



Building Active Schools in Special Education



IMPLEMENTING A WHOLE SCHOOL
APPROACH TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY,
MOVEMENT AND PLAY IN SPECIAL
EDUCATION SETTINGS

Whole School Approaches to Physical Activity in Special Education Settings: A Co-Developed Guidance Document

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Acknowledgements

Funding for the development of this resource was provided by the Garfield Weston Trust.

Content Development

Led by Dr Erin Byrd (Ulster University)

Review of evidence on school physical activity and play by Professor Marie Murphy (Ulster University), Professor Victoria Simms (Ulster University), Dr Jason Wilson (Ulster University), and Dr Paul McFlynn (Ulster University).

Review of evidence on implementation approaches by Professor Laurence Taggart (Queens University Belfast)

Co-Development Working Group

Martin Carey, Castle Tower School, Ballymena

Mike Carson, Oakwood School and Assessment Centre, Belfast

Sinead Crossan, Ardnashee School and College, Derry-Londonderry

Ellie McGregor, Rosstulla School, Newtownabbey; Eager Belvoirs Special Olympics Club, Belfast

Conor Murray, St Gerard's School and Support Services, Belfast

Laura Rainey, Ardnashee School and College, Derry-Londonderry

Tom Stevenson, Mitchell House School, Belfast

Tracey Bassett, Education Authority Northern Ireland

Rebecca Linford, Education Authority Northern Ireland

David Kennedy, Education Authority Northern Ireland

Stephanie Kenny Quinn, Education Authority Northern Ireland

Jarlath McGill, Education Authority Northern Ireland

Hayley Kavanagh, Special Olympics Ireland

Áine Boner, Ulster University Placement Student

Why Is Physical Activity for Children with Additional Needs and Disabilities So Important?

Individuals with additional needs and disabilities are more likely to face a variety of secondary or chronic health conditions compared to those without disabilities. These conditions include obesity, osteoporosis, cardiovascular disease, Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes, mental health issues, and dementia (Cooper et al., 2015; Taggart and Cousins, 2014; Shelton, Abdinor and Lodder, 2025). Alarming, research shows that, on average, people with additional needs and disabilities die 20 years earlier than those without disabilities, with many of these premature deaths being preventable. Many families of children with additional needs and disabilities face barriers in accessing appropriate healthcare and therapy resources, such as physiotherapy and occupational therapy (Brown, Cooper and Diebel, 2013). This can lead to a lack of proper management for both physical and mental health needs.

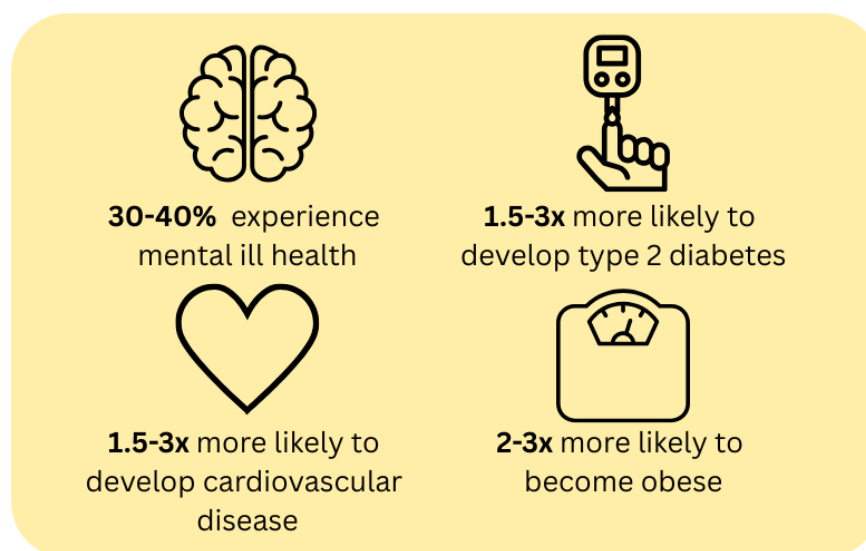


Figure 1: Long term health outcomes for people with learning disabilities

Encouraging healthy behaviours, such as being physically active and reducing time spent in sitting-based activities, can help reduce the risks associated with the poor health outcomes outlined above (Kapsal et al., 2019). However, significant challenges exist for children, families, and communities that limit opportunities for increased physical activity (Bossink, van der Putten and Vlaskamp, 2017). Children and young people with additional needs and disabilities, along with their families, often lack the support necessary to find, access, and participate in physical activities.

