

# Development of key themes for physical activity promotion

## Learning note

### Background

In 2011 the first UK-wide physical activity guidelines were published in the document *Start Active Stay Active*<sup>1</sup>. The standardisation of the guidelines across the four countries has now provided the opportunity to promote clear and consistent messages for physical activity. The document took a life stage approach and for the first time introduced recommendations for early years and older adults, in addition to children and young people, and adults.

Once the guidelines were published, there was a need to help health professionals understand them, so that they could promote them to the public in easy to understand language. In response to this, the British Heart Foundation National Centre for Physical Activity is developing a number of information sheets<sup>2</sup> for each life stage, which are aimed at a professional audience.

In line with the 'The Healthcare Quality Strategy for NHSScotland'<sup>3</sup>, NHS Health Scotland wanted to understand the key themes that motivate people to become more active to ensure that the messages that are shared with professionals to promote physical activity are person-centred.

To achieve this outcome, the Research Shop was commissioned to undertake two projects: 'Development of key themes for physical activity promotion for the early years and children and young people'<sup>4</sup> and 'Development of key themes for physical activity promotion for adults and older adults'<sup>5</sup>.

This learning note brings together the findings from each report and presents a number of themes and key learning points that should be considered by professionals in the promotion of physical activity across all life stages (Table 1) and some life stage specific considerations (Table 2). This information can be used to help the development of physical activity interventions, from brief advice through to programme development and print publications. Table 3 provides a more detailed account of the meaning of each theme and key learning point in Table 1.

### References

- 1 Department of Health. *Start active, stay active: a report on physical activity from the four home countries'* Chief Medical Officers. Department of Health; 2011. Can be accessed at [www.paha.org.uk/Resource/start-active-stay-active-a-report-on-physical-activity-from-the-four-home-countries-chief-medical-officers](http://www.paha.org.uk/Resource/start-active-stay-active-a-report-on-physical-activity-from-the-four-home-countries-chief-medical-officers)
- 2 British Heart Foundation National Centre for Physical Activity Information Sheets. Can be accessed at [www.bhfactive.org.uk/guidelines/index.html](http://www.bhfactive.org.uk/guidelines/index.html)
- 3 Scottish Government. *The Health Care Quality Strategy for NHSScotland*. Scottish Government; 2010. Can be accessed at [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/05/10102307/0](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2010/05/10102307/0)
- 4 The Research Shop. *Development of key themes for physical activity promotion for the early years, children and young people*. NHS Health Scotland; 2012. Can be accessed at [www.paha.org.uk/Resource/development-of-key-themes-for-physical-activity-promotion-for-the-early-years-children-and-young-people](http://www.paha.org.uk/Resource/development-of-key-themes-for-physical-activity-promotion-for-the-early-years-children-and-young-people)
- 5 The Research Shop. *Development of key themes for physical activity promotion for adults and older adults*. NHS Health Scotland; 2012. Can be accessed at [www.paha.org.uk/Resource/development-of-key-themes-for-physical-activity-promotion-for-adults-and-older-adults](http://www.paha.org.uk/Resource/development-of-key-themes-for-physical-activity-promotion-for-adults-and-older-adults)

**Table 1 – Key learning points to be considered for all life stages**

All life stages	
Themes (T)	Key learning points (KLP)
<b>1. Initial engagement techniques</b>	1. The promotion of physical activity must have a person-centred approach. People relate to messages and information about physical activity, <b>only</b> when they can make the message personally relevant to their own lives.
	2. The types of things that make a physical activity message ‘person-centred’ include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• personalising the benefits of participating in physical activity (see table 2)</li> <li>• exploring the extent to which a person thinks their current lifestyle will be affected by any changes</li> <li>• exploring the person’s perceptions about how much effort is required to make those changes</li> <li>• how the message has been conveyed (i.e. tone, language used, examples given, who is relaying the message and by what medium).</li> </ul>
<b>2. Secondary engagement techniques</b>	3. People are sometimes motivated to engage with physical activities which offer the opportunity to achieve some other goal. For example, fundraising events, mass participation events, school projects and workplace challenges.
<b>3. Raising the issue of physical activity</b>	4. The term ‘physical activity’ is commonly misunderstood, with a general feeling that it mostly (but not always) refers to sport and structured exercise. Putting across the everyday nature of physical activity is therefore important.
	5. People often find the language used to communicate messages about physical activity confusing, technical and de-motivating. Keep it simple.
	6. People are motivated by being encouraged to sit less during the day and breaking up activity into shorter ‘bouts’, so that becoming and staying active seems more manageable.
<b>4. Interventions and support</b>	7. People need and want ongoing support to help them stay motivated to be regularly physically active.
	8. People need support to identify opportunities to be active in their daily lives, as well as more structured activities in their community.
	9. Once it is made clear that purposeful walking is an accepted form of physical activity, people place a significant value on walking – in terms of the benefits and opportunities for being active that it offers. People view it as an opportunity that is immediately achievable, accessible and personally valued.

