

Play matters: responding to this century's biggest societal challenge

With today's children expected to lead shorter lives than their parents, there has never been a greater need for active play. As Michael Hoenigmann explains, the Association of Play Industries (API) is doing all it can to promote the benefits of physical activity.

Earlier this year the API submitted evidence to the all-party activity commission, setting out its views on how to encourage more people, particularly children, to be more physically active on a regular basis.

The API believes that for the general population, parks and public spaces should be physical activity hubs. Recent research from the European Commission states that 40% of citizens that participate in sport and other physical activity do so in parks and outdoors. According to the API, parks should incorporate four key elements:

- well-equipped, well-maintained, safe, fun and challenging play spaces for young children, combining fixed, loose and natural play resources, equipment and surfacing;
- more challenging and varied play, sport and social spaces and zones for older children and teenagers, for example fixed outdoor fitness equipment and skate, BMX and parkour facilities to increase participation, encourage inter-generational interaction and improve community cohesion;
- safe walking, exercise and social spaces for older people;
- volunteer or other health or fitness professionals to help those less confident or comfortable taking part in physical activity to get started and maintain a suitable programme of activity.

The API strongly believes that we cannot and should not be playing politics with people's health and wellbeing, and supports a cross-party approach to tackling the challenge. Major investment in sport and play from the very earliest age, with professional coaching supplementing excellent facilities, would deliver dramatic results. If research produced to date is remotely accurate, the potential savings on the estimated bill currently borne by the NHS, plus the resulting return on investment, would be significant. Fitness4Life would be the logical evolution of the Change4Life initiative.

Asked for examples of where best practice is being delivered, the API offered initiatives such as sports legacy zones and social fitness zones, which are increasing physical activity levels within local communities. This has been achieved by offering a solution for all ages and encouraging the social aspects of play, including cross-generational play. A study of two schemes in Watford and Bracknell parks shows that the investment more than tripled the amount of physical activity undertaken within the local community, with the average length of time spent in active play or exercise increasing by 376%. In both areas activity levels increased for all age ranges, with average visits to the parks tripling (from three to nine visits per month) and the amount of time spent during each visit almost doubling (from 13.5 to 25.5 minutes per visit).

These zones, which include adult outdoor fitness equipment with exercise programmes for people of different ability levels or physical needs, can be installed in compact spaces. This means they can be

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targeted at specific postcodes across a local authority where interventions are most needed and in urban areas where open green space may not be available. These zones have been designed with personal development plans so that users can measure their progress while instructional videos can be accessed online or by smartphone.

Initiatives like these are successful because they: create access to high-quality free-to-use facilities which leads to an immediate uplift in physical activity; provide access to exercise facilities for local communities within walking distance and without the need for transport; provide facilities that meet the needs of all ages within a local community; and encourage the social aspects of physical exercise which are more effective in driving participation.

The most important investment in play in recent years was the £235-million PlayBuilder PathFinder programme, launched in 2008 as part of the Labour government's national play strategy. The coalition government halted funding for this programme and there has been little political will to support play since. The value of API-member company orders reached a £198-million high in 2010 but by 2013 had fallen by 18% to £162 million. In the first quarter of 2014 they reported £42 million of orders, the lowest level since the same quarter in 2006 and the fourth consecutive annual fall in Q1 figures. Declining order books were blamed on local authority spending cuts, delayed procurement decisions and discounting.

The UK's physical inactivity epidemic threatens the lives of our children and generations to come unless addressed urgently. Calls for a national cross-party, department and sector strategy to tackle the crisis are welcome but now it is time for action. It is important that the vital role of active play from children's earliest years is recognised at a policy level. Inactive children become inactive adults that increase the NHS burden every year. There is a strong economic case for investment in the provision of high-quality, accessible places, spaces and equipment for children's play, particularly in disadvantaged communities.

When it comes to funding investment in play, the API believes that a redirection of funds is needed but it has to be cost-effective to prevent rather than cure. Investing in children's health and fitness throughout their childhood and into adulthood should be cheaper and more rewarding than investing billions in fixing the results of years of physical neglect. It also requires political bravery to think and plan beyond an electoral term but policy-makers must be prepared to take the plunge.

Competitive sport and PE are often cited as the key antidotes to sedentary lifestyles among children but the rigid rules and rituals of school sport and PE alienate many. To encourage active habits for life, the API works to raise awareness of the vital importance of active play. Increasing access to and investment in high-quality play spaces should be a national policy priority. For many children, school provides the only access to safe outdoor play so to increase access the API is keen to see abandoned or derelict public spaces repurposed as play areas.

In the past year the API participated in numerous forums, consultations and debates on physical inactivity and play policy. Next it will collate first-hand evidence from across its membership of the positive impact of play. There is much work to do and the API knows all too well that if we are to tackle this century's biggest societal challenge – rising physical inactivity levels – this child's play business is deadly serious.

Michael Hoenigmann is chair of the API. Established in 1984, the API represents manufacturers, installers, designers and distributors of outdoor and indoor play equipment and safety surfacing. It represents approximately 85% of the play industries and its members build around 4,000 playgrounds every year. The

API campaigns at the highest levels for policy recognition for play.

For further information the API, visit www.api-play.org

Reference:

The Eurobarometer on Sport and Physical Activity can be found via <http://europa.eu>

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