Physical activity is crucial for healthy cognitive and physical development in children and young people, and there is mounting evidence that movement and activity are especially important for children and young people with additional needs and disabilities. Physical activity and physical play are vital for these children as they foster physical, social, and emotional development. Engaging in physical activities not only enhances motor skills but also promotes inclusion, improves psychosocial health, and supports academic performance. This is particularly important given the significant health disparities faced by these children. Currently international recommendations are for children and adolescents to achieve 60 minutes per day

of physical activity (WHO, 2010) while UK guidance recommends children and young people with a disability accumulate 20 minutes per day of physical activity (Smith et al., 2022).

Despite the benefits of physical activity being well documented children and young people with additional needs and disabilities tend to have lower activity levels than their peers without these disabilities. They also engage in fewer types of physical activity and play, spend more time sitting and lying, as well as having lower sport participation.

The Gateshead Millenium study in 2017 found that by age 7, children spend 50% of their time sitting down and by age 15 it is 75% (Mann et al., 2017). In Northern Ireland, the latest [Ireland North and South Report Card on Physical Activity for Children and Adolescents](#) has shown that children with disabilities are significantly less active and take part in more sitting-based behaviour than their peers (Carlin et al., 2024).



Within schools, physical activity, physical play and movement have been shown to improve sociability, classroom functioning, executive function, and mood in children and young people with additional needs and disabilities(REF).

School settings have been shown to be a key area to address inactivity due to the amount of time a child spends in this setting per week over the year. A study by Sit et al. (2017) found that children with disabilities spent over 70% of their school day sitting and only accrue about 17 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (MVPA), well below the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity for children. By enhancing the physical and social aspects of school settings, such as increasing play area usability and teacher support for physical activity, schools can promote greater engagement in physical activity and physical play among these children and young people.

What is a Whole School Approach to Physical Activity?

The [Global Action Plan on Physical Activity](#) 2018–2030 (GAPPA) is a strategic framework developed by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to promote physical activity and increase adherence to the physical activity guidelines worldwide. It aims to support countries in increasing physical activity levels, improving health outcomes, and tackling the global issue of physical inactivity.

Key objectives of the GAPPA strategic framework are to **promote inclusive approaches** to physical activity, making it accessible to all individuals, regardless of age, ability, or geographic location, and to advocate for the **creation of built and social environments** that support physical activity.

One of the four key strategic areas is to create active societies which involves creating policies and interventions that foster a culture of physical activity in communities. This includes engagement with schools as key environments where physical activity can be promoted through educational programs and activity-based initiatives. But note this is a strategic framework, we need now need to focus on how such frameworks or policies of physical activity are implemented within and across school settings thereby embedding and sustaining behaviour change within these schools. This document will address this implementation gap.

Active schools have also been identified as a key strategy to increase physical activity across populations within the [International Society for Physical Activity and Health \(ISPAH\) 8 Investments in Physical Activity](#). The ‘active schools’ investment in the ISPAH framework focuses on embedding physical activity into the school environment to promote behaviour change and lifelong healthy habits. Schools play a critical role in shaping children and young people’s physical activity levels, as they serve as a primary setting for this population to engage in physical activity and receive education on health and wellness.

