

St Agnes CE Primary School

## School Child Physical and Mental Health Policy

### **1: Why we have a physical and mental health policy document.**

According to the government's own Childhood Obesity Report, nearly a third of children aged 2 to 15 are overweight or obese. What's more, with each passing year more children are becoming obese at earlier ages and staying obese for longer.

Obesity, as is now widely recognised, is directly related to dying prematurely, becoming a type 2 diabetic, increasing the chance of blindness or limb amputation, and greatly enhancing the chance of mental health issues.

These are, of course, tragic issues for the individual concerned, but they also have a huge impact for everyone else because the cost of supporting such people through medical and social care is putting unsustainable pressure on the country's ability to supply appropriate medical and social services.

The school recognises, of course, that it is a school – and not responsible for the complete physical and mental well-being of the children taught in the school or for the economic well-being of the country. Nor do we seek to take over the roles that are quite rightly assigned to parents, GPs, social services, etc.

But the school is in a unique position not only to enhance the intellectual and physical condition of children, but also to help take the message of the dangers of obesity to parents.

Our position in evolving this policy stems from the fact that the Academy of Royal Medical Colleges stated in 2017 that "Physical activity is a 'miracle cure'." Its argument is that extra activity is able to treat, prevent, and manage up to twenty different lifestyle conditions such as many cancers, diabetes, and heart disease as well as support mental health and wellbeing and prevent of the onset of dementia.

Furthermore, an increasing body of evidence shows that young children who are more physically active are more likely to achieve higher academic success (something that is very much in our remit), less likely to develop mental health problems, and less likely to start participating in risky lifestyle behaviours (such as smoking) than children who are more sedentary.

Indeed, a recent study by Cambridge University (the largest of its kind) showed that irrespective of weight inactivity was twice as significant an indicator of premature mortality as Body Mass Index, the measurement for assessing obesity.

Thus the issue of the physical condition of the children we teach is something we should be focussed on, because if we can encourage them to take more physical activity we will be working to enhance success in our core concerns: the child's intellectual capacity, the child's ability to gather and retain knowledge, the child's ability to pass exams, and the child's ability to enter the ever changing world of work later in life.

## **2: The government's view**

In 2017 the government issued its directive relating to the creation of Active Schools recommending that children get 30 minutes of activity per day at school in addition to the two hours of PE already timetabled.

The logic behind the directive is that as a result of this very modest amount of additional activity not only will the children's physical well-being improve, but so also will their mental health, their academic performance, their behaviour within school, their ability to make and keep friends, and their willingness and ability to engage in teamwork.

Additionally, it is more than likely that the physical and mental well-being of the parents will also improve if the initiative is explained to them.

The school embraces this view and thus makes it part of its core educational policy.

## **3: The School's Role**

We have noted that almost one in four children believe that playing video games counts as exercise, according to research undertaken for the 10th anniversary of the moment when the former London 2012 chairman Lord Coe secured the Games for London with a vow to "inspire a generation."

We feel we are well placed as a school to overcome this perception problem, and also (following the report from UKActive) ensure that the fitness and activity levels of pupils are tracked and monitored as academic achievement in schools is also tracked and monitored.

We know that in 2013 half of seven-year-olds were not meeting the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity highlighted in the chief medical officer's guidelines for children. Since then the situation has declined further so the aim is to reverse the trend.

Clearly the school cannot oversee 60 minutes of daily physical activity per child, but we can deliver half an hour a day physical activity five days a week, and activity in PE and sports lessons. We can also encourage children to join in physical activity during their breaks when the weather permits and we can encourage them to join in out of hours activities.

We can in our work encourage parents to see this as an issue that they should give attention to, and we can ensure that colleagues and the parents of the children we teach all have an understanding of the fact that enhanced physical activity does not diminish teaching time, but rather enhances the impact of the teaching that we deliver.

#### **4: Physical activity within lessons**

According to a panel of 24 specialists in exercise from eight countries including Britain, reported in the British Journal of Sports Medicine, just one session of an activity that raises children's heart rate is good for both the brain and for educational achievement.

Their conclusion is that anything involving exertion, including activities within the classroom incorporated into a lesson, can be good for a child's physical and mental development.

"A single session of moderate physical activity has an acute benefit to brain function, cognition and scholastic performance in children and youth," they say in their 21-point agreed statement.

"Physical activity before, during and after school promotes scholastic performance in children and youth. Mastery of fundamental movement skills is beneficial to cognition and scholastic performance in children and youth," they add.

As a result of these findings the school is committed to the notion of finding ways of introducing physical activity into lessons, so that physical activity is seen as part of normal life and not something that is solely separated out into PE and sports lessons in which a limited number of children excel.

We will, of course, continue to teach PE and sports lessons and the playing of organised games, but will also find activities that everyone can join in.

#### **5: School breaks**

We acknowledge that children should be allowed to choose their own activities during their breaks from lessons. But we also feel that we can encourage all children to become involved in activities during these times by providing games and encouraging social activities for these times.

We shall also work to encourage children to take up some of the physical activities that they have experienced within lessons and replicate them during their breaks from lessons.

## **6: Colleagues**

We acknowledge that not all colleagues will feel at ease with engaging in physical activity with children for the first time. However, by introducing physical activity into lessons we encourage colleagues to participate in this programme as much as they feel able.

## **7: Parents**

We have mentioned parents before, and we see as part of our work the notion of taking to the parents the message of the benefit to children in both their physical well-being and their ability to excel intellectually.

The school, of course, would not wish to be seen as telling parents how they should bring up their children, but we are well placed to be able to help parents understand the great value that will accrue to their children both intellectually and in terms of their physical and mental health through extra activity.

We noted the report of the panel of 24 specialists in exercise above and their conclusions. Our feeling is therefore that children's involvement in any form of structured or unstructured physical activity is not time lost from lessons and academic work. It actually enhances brain function and speeds up learning.

Thus it is clearly very much in the school's prime remit to find ways of enhancing learning, and thus we see part of our role as being one of encouraging parents to embrace the notion of enhanced physical activity for their children.