

Press release: Schools not 'silver bullet' to tackling childhood obesity

Lobby groups should not see schools as a 'silver bullet' to tackle childhood obesity, a new report from Ofsted says.

While schools have an important role to play in encouraging healthy lifestyles and exercise as part of a rich, broad curriculum, expecting too much of schools will not solve the problem, and risks further increasing teacher workload. As the government's recently published [obesity strategy](#) acknowledges, this is a complex societal issue, requiring solutions from many different players.

Last year the inspectorate carried out research to understand whether schools are demonstrably having an impact on levels of childhood obesity, and if there is any good practice out there from which other schools can learn. Inspectors visited 60 schools around the country, and found that most have responded well to government initiatives, including expectations around physical activity and healthy eating. But it was not clear that the specific interventions that schools make could, by themselves, overcome other factors that affect the weight of their pupils.

PE, personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and design and technology (D&T) all provide valuable learning for children, who may not be taught about healthy eating and the benefits of exercise at home.

Reinforcing messages, imparting knowledge and developing skills is what schools do well. The report says that schools should focus on improving the things they are best placed to do, such as:

- planning a challenging and well-sequenced curriculum, including learning about the body in PE and science, and about healthy eating and cooking
- providing ample opportunity for children to take physical exercise during the school day – with lots of opportunities to 'get out of breath'
- teaching particular skills like how to cook or how to dance
- updating parents on their children's physical development, such as agility, balance and coordination

Chief Inspector Amanda Spielman said:

Obesity is a serious public health challenge with wide-ranging and deep-rooted effects. Schools have an important role to play in the fight against childhood obesity. A broad curriculum, which emphasises healthy lifestyles and high quality PE is vital to this, but is too often given insufficient focus.

We must also recognise that schools cannot provide a silver bullet for all societal ills. Teachers and school leaders are already

stretched; they should not be held responsible for an issue that requires concerted action across the board.

Families, government, industry, and other parts of the public sector all have a role to play in making food and drink healthier, and supporting children to make better choices.

Inspectors found that schools put too much effort into activities designed to influence parents without any evidence that they either have an impact or are what parents want. Eighty-three per cent of parents said they had been invited to an event at school. But many of them told Ofsted they are time-poor and what they really want is readily available information about what their child is doing at school: what they are eating and learning about, so that this can be followed up on at home.

Parents also said they wanted more time for PE in the curriculum. And while extra-curricular activities are a good way to broaden the opportunities for children to learn new skills and to exercise, a quarter of parents said that their child couldn't access all the clubs and activities they wanted.

Amanda Spielman continued:

It is essential that schools do not get distracted from their core educational purpose. Education for health is essential and must be done well. But this will not happen if schools are devoting time and energy to things in which they are neither expert nor likely to have an impact.

As part of their research inspectors spoke to school senior managers, governors, school staff with responsibility for healthy eating or physical activity, teachers, teaching assistants, catering staff, school nurses, pupils and the pupils' parents. They observed lessons related to healthy eating and physical activity, looked at extra-curricular provision, and at the content of school lunches.