Table 1: Summary of policy recommendations supporting physical activity and play within school settings

Policy	Recommendation Summary
Global Action Plan on Physical Activity (GAPPA) Available from: WHO GAPPA	Enhance the quality and availability of physical education, recreation, sports, and play for all pupils across all levels of education (primary to tertiary), using a whole school approach to foster lifelong health, physical literacy, and enjoyment of activity tailored to individual abilities.
Commission on Ending Childhood Obesity (ECHO) Available from: WHO ECHO	Ensure that adequate facilities are available on school premises for physical activity during recreational time for all children (including those with disabilities). Include quality physical education in the school curriculum and provide adequate and appropriate staffing and facilities to support this.
United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Promoting Quality Physical Education Available from: UNESCO Quality PE	Creating guidelines and a framework to assist policymakers in reforming physical education policies and ensuring equal access to physical education that aligns with the needs and expectations of all children.
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Available from: UN OHCHR Rights of the Child	Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises that children have the right to rest, leisure, play, and recreational activities appropriate to their age and abilities, as well as the freedom to participate in cultural and artistic life. It calls on states to respect and promote these rights and to ensure equal access to such activities. Schools play a crucial role in this, by providing opportunities for children to engage in cultural, artistic, and recreational activities within the educational environment, supporting their overall development and participation in cultural life.
United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Available from: UN OHCHR Persons with Disabilities	Article 30 explicitly recognises the right of persons with disabilities, including children, to participate in cultural, recreational, and sporting activities on an equal basis with others. It highlights the importance of schools in promoting opportunities for physical activity and sport, ensuring that children with disabilities have access to inclusive and supportive environments where they can engage fully and confidently.

A **Whole School Approach (WSA) to Physical Activity** is a comprehensive strategy that integrates physical activity into the everyday life of a school, creating an environment where pupils, teachers, staff, and the wider community are all encouraged and supported to be physically active. The approach involves multiple components, such as physical education and active classrooms, and takes into account the physical, social, and cultural environments in the school. The goal is to make physical activity a regular and enjoyable part of daily school life, both within and outside the classroom.

Six Domains of a Whole School Approach to Physical Activity

The WHO 'Promoting Physical Activity Through Schools' outlines six key domains that support the promotion of physical activity through a whole-of-school approach. These include:



Figure 2: Domains of physical activity for a whole school approach in mainstream school settings

Physical Activity in Special Education Settings

Physical activity and movement behaviours in special education settings may differ from those in mainstream education environments due to the varied needs and abilities of pupils. In mainstream settings a standardised physical education curriculum designed for typically developing children is adopted, promoting exercises and sports that may not accommodate all pupils' unique requirements. Conversely, special education settings frequently adopt a more individualised approach, incorporating adaptive physical education strategies tailored to each pupil's physical, sensory, and cognitive challenges. This may include modified activities that

prioritise skill development in a supportive atmosphere, fostering engagement and ensuring participation (Wilhelmsen and Sørensen, 2017). Furthermore, movement behaviours in special education may encompass alternative forms of expression and interaction, such as sensory integration and behavioural regulation activities or therapeutic exercises, which are less common in mainstream settings. Ultimately, these differences reflect a commitment to inclusivity and the enhancement of physical and mental well-being across diverse learner profiles.

Our exploratory work within special education settings and with educators has allowed us to reframe the key domains of physical activity within special education settings.

The **key domains of physical activity within special education settings** include:

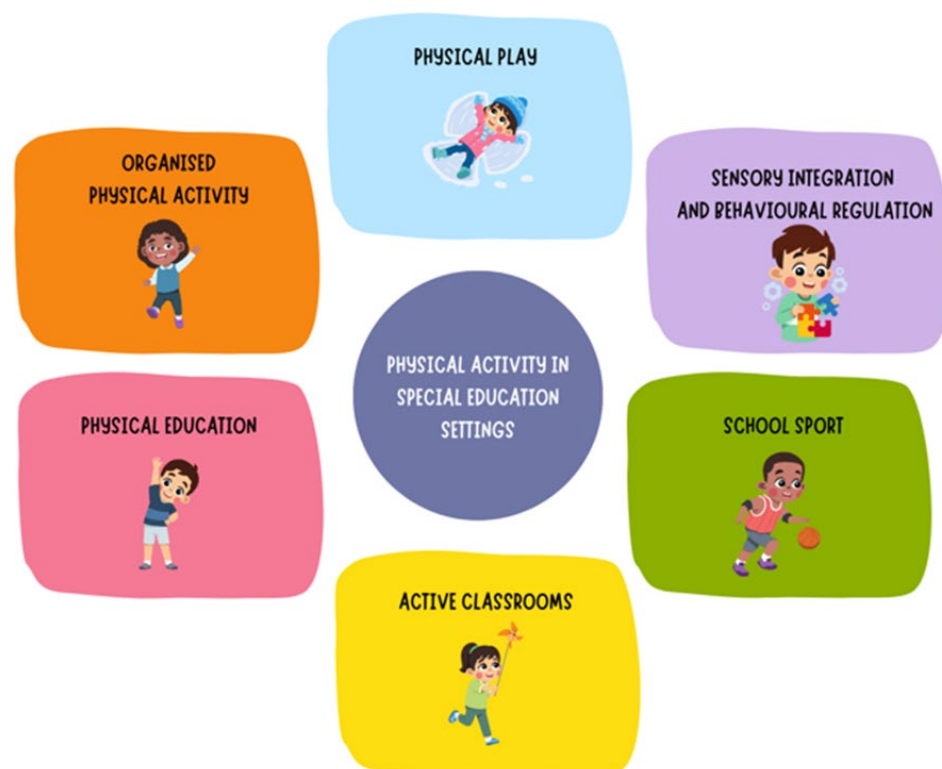


Figure 3: Domains of physical activity for a whole school approach in special education settings

- Sensory Integration and Behavioural Regulation
- Physical Play
- Active Classrooms
- Physical Education
- Organised Physical Activity
- School Sport

To achieve maximum physical benefits for children and young people with additional needs, it is suggested that schools adopt multicomponent physical activity and movement-based interventions, which involve implementing activities that cover at least two of the six evidence-based areas above. The best movement based multicomponent interventions integrate strategies that focus not only on the curriculum but also on the emotional, physical, and learning environments. This approach best supports a whole school strategy, ensuring a coordinated effort to promote movement and physical activity of children and young people throughout the school day and beyond (WHO, 2021).

Physical Activity, Movement and Play Interventions Across the Six Key Domains



1. Ensure opportunities for all children to engage in activities that promote sensory and behavioural regulation throughout the school day

Rationale

Physical activity and movement within the special education environment should begin with and focus heavily on movement for sensory and behavioural regulation. Self-regulation is the ability to understand, monitor, and adjust energy levels, emotions, attention, social interactions, and prosocial thinking and behaviour (Shanker, 2013). How we experience the world at any given moment depends on our current state of regulation. Furthermore, self-regulation influences our capacity to take part in and engage meaningfully with the world around us, particularly in a learning setting. Dysregulation can substantially impact pupil learning by diminishing focus, attention, and emotional resilience. When a pupil experiences dysregulation, they may find it difficult to concentrate, retain information, or engage fully in classroom activities. Additionally, it can result in behavioural difficulties, heightened anxiety, and frustration, all of which can further impede their capacity to learn effectively (Goodall et al., 2022).

Current Situation





Physical activity is critical for healthy cognitive and emotional development in children and young people, and there is mounting evidence that movement is a vital regulating outlet for youth with social, emotional, and behavioural challenges (Bowling et al., 2022). Physical activity programmes in schools have been shown to increase on-task behaviour in children (Goh et al., 2016). Physical activity and movement can have a positive effect on a child's executive functions, particularly inhibition and self-regulation, which have implications for how children manage their behaviour and focus in learning environments (Mavilidi et al., 2018). Integrating movement in the classroom, through sensory circuits or 'brain breaks', is a proactive approach to help refocus pupils with sensory difficulties or children with emotional and behavioural challenges (Autrey, 2020).

Key Pledge Statements Related to this Domain

- Our school uses physical activity and play to support **the physical, social, emotional and mental health** of our pupils and promotes an active healthy living environment.
- Physical education, school sport, physical activity and play are an integral part of our **school improvement culture**.
- Our school has a **targeted approach** to improving the level of physical activity experienced by all pupils.