**Table 2 – Life stage specific considerations**

	Early years	Children and young people	Adults	Older adults
Themes (T)	Key learning points (KLP)			
<b>1. Benefits of physical activity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improving social skills</li> <li>• Developing friendships</li> <li>• Improving self-confidence</li> <li>• Aiding the carer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining a healthy weight</li> <li>• Improving social skills</li> <li>• Developing friendships</li> <li>• Improving self-confidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reducing the risk of suffering from medical conditions where there is a family history</li> <li>• Social contact and interaction</li> <li>• Short-term benefits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reducing the risk of falls</li> <li>• Maintaining cognitive function</li> <li>• Maintaining independent living</li> <li>• Social contact and interaction</li> <li>• Short-term benefits</li> <li>• Providing a routine</li> </ul>
<b>Motivating language</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Play</li> <li>• Happy</li> <li>• Healthy</li> <li>• Active play</li> <li>• Morning or afternoon play sessions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fun</li> <li>• Friendship</li> <li>• Variety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily activity</li> <li>• Regular activity</li> <li>• Effort required (rather than intensity)</li> <li>• Healthy heart</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ageing well</li> <li>• It’s ok to have inactive periods if you balance them with active ones</li> <li>• Small steps</li> </ul>
<b>3. Key people/ places to raise the issue</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health visitors</li> <li>• Nurseries</li> <li>• Playgroups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends, peers and relatives</li> <li>• Community role models</li> <li>• Adults in informal and social settings</li> <li>• Personalities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends, peers and relatives</li> <li>• Allied health professionals</li> <li>• GPs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends, peers and relatives</li> <li>• Allied health professionals</li> <li>• GPs</li> </ul>
<b>4. Preferred activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal everyday activities</li> <li>• Play</li> <li>• Indoor play</li> <li>• Outdoor play</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal activities in youth settings or after school club settings</li> <li>• Active travel</li> <li>• Group activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walking</li> <li>• Active travel</li> <li>• Flexible activities that can be built into daily living</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Walking</li> <li>• Structured activities that can provide a routine to lives</li> <li>• Activities that are part of everyday life that can be built on</li> </ul>

**Table 3 – a more detailed account of the meaning of each theme and key learning point in Table 1.**

T	KLP	What does this mean?
1	1	Encouraging less active people to do more physical activity will be most effective on a one-to-one basis where knowledge about the person's own background and living environment can be used to make the initial engagement. Population level messaging although less effective at personal engagement, should encourage people to find that personal connection with physical activity.
	2	People at all life stages are most interested in the benefits that being regularly active will bring them, so these should be introduced early into the promotion of physical activity. It is the personal value attached to these benefits that is the initial 'hook' that draws people to being physically active. However, the type of benefit of personal interest differs by life stage (see Table 2). The tone used to convey a message about physical activity should be warm and friendly, using informal and everyday language. People tend to disengage when the tone or language is perceived as patronising or lecture-like.
2	3	A person's reason for participation is not necessarily to increase their physical activity levels, but can be for some other purpose or gain. Activities like school projects, fundraising events, mass participation events and workplace challenges are motivational across the life stages. These activities are likely to be taken up by a variety of individuals and are also likely to encourage people to sustain participation in physical activity over a period of time. Messages should consider these 'hooks' to motivate people to participate.
3	4	When talking about 'physical activity', emphasis on the achievable, everyday nature of physical activity (including active travel and daily movements and not just sport or exercise) will help to motivate less active and inactive people.
	5	The message and advice given should be simple. Everyday language should be used when speaking about physical activity. Words and concepts motivational to each life stage should be used (see Table 2).
	6	For some people, it may be more effective and personally motivating to support them to aim for a reduction in sitting time as an introduction to physical activity, rather than placing an emphasis on increasing time spent being active. The next stage would be mentioning the concept of small 'bouts' of physical activity being introduced to daily life, then leading onto increasing physical activity levels.
4	7	The value of mentors and other supportive structures needs to be considered as part of all physical activity messaging. Support can come from many sources, including family, friends, health professionals and media, so long as it is a source that is respected and valued by that person.
	8	Messages should provide suggestions about how to access local services, in addition to advice about how to build up a lifestyle approach to being active.
	9	Messages should make an effort to include and promote the many and varied merits associated with walking.