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TITLE: Going further than the 'Daily Mile'.

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Introduction

In 2015, media attention focussed on a Scottish primary school where the introduction of a 'Daily Mile' saw pupils run or walk a mile, taking around 15 minutes each day.¹ The benefits claimed by the school and media included that obesity had been eliminated and that educational attainment and concentration had been improved.^{2,3} The simplicity and replicability of the concept has caught the attention of the health and education sector, and over the last year there have been moves to reproduce the programme across England.

Why not the Daily Mile?

The Daily Mile falls short of where primary school physical activity needs to be. While an additional 15 minutes or more per day of activity will contribute to achieving the recommended daily minimum of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity in children,⁴ the Daily Mile is an overly simplistic contribution to energy expenditure that misses opportunities to develop a range of physical and social skills. Furthermore, it's a potential contributor to the issues underpinning physical inactivity later in life.

It also fails to address what children want from physical activity. Children have an inherent interest in physical activity-based play and a strong belief in its value, with the main reasons for positive attitudes towards physical activity identified as fun and enjoyment, being with friends, and the sense of belonging to a team.⁵ It is unlikely that an enforced mile run will engender these feelings in every child.

The worst-case scenario is that the Daily Mile is setting up a generation for a lifetime of inactivity. Low levels of participation after leaving primary school are often due to negative experiences of primary school sport and physical activity, particularly in girls⁶. Reasons cited for children and young

people not wanting to participate in physical activity in primary school include getting cold and wet⁷, and boredom;⁸ both commensurate with a compulsory year-round outdoor run in school uniform.

The current state of primary school PE

The excitement with which the Daily Mile has been received is a tacit admission that there is a lack of structured physical activity in primary schools. PE lessons in England last an average of 108mins, well below the daily recommended levels of physical activity.⁹ Outside classes, break times provide an opportunity for free play but for children who are already disengaged with physical activity, this time is usually spent sedentary.¹⁰

There is also a variation in quality of primary school PE delivery. Initial Teacher Training allocates a maximum of 12 hours to physical education, meaning primary teachers do not feel confident or safe delivering PE lessons.¹¹ Furthermore, many teachers start with preconceived views of PE, usually shaped from their own negative school experiences, which are difficult or impossible to change.¹²

Building the foundations of a sporting future

The benefits of the Daily Mile claimed are not exclusive to a mile's walk or run, but are the widely reported benefits of physical activity. If schools are to commit time to physical activity, could it be better spent promoting physical literacy, movement skills and leadership as well expending energy?

Physical literacy is the foundation of PE and school sport and describes the range of motor skills, flexibility, agility, co-ordination, confidence and motivation required to take part in physical activity or sport.^{13,14} It promotes physical activity in a way that allows pupils to enjoy, achieve and develop an active habit for life. Time spent on the Daily Mile could instead be spent more productively on games that include agility, object interception and other motor skill development. These may take the form of invasion games, net and wall games, striking and fielding, and dance or gymnastics and can be used to develop leadership, sporting values and a sense of fair play when pupils are given the responsibility to lead and officiate games. They also build the foundations needed to participate and

demonstrate competency in a much wider range of sports in later life. Whilst it means more work than a simple mile run, there are resources and support available to deliver an enhanced offer through the Primary School Sport Premium (PSSP)¹⁵, alongside resources from national and local bodies.

Conclusion

Whilst measures to increase physical activity should be encouraged, initiatives should seek to make activity fun, engaging for all, varied, and should improve physical literacy through developing skill, co-ordination and confidence. Where additional time is made available, structured play is therefore preferable to the Daily Mile in increasing levels of physical activity in primary school children.

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