- Our school is committed to continually developing **confidence and competence of teachers and wider school staff** to enable them to deliver high quality physical education, school sport and physical activity.
- Our physical activity, movement and active play offer (including Physical Education and school sport) is **inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners**. It is informed through a **collaborative approach** engaging pupils, school staff and families, built around personalised challenge to ensure every pupil can engage, progress, and thrive.
- Pupils who would benefit from, and are suited to, **water-based activities** are given the opportunity to access swimming sessions in a safe, supportive, and enjoyable environment. The focus is on building water confidence, promoting physical and sensory benefits, and developing essential safety awareness in and around water. Sessions are tailored to individual needs, and all pupils are encouraged to engage at their own pace, with fun and positive experiences as a priority.
- Physical activity across the school is overseen by a **Physical Activity Coordinator** who ensures a consistent, high-quality approach to physical education, school sport, and daily movement. As a qualified teacher, they work collaboratively with staff and external partners to promote inclusive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate physical activity opportunities for all pupils.
- Our school encourages and supports pupils to achieve a total of **60 minutes of physical activity daily, inside and outside the school day**, recognising the importance of movement for health, regulation, and wellbeing. For pupils with complex needs, this may include adapted activities, active play, or therapeutic movement at school, home or in the community. We work in **partnership with families** and carers to share strategies, resources, and ideas that make physical activity accessible and enjoyable beyond the school setting.

Links to practical resources to support movement and physical activity within this domain:

	Disability Sport NI- Sensory Motor Circuit
	National Council for Special Education- Sensory Spaces in Schools
	Playboard NI - Playful minds
	NCSE-Movement-Breaks-in-the-Classroom-Booklet.pdf



2. Implement strategies to promote physical play within different environments in the school setting

Rationale

Play is “essential for development” (Ginsburg, 2007). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, Article 31) enshrines *all* children’s right to play and leisure, due to the recognition of the fundamental importance of play for children’s development, learning, wellbeing and health. In addition, Article 23 of the UNCRC emphasises that children with disabilities should enjoy a full life, integrated in their community, this includes through play.

Play takes many forms, it is recognised that physical play is an important physical activity outlet for children, allowing them to build “active and healthy bodies” (Ginsburg, 2007). During play, children can perceive a sense of freedom that can allow them to explore and master movement skills without fear of failure (Veiga, 2022). Physical play, especially with peers, not only has

benefits for physical health but can also support emotional regulation and wellbeing (Veiga, 2022). There is emerging evidence of the value that educators place on the use of play for inclusion of children with diverse characteristics, both in mainstream and special educational needs settings (McNally, Simms, O’Keeffe, and Duncan, 2023).


Current Situation




Play is embedded in educational policy. However, it has been noted that educators report the need for skill development to ensure that they can implement and support play practices (Hunter and Walsh, 2014). Therefore, professional development opportunities for play engagement and leadership should be paramount. It is recognised that the most important contributor to physical activity for school-aged children is outside play in the playground or other school spaces (Van Engelen et al., 2021). More broadly, outdoor play is associated with a variety of other positive outcomes. Outdoor play provides children with opportunities to take supervised risks; engaging with adventurous play has been associated with positive mental health outcomes (Dodd, Nesbitt, and Fitzgibbon, 2023). In addition, outdoor play provides children with the opportunity to socialise in different contexts (Bento and Dias, 2017), develop independence (Cerino, 2021) and boost physical activity (Aggio et al., 2017). However, outdoor play is on the decline for all children (Fahy, 2021), with additional challenges faced by children with disabilities (Van Engelen et al., 2021). Supporting outdoor and physical play for children with disabilities should be considered by special education schools. Ensuring outdoor play spaces are sufficiently accessible for all pupils should be prioritised by schools, as well as supporting educators in their implementation of play practices.

