

OLYMPIC LEGACY—NOT FIT FOR PURPOSE

Research is showing that there will be no Olympic legacy of increased fitness and health. The problem is that top athletes and the medical profession have limited understanding of what constitutes a normal healthy lifestyle and virtually no understanding of how it is to be achieved.

The media regularly reports the “obesity epidemic” and gives details of organisations providing “solutions”. The reality is that these solutions only meet the needs of a very small proportion of the population. They are too costly for many individuals and, where publicly funded, too costly for widespread application.

Going to celebrity athletes for advice is often misguided. They achieve their fitness through very strict regimes, i.e. an abnormal lifestyle, and will not necessarily understand how to achieve a normal healthy lifestyle. Their fitness regime is way beyond what can be expected any ordinary person will do.

One former athlete who does understand the issues, Charlie Spedding, says:

***“As a former Olympic athlete, I am very concerned about the steep decline in the standard of distance running by British athletes during the last 20 years. In my work as a community Pharmacist, I am very concerned about the dramatic increase in overweight and obese young people during the same time frame. The decline in standards will mean a dearth of medals in International competition; the increase in obesity will mean a surge in diabetes, heart disease and cancer.*”**

I believe that both of these problems are largely due to the same reason: children do not exercise nearly as much as they used to. As children, my generation used to walk to and from school, ride bikes and play outside at every opportunity. All of this informal and fun activity gave us a basic level of physical fitness, which was sufficient to prevent overweight and its consequent illnesses.”

The medical profession treats obesity as a disease wanting to treat it through drugs, gastric bands, therapies, etc with as much relevance to the population as a whole as the quack remedies offered when Londoners were suffering from cholera and dysentery in the 1850s.

The vast majority of people do not want to, do not have time to or cannot afford to attend gyms or be in sports teams. For them this is not a “normal” lifestyle.

What we need is an environment in which people choose to walk (or cycle) because it makes sense to do so. A healthy environment will give a healthy lifestyle.

If in our residential roads priority was given to pedestrians then journeys to school or local facilities would be safe for children and quicker than taking the car. I know from my own experience that it is quicker to get both to the railway station and to the town centre, a journey in both instances of just over a mile, by bike rather than by car.

A healthy lifestyle therefore depends on the physical and social environment in which people live rather than on medical interventions or hopes of mass participation in sport.

In the last 20 years I have carried out observational and interview research of children at play at over 70 areas of housing in different parts of England and Wales. What I have found is that children want to play out and are instinctively active.

Too many people blame parents for being risk averse yet when I interview parents and children they want their playground equipment to be bigger, faster, more exciting. They are not risk averse. It is just that the roads have got so busy that it is sensible to keep your children indoors away from the dangers.

In research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation we found that if you had a housing area with 100 children and only half of them could play out but they did play out and run around their local area, then in a year they would 281,000 journeys. This is a massive amount of non-polluting healthy exercise yet it is a transport that successive governments fail to recognise.

The reason most children do not play out nowadays is very simply the increase in motor traffic. Where traffic cannot go through residential areas at fast speeds children still play out as they always have done. This playing out is far more important for a healthy lifestyle than is school sport (or any sport).

Yet organisations such as RoSPA and the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (PACTS) have an emphasis on keeping children out of the way of traffic. The reasonable assumption must be they think it's a bad idea for children to dent the bonnets of cars. If they were really concerned about children it would be the car that on entering a residential area would have to stop, look right and left and proceed with caution.

School travel strategies only scratch the surface of the problem. Children only go to school half of the days in the year. The other half (weekends and holidays) are free play days for children. Even on school days there will be more time to play out in the evening than the time given to school sport.

School sport has many benefits (and I speak as one who enjoyed competing for my school) but all the evidence is that participation in that sport falls off very quickly after the children leave school.

A simple way of checking how children's play has been restricted by the car is to observe children coming out of a primary school. Virtually all are now accompanied yet for the first two-thirds of the last century the vast majority of children aged 5 upwards would walk to school on their own.

When children did walk to school on their own they were also able to go to their friends' houses, race round the block, play tig, skip, do errands for their parents, in other words once the school day finished there were plenty of opportunities for a healthy lifestyle and the children did adopt a healthy lifestyle.

It is popular to blame the television and computer games yet when the television first emerged people were worried about children not playing out but they still did. When children are asked they still want to play out.

Stranger danger is also blamed yet I observe differences in children playing out within the same areas of housing. If stranger danger was the real cause then there would not be differences. The reality is that children play out where traffic speeds are very slow and perhaps paradoxically the fear of stranger danger is reduced and neighbourliness is increased because parents talk about "keeping an eye out" for each other's children.

The solution is to give priority to pedestrians on most residential roads. We should all be prepared to drive the last 50m-80m to our homes at very slow speeds. In effect a road would be a pedestrian crossing along its whole length. In this way children will be able to run around in sight and sound of their own homes as they have done for countless generations. That will lay the foundation of a healthy lifestyle. Their parents will also find it quicker and more convenient to walk the short journeys they now often take by car. Not only that but we know that once people walk and talk together in their neighbourhood, neighbourliness (or the Big Society) increases.

Children who are naturally fit from living in such an environment will be less likely to feel embarrassed about joining in sports and activity that require them to be fit. Living a healthy lifestyle is likely to lead more people to become involved in even more active healthy sports.

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