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Children become less active at an earlier age than previously thought, according to new research. It was widely believed that physical exercise started to decline with teenagers. But a study, carried out over eight years in the north-east of England, showed that activity levels begin to drop among seven-year-olds,

as Jane Dreaper reports. Children are supposed to be active for an hour every day, but most youngsters don't get enough exercise, and this study suggests that bad habits start at an earlier age. More than 400 children from Gateshead wore an activity monitor for a week at a time. Their exercise levels were measured at the ages of seven, nine, 12 and 15. Physical activity dropped off from the age of seven onwards, in boys and girls. The orthodox view is that this adolescent decline is not only something which happens at adolescence, so it coincides with puberty or with transition to high school, but also, it is something that particularly affects girls. And our study shows that that is clearly not the case. I think what that means, in terms of public health programmes, is that programmes and policies and practices all have to focus much earlier, probably around about the time children go to school.

Too much time looking at screens and sitting down is storing up health problems for the future, according to Public Health England. It is campaigning to try and change the fact that one in five children leaves primary school obese.