Key Pledge Statements Related to this Domain

- *Our school uses physical activity and play to support **the physical, social, emotional and mental health** of our pupils and promotes an active healthy living environment.*
- *All pupils have the opportunity to be physically active daily **within the broader curriculum** (including a variety of light, moderate and vigorous intensities).*
- *Physical education, school sport, physical activity and play are an integral part of our **school improvement culture**.*
- *Our school has a **targeted approach** to improving the level of physical activity experienced by all pupils.*
- *Our school is committed to continually developing **confidence and competence of teachers and wider school staff** to enable them to deliver high quality physical education, school sport and physical activity.*
- *Our physical activity, movement and active play offer (including Physical Education and school sport) is **inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners**. It is informed through a **collaborative approach** engaging pupils, school staff and families, built around personalised challenge to ensure every pupil can engage, progress, and thrive.*
- *Physical activity across the school is overseen by a **Physical Activity Coordinator** who ensures a consistent, high-quality approach to physical education, school sport, and daily movement. As a qualified teacher, they work collaboratively with staff and external partners to promote inclusive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate physical activity opportunities for all pupils.*
- *Our children and young people have the opportunity to engage in **leadership opportunities**, through PE, sport, physical activity, movement or active play, in a way that is meaningful to them and reflects their abilities and preferences.*
- *Our school encourages and supports pupils to achieve a total of **60 minutes of physical activity daily, inside and outside the school day**, recognising the importance of movement for health, regulation, and wellbeing. For pupils with complex needs, this may include adapted activities, active play, or therapeutic movement at school, home or in the community. We work in **partnership with families** and carers to share strategies, resources, and ideas that make physical activity accessible and enjoyable beyond the school setting.*

Links to practical resources to support movement and physical activity within this domain:

	Playboard NI Positive Playgrounds
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	Playboard NI Taking Outdoor Play Seriously
	Playboard NI Power of Play
	CCEA Playful Learning Continuum



3. Embed 'Active Classrooms' in the school curricula

Rationale

Active classrooms encourage pupils to participate actively in their learning journey through movement and physical activities. Physically active learning can transform lessons into accessible, engaging experiences, that can cater to diverse needs. Active learning environments can benefit pupils with additional needs and disabilities by improving focus, concentration and restlessness, provide multisensory experiences, and foster social interaction. Embedding physical activity into the curriculum and pedagogical approaches, goes beyond classroom activity breaks and gives children and young people the opportunity to move while learning.

Current Situation





Take 10! And the *EUMove project* are examples of classroom physical activity break (CAB) resources that can be incorporated across the school day to give children a break from usual classroom routines. However, creating active environments within the classroom that promote learning while moving can be a more holistic approach as CAB tend to be neglected when curriculum pressures build (Campbell and Lassiter, 2020). Recent research indicates that flexible classroom layouts, are highly effective in decreasing pupil sitting time. By allowing pupils to move freely and regularly changing their work and play spaces, flexible environments help break up extended periods of sitting, promoting more physically active learning (Kariippanon, et al., 2021). Additionally, research shows that outdoor education boosts the light, moderate and vigorous physical activity of children and young people. Education outside the classroom involves regular curriculum-related experiential learning activities conducted outdoors, incorporating physical activity to support pedagogical objectives (Bentsen et al., 2022). Approaches such as incorporating Forest School pedagogy or principles in teaching has been shown to increase children's physical activity and motor skill development (Dabaja, 2022). Subjects can be taught outside the traditional classroom setting using problem-based learning and hands-on experiences. In this way, physical activity is seamlessly integrated without undermining curriculum goals.

Key Pledge Statements Related to this Domain

- Our school uses physical activity and play to support **the physical, social, emotional and mental health** of our pupils and promotes an active healthy living environment.

