massively under-promoted'," suggests Horgan, who is a youth and ethical marketing specialist. But its current transition to an Active Flag programme, modelled on the highly successful Green Flag scheme, may help to achieve longer-lasting benefits.

Exercise physiologist David Egan, who founded the Red-Branch charity to promote healthy lifestyles for children, encounters a lot of barriers to physical activities in schools.

"Six out of 10 primary schools do not have the facilities or equipment for PE, which is a major issue," he points out. "You can talk about Active School



Week, but if a school does not have a GP [general purpose] room, or even a playground in the case of some city schools, it's a bit of a joke.

"Another issue which we encounter is that we allocate less time to PE in Ireland than in almost any other European country. The minimum curriculum guideline for PE at national school level is only 30 minutes a week."

In addition, an estimated 40 per cent of national schools have a "no run" policy govern-

ing time in the playground. "It may prevent a few broken bones, but it is setting children up for a life of chronic ill health," says Egan.

While most people are aware that being physically active reduces the risk of heart disease, strokes, certain cancers and type II diabetes, many people do not realise that exercise also plays a major role in reducing stress levels and helping to prevent depression, he says. It can also boost academic performance.



Above and left, pupils at Mount Anville School, Dublin take part in a pre-class warm-up at the school under the direction of parent Sheena Horgan. Photographs: Frank Miller

Turn the school run into a walk

The frenzied convergence of cars on schools twice a day is symptomatic of our skewed lifestyles. A few generations ago, the idea that we would need a "Walk to School Week", which runs this year from May 18th to 23rd, would have seemed absurd.

Some 55 per cent of all primary school children in the Republic are driven to school, according to figures from the last Census. The Central Statistics Office reports that of the 247,000 children who were driven to school in 2006, 44,000 of them were driven 1km or less. Another 105,000 were driven less than 4km.

The many reasons children are ferried to school could, in microcosm, be seen as a reflection of our times. They include fears that the roads are too dangerous for them to walk or cycle; that a child may be abducted; lack of time when parents are rushing to jobs; laziness; our pampered generation's aversion to a spot of rain.

The benefits of getting children out of the cars onto their feet include not only better physical and mental health, but also a reduction in carbon emissions and less traffic congestion.

That is why the Green Schools initiative, run by An Taisce, is promoting Walk to School Week. While 300 schools are being directly targeted under the Green Travel programme, all schools are invited to participate.

Walk to School Week is also run in the North, where the theme this year is "walk and talk", stressing the

sociable aspect of leaving the car at home.

If a whole week of walking seems too daunting, children and parents everywhere are being asked for a special effort to make the school run a walk on Wednesday, May 20th. You might find you like it.

Schools can register to take part in Walk to School Week by e-mailing: walktoschool@eeu.antaisce.org



their make-up afterwards. It might sound laughable, says Egan, but if giving them an extra 10 minutes to tidy themselves up is what it takes to keep them involved, it should be done.

Aura, which runs 10 leisure centres on behalf of local authorities, looks for ways to involve teenage girls. It is piloting a new group activity on dance mats called Zig-Zag, in Tullamore, Co Offaly, which, if successful, will be introduced at other centres, says Aura's managing director, Emma Killeen.

Aura's philosophy is making fitness fun for the whole family. The pay-as-you-go centres include pools and gyms; some have playgrounds, soccer pitches, running tracks and skateboard parks.

"Swimming is the big thing," she explains. A total of 40,000 children take weekly lessons at its centres each year.

Having trained and worked in leisure management for some years, Killeen saw that swimming classes tended to be regimented and she wanted to make them much more fun for children.

There is too much emphasis on "making the grade" in other swimming centres, she suggests. "Our lessons are much more positive and flexible and the children don't even realise they are learning. We are more focused on the needs and abilities of the individuals."

Children are assigned to small classes on the basis of ability rather than age, which helps to reduce competitiveness, as does the naming of groups

"ducklings", "turtles", "star fish", etc rather than levels one, two, three. The quality of teachers is also important, Killeen stresses, and they often go into the pool and demonstrate to the children, rather than being the imposing figure standing on the deck.

Teenagers aged 13 up are allowed to use the gyms, which is popular with boys. Aura centres cater for girls with tailored activities, such as Zig Zag, or even by running craft courses, which finish up with a session in the pool.

It takes innovation to lure children away from the television these days. Egan is struck by the amount of time Irish children spend watching television. The average child watches three hours a day and if such a child lives to be 70 years old, he or she will have spent nine years passively watching the box, he points out.

Some young children's lives are so sedentary that they are not mastering the ABC of physical activity through unstructured play, according to Egan. (A stands for agility, B for balance and C for co-ordination.) Sports trainers say that some children are coming into clubs, unable to run properly or catch a ball easily.

It's time we all realised that there is more than one ABC in a child's life that matters.

Useful websites:
Redbranch.com;
Auraleisurecentres.ie;
Activeschoolflag.ie;
IrishsportsCouncil.ie

swayman@irishtimes.com

A recent US study found that children who participate in vigorous physical activity tend to have higher academic grades than children who are less active. The most physically active students performed on average 10 per cent better on maths, science and English tests than their sedentary counterparts.

However, the study found that simply doing PE did not by itself raise grades, and that taking part in vigorous activity at least three times per week was associated with the best academ-

ic performance.

At secondary level, there is the big issue of lack of specialist PE teachers, Egan says. "Most of the schools I work with are trying very hard to do the right thing, but they are working in very difficult circumstances."

As any parent of a miserable participant in compulsory school rugby or hockey knows, there is a tendency "to keep hammering the square peg into the round hole", he suggests, which is likely to put children off physical activity for life.

RedBranch ran focus groups with teenage girls to try to identify why they have such a high drop-out rate from school sports. The reasons coming back included a dislike of competition and complaints that the activities offered, such as GAA, soccer, basketball, were too masculine.

The 20 to 30 per cent of girls who were not into traditional sports wanted activities such as yoga, salsa or hip-hop dance. "We work with the schools to get those activities on the menu and all of a sudden you see a big increase in uptake."

In Scotland, it was found that schoolgirls were dropping out of sport because they were not being given enough time to fix