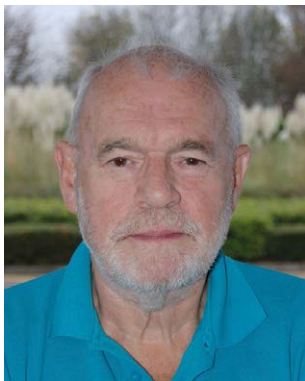


Kids, on yer feet!



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About this series

In this regular series, Tam Fry delves into the latest news on the fight against obesity.

In this issue, he discusses the Prime Minister's upcoming "Framework to tackle childhood obesity" and the need to promote physical education in schools.

Unfortunately, daily exercise is frequently not a habit in children, but there is a hint that it might become one after David Cameron's "Framework to tackle childhood obesity" is launched in (possibly) January. It could make provision for physical education (PE) to be a weekday activity again in our primary schools – and not a moment too soon. I have made the assumption that, by January, Mr Cameron will have been persuaded to ditch his untenable and ridiculous position on school PE – that it is merely a "box-ticking exercise" – which discourages schools from doing more sport. When half of the UK's 7-year-olds fail to take any regular exercise (Griffiths et al, 2013), he should realise that they are hardly likely to make the football team on the pitch if they haven't first picked up the basics of getting out of breath in the playground.

Who could have done the persuading? Don't take my word for it, but google Natasha Devon, a former model and now the mental health Czar, and you might hit on the answer. Ms Devon happens to have called for all schoolchildren to be required to take 30 minutes of exercise every day within curriculum hours (Griffiths, 2015). Although it seems that she's fixated on having them do yoga or Zumba classes, I expect that she's woman enough to acknowledge that any activity which gets children going will do, provided that it sets their pulses racing and they have fun doing it. Like at the primary school in Stirling, for instance, where the Head Teacher has her children happily walking or running a measured mile around the school's perimeter every morning, in addition to their regular PE classes (Slawson, 2015). In so doing, she ensures that when they get back to the classroom their minds are clear and they are ready to learn. That's not rocket science, but it is said to have earned her an invitation to the White House,

where Michelle Obama has been trying to get the same kind of thing off the ground in American elementary schools.

Credit for Mr Cameron's ditching his negative attitude towards PE might also be down to any number of sporting stars who have publicly lamented Britain's failure to secure the promised "legacy" of the 2012 Olympic Games to get our children off the couch and on their feet. One particular national treasure stands out amongst them. She is Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson, the charismatic Paralympic multi-gold medallist and now chair of UKactive. Having been asked to write a report on the value of sustained PE for the Welsh Assembly (Schools and Physical Activity Task and Finish Group, 2013), she would doubtless have slipped a copy to Downing Street through the Palace of Westminster internal post. Her report was commissioned by Assemblymen desperate to know how best to get Welsh kids up and running. Baroness Tanni told them in a response that was short and sweet. Treat PE as a core subject in the curriculum, she wrote, and the rest would take care of itself. PE should be comparable in importance to maths and English. Furthermore, the report didn't come with the usual lengthy wish list of other demands; in Baroness Tanni's perception, such a list would detract from the single message that the politicians needed to get their heads round.

If Mr Cameron's Framework doesn't pick up this message too, and provide for a sea change in the provision of physical activity in schools, it will be a disgrace. It may be the very last chance for Whitehall to atone for the past and guarantee that the Olympic legacy remains afloat rather than finally sink beyond trace. Although Cameron and his ministers cannot be held responsible for initially mis-selling the legacy in the years following the 2005 award of the Games to London – two Labour

administrations must bear the blame for that – they did little to make the legacy dream come true when elected in 2010. As the new Prime Minister, Cameron had every chance to make amends for Tony Blair’s appalling manipulation of shipping 30 schoolchildren from the London Borough of Newham to Singapore as pawns to sway the International Olympic Committee into voting for London. Labour’s script read that, once the Games were over, these pupils, and millions like them, would “aspire to be champions at future Games.” More or less overnight, UK schools were told to double the number of PE sessions and co-ordinators were hired to get grassroots sports off the ground. But the impetus was short-lived and had already begun to fade by 2010. Tragically, Singapore’s promises – and the aspiration of the Newham students – became little more than a pipedream. Most of the money available continued to be funnelled into elite sports and fancy venues rather than building infrastructure that would flourish for years after the 2012 closing ceremony.

Team GB did win a sackful of medals, but when the many thousands of children rushed to join clubs that would help them become future Olympians, the necessary facilities were nowhere to be seen. Athletes, rowers, cyclists, swimmers and gymnasts may well return from Rio this autumn with a respectable tally of hardware, but commentators looking at medal prospects for the 2020 Games and afterwards are somewhat less optimistic. They are on record as saying that denying children the opportunity to flourish after London was “tantamount to state child neglect” (Weiler et al, 2014), whilst the House of Lords Select Committee charged with investigating the Olympic legacy reported, in anodyne Westminster speak, that “we have seen little evidence that a general post-Games step change in participation across the UK has materialised” (Lords Select Committee, 2013).

Mr Cameron’s Framework could begin to change all this by inculcating in primary

schoolchildren the idea that they include daily exercise just to be healthy and fit. That’s plain common sense and, ideally, should have happened in their preschool years, when 3 hours of daily activity is recommended (Department of Health, 2011). But better late than never. Fortuitously, commentators have also gone on record as saying that children should be tested annually for their fitness when they are assessed for their BMI under the National Child Measurement Programme (UKactive, 2015). It’s a heaven-sent opportunity. ■

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