- All pupils have the opportunity to be physically active daily **within the broader curriculum** (including a variety of light, moderate and vigorous intensities).
- Physical education, school sport, physical activity and play are an integral part of our **school improvement culture**.
- Our school has a **targeted approach** to improving the level of physical activity experienced by all pupils.
- Our school is committed to continually developing **confidence and competence of teachers and wider school staff** to enable them to deliver high quality physical education, school sport and physical activity.
- Our physical activity, movement and active play offer (including Physical Education and school sport) is **inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners**. It is informed through a **collaborative approach** engaging pupils, school staff and families, built around personalised challenge to ensure every pupil can engage, progress, and thrive.
- Physical activity across the school is overseen by a **Physical Activity Coordinator** who ensures a consistent, high-quality approach to physical education, school sport, and daily movement. As a qualified teacher, they work collaboratively with staff and external partners to promote inclusive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate physical activity opportunities for all pupils.
- Our children and young people have the opportunity to engage in **leadership opportunities**, through PE, sport, physical activity, movement or active play, in a way that is meaningful to them and reflects their abilities and preferences.
- Our school encourages and supports pupils to achieve a total of **60 minutes of physical activity daily, inside and outside the school day**, recognising the importance of movement for health, regulation, and wellbeing. For pupils with complex needs, this may include adapted activities, active play, or therapeutic movement at school, home or in the community. We work in **partnership with families** and carers to share strategies, resources, and ideas that make physical activity accessible and enjoyable beyond the school setting.

Links to practical resources to support movement and physical activity within this domain:

	Forest School NI
	EU Move Physically Active Lessons
	EU Move Creating Physically Active School Environments
	NI Curriculum Active Learning and Teaching Methods for KS1 and KS2



4. Provide physical activity opportunities through a quality tailored physical education pathway

Rationale

Across the UK, Physical Education (PE) is a statutory element of the curriculum, meaning that all pupils should receive a PE curriculum that is not only broad and balanced but is matched to their needs and abilities. Quality PE should promote physical activity and physical literacy, where pupils are learning to move and moving to learn. Through Athletics, Dance, Games, Gymnastics, Outdoor Education and Swimming, pupils should experience physical activity in a variety of ways and at different levels of intensity. Where possible, teachers should aim to include activities that are moderate to vigorous. Having a quality PE experience is vital for pupils in that it can give them the confidence and competence to take part in activities outside of school and develop within them a positive attitude towards a

healthy active lifestyle, which is critical for individuals with additional needs and disabilities (Pushkarenko, Causgrove Dunn and Wohlers, 2021).




Current Situation

Timetabled structured quality PE remains a key component of a whole school approach to physical activity. Special education schools normally have a PE specialist teacher who is qualified to teach a broad and balanced curriculum, adapt activities to suit all ability levels and ensure that PE lessons are appropriate in terms of physical activity. The recommended guidance from Department of Education Northern Ireland (DENI) states that pupils should receive 2 hours of PE per week. It is important to note that this is guidance and thus not statutory. Other special education settings, such as Specialist Provision in Mainstream (SPiM), are more likely to not have this expertise and as a result, the quality of PE provided in such settings may be impacted. Across all special education settings barriers to providing quality PE include inadequate training of teaching and support staff, limited inclusive or adaptive resources (especially for children and young people with profound or complex needs), time constraints, and inconsistent access to facilities (O'Connor and McNabb 2021). These barriers must be addressed to ensure pupils are supported to participate in PE sessions to enhance physical literacy.

Key Pledge Statements Related to this Domain

- *Our school uses physical activity and play to support **the physical, social, emotional and mental health** of our pupils and promotes an active healthy living environment.*
- *Physical education, school sport, physical activity and play are an integral part of our **school improvement culture**.*
- *Our children receive **physical education** lessons which are quality assured in line with the monitoring of other curriculum areas.*
- *Our school has a **targeted approach** to improving the level of physical activity experienced by all pupils.*
- *Our school is committed to continually developing **confidence and competence of teachers and wider school staff** to enable them to deliver high quality physical education, school sport and physical activity.*
- *Our physical activity, movement and active play offer (including Physical Education and school sport) is **inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners**. It is informed through a **collaborative approach** engaging pupils, school staff and families, built around personalised challenge to ensure every pupil can engage, progress, and thrive.*
- *Our school provides **two hours of high-quality, timetabled multisensory and movement focused physical education per pupil per week**, delivered in a collaborative approach to meet the diverse and complex needs of our pupils, ensuring that activities are adapted, inclusive, and meaningful for every learner. Physical Education is planned and delivered in a pathway approach that supports meaningful participation, social engagement, sensory regulation, and physical development.*
- *Pupils who would benefit from, and are suited to, **water-based activities** are given the opportunity to access swimming sessions in a safe, supportive, and enjoyable environment. The focus is on building water confidence, promoting physical and sensory benefits, and developing essential safety awareness in and around water. Sessions are tailored to individual needs, and all pupils are encouraged to engage at their own pace, with fun and positive experiences as a priority.*
- *Physical activity across the school is overseen by a **Physical Activity Coordinator** who ensures a consistent, high-quality approach to physical education, school sport, and daily movement. As a qualified teacher, they work collaboratively with staff and external partners to promote inclusive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate physical activity opportunities for all pupils.*
- *Our children and young people have the opportunity to engage in **leadership opportunities**, through PE, sport, physical activity, movement or active play, in a way that is meaningful to them and reflects their abilities and preferences.*
- *Our school encourages and supports pupils to achieve a total of **60 minutes of physical activity daily, inside and outside the school day**, recognising the importance of movement for health, regulation, and wellbeing. For pupils with complex needs, this may include adapted activities, active play, or therapeutic movement at school, home or in the community. We work in **partnership with families** and carers to share strategies, resources, and ideas that make physical activity accessible and enjoyable beyond the school setting.*

