

Twenty-five years ago, children in London walked to school and played in parks and playing fields after school and at the weekend. Today they are usually driven to school by parents anxious about safety and spend hours glued to television screens or computer games. Meanwhile, community playing fields are being sold off to property developers at an alarming rate. 'This change in lifestyle has, sadly, meant greater restrictions on children,' says Neil Armstrong, Professor of Health and Exercise Sciences at the University of Exeter. 'If children continue to be this inactive, they'll be storing up big problems for the future.'

B In 1985, Professor Armstrong headed a five-year research project into children's fitness. The results, published in 1990, were alarming. The survey, which monitored 700 11-16-year-olds, found that 48 per cent of girls and 41 per cent of boys already exceeded safe cholesterol levels set for children by the American Heart Foundation. Armstrong adds, "heart is a muscle and need exercise, or it loses its strength." It also found that 13 per cent of boys and 10 per cent of girls were overweight. More disturbingly, the survey found that over a four-day period, half the girls and one-third of the boys did less exercise than the equivalent of a brisk 10-minute walk. High levels of cholesterol, excess body fat and inactivity are believed to increase the risk of coronary heart disease.

C Physical education is under pressure in the UK – most schools devote little more than 100 minutes a week to it in curriculum time, which is less than many other European countries. Three European countries are giving children a head start in PE, France, Austria and Switzerland – offer at least two hours in primary and secondary schools. These findings, from the European Union of Physical Education Associations, prompted specialists in children's physiology to call on European governments to give youngsters a daily PE programme. The survey shows that the UK ranks 13th out of the 25 countries, with Ireland bottom, averaging under an hour a week for PE. From age six to 18, British children received, on average, 106 minutes of PE a week. Professor Armstrong, who presented the findings at the meeting, noted that since the introduction of the national curriculum there had been a marked fall in the time devoted to PE in UK schools, with only a minority of pupils getting two hours a week.

D As a former junior football international, Professor Armstrong is a passionate advocate for sport. Although the Government has poured millions into beefing up sport in the community, there is less commitment to it as part of the crammed school curriculum. This means that many children never acquire the necessary skills to thrive in team games. If they are not good at them, they lose interest and establish an inactive pattern of behaviour. When this is coupled with a poor diet, it will lead inevitably to weight gain. Seventy per cent of British children give up all sport when they leave school, compared with only 20 per cent of French teenagers. Professor Armstrong believes that there is far too great an emphasis on team games at school. "We need to look at the time devoted to PE and balance it between individual and pair activities, such as aerobics and badminton, as well as team sports. "He added that children need to have the opportunity to take part in a wide variety of individual, partner and team sports.

E The good news, however, is that a few small companies and children's activity groups have reacted positively and creatively to the problem. Take That, shouts Gloria Thomas, striking a disco pose astride her mini-spacehopper. Take That, echo a flock of toddlers, adopting outrageous postures astride their space hoppers. 'Michael Jackson, she shouts, and they all do a spoof fan-crazed shriek. During the wild and chaotic hopper race across the studio floor, commands like this are issued and responded to with untrammelled glee. The sight of 15 bouncing seven-year-olds who seem about to launch into orbit at every bounce brings tears to the eyes. Uncoordinated, loud, excited and emotional, children provide raw comedy.

F Any cardiovascular exercise is a good option, and it doesn't necessarily have to be high intensity. It can be anything that gets your heart rate up: such as walking the dog, swimming, miming, skipping, hiking. "Even walking through the grocery store can be exercise," Samis-Smith said. What they don't know is that they're at a Fit Kids class, and that the fun is a disguise for the serious exercise plan they're covertly being taken through. Fit Kids trains parents to run fitness classes for children. 'Ninety per cent of children don't like team sports,' says company director, Gillian Gale.

G A Prevention survey found that children whose parents keep in shape are much more likely to have healthy body weights themselves. “There’s nothing worse than telling a child what he needs to do and not doing it yourself,” says Elizabeth Ward, R.D., a Boston nutritional consultant and author of *Healthy Foods, Healthy Kids*. “Set a good example and get your nutritional house in order first.” In the 1930s and ’40s, kids expended 800 calories a day just walking, carrying water, and doing other chores, notes Fima Lifshitz, M.D., a pediatric endocrinologist in Santa Barbara. “Now, kids in obese families are expending only 200 calories a day in physical activity,” says Lifshitz, “incorporate more movement in your family’s lifepark farther away from the stores at the mall, take stairs instead of the elevator, and walk to nearby friends’ houses instead of driving.”