

Briefing Paper: How can active travel enhance educational attainment in school children?

Dr Darshana Bhattacharjee, Registrar in Paediatrics and Public Health

What do we already know?

- **The school curriculum is becoming increasingly constrained**, with opportunities to undertake physical education during the school day diminishing in favour of classroom-based academic work.
- The average child aged 5 to 17 years in the UK **does not reach the recommended minimum daily levels of physical activity**- 60 minutes per day. Childhood obesity is becoming endemic, with associated negative health impacts that persist into adulthood.
- **More children travel to school unnecessarily by car** when they live close enough to be able to walk or cycle, and can gain the health benefits as a result.

What have we found?

- **More than 20 scientific papers** looking at the link between physical activity and academic attainment over the past 14 years have been reviewed.
- There is convincing evidence that **physical activity and fitness levels in school children is associated with better academic scores and improved classroom behaviour**.
- Physical activity during the school day **is not detrimental** to academic performance.
- **Active commuting to school** can lead to the above benefits.

What can you do with this information?

- **Support** active travel in school children, and **acknowledge** the fact that this can lead to improved school performance, which can influence the positions of Bristol schools in league tables. Raising the profile of Bristol schools can in turn help families choose schools which are closer to their homes in order to allow active travel.
- **Make school travel plans an integral part of school policy** to encourage sustainable modes of transport, and highlight the fact that the LEA have a **statutory duty** to contribute to healthy travel to school initiatives.
- **Enhance road safety messages**, including the 20mph speed limit, for the local catchment area. Make parents aware that driving their children to school makes the environment more detrimental for walkers and cyclists.
- **Promote messages on better health and academic performance** through active travel via poster campaigns in schools and other public facilities, and link to existing campaigns such as Change 4 Life.
- **Provide facilities within schools** for active travel, and provide incentives for funding and accessing resources within the local authority, such as training.



Where can you get further information?

- A full summary of the evidence reviewed can be found in the paper “**Physical activity through active travel Briefing Note: A best available opportunity for enhancing academic attainment among school pupils?**” by Dr D Bhattacharjee, February 2015. Please contact Adrian Davis (Adrian.davis@bristol.gov.uk) or Jodi Savickas (Jodi.savickas@bristol.gov.uk) in Bristol City Council to obtain this.
- Relevant information on physical activity and active travel can be found through the following links:
 - Physical activity guidelines for children and young people (5-18 years). Department of Health, July 2011.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-physical-activity-guidelines>
 - Campaign for safer streets: Sustrans Policy Briefing. Sustrans, May 2014.
<http://www.sustrans.org.uk/safetoschool>
 - Modeshift STARS: www.modeshiftstars.org
 - The link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment. Public Health England, November 2014.
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-link-between-pupil-health-and-wellbeing-and-attainment>