Links to practical resources to support movement and physical activity within this domain:

	Inclusive PE Training Activity Alliance
	Young Athletes Programme Special Olympics Ireland
	Scoilnet Inclusive PE Lessons
	The PE Hub STEP Framework



5. Provide additional opportunities for movement with organised physical activities

Rationale

Children and young people spend approximately 35 hours per week at school, excluding the time spent travelling to and from school. Organised physical activity initiatives scheduled during the school day or immediately before or after school on the school premises offer children opportunities to engage in structured movement beyond traditional physical education or break time play activities. These initiatives—such as walking clubs, the Daily Mile, extracurricular sports, or dance programs—can help increase overall daily physical activity levels. Providing these opportunities in a school-based environment ensures equitable access in a familiar environment which is particularly important for children who may face barriers to participating in community-based sports or activities. The consistent routine of school-based programmes may also help to encourage long-term habits of regular physical activity and foster lifelong healthy behaviours. It is important to note that travel to and from school offers a practical, sustainable chance for extra physical activity—via walking, cycling, or scootering—but inclusive planning and tailored support are essential to address the unique mobility, safety, sensory, and supervision needs of children and young people with additional needs and disabilities so they too can benefit.

Current Situation

The Daily Mile is a school-based initiative where children and staff are encouraged to walk, jog, or run outside for 15 minutes each day, aiming to improve physical activity, fitness, and wellbeing. It requires minimal planning or equipment, making it an accessible way for schools to increase daily physical activity as part of their regular routine (<https://thedailymile.co.uk/>). Over half the primary schools and one third of SEN schools in NI report taking part in the Daily Mile (Breslin et al., 2023). Peer-led walking breaks where children and young people take part in walks in and around the school (led by peers who have been given some basic walk leadership training) have shown promise in supporting pupils in special education settings to be more active (Mullhall et al., 2024). For children with physical disabilities which prevent walking or

running using “walking or wheeling” to describe such initiatives is more inclusive and likely to encourage greater participation.

Key Pledge Statements Related to this Domain

- Our school uses physical activity and play to support **the physical, social, emotional and mental health** of our pupils and promotes an active healthy living environment.
- All pupils have the opportunity to be physically active daily **within the broader curriculum** (including a variety of light, moderate and vigorous intensities).
- Physical education, school sport, physical activity and play are an integral part of our **school improvement culture**.
- Our school has a **targeted approach** to improving the level of physical activity experienced by all pupils.
- Our school is committed to continually developing **confidence and competence of teachers and wider school staff** to enable them to deliver high quality physical education, school sport and physical activity.
- Our physical activity, movement and active play offer (including Physical Education and school sport) is **inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners**. It is informed through a **collaborative approach** engaging pupils, school staff and families, built around personalised challenge to ensure every pupil can engage, progress, and thrive.
- Pupils who would benefit from, and are suited to, **water-based activities** are given the opportunity to access swimming sessions in a safe, supportive, and enjoyable environment. The focus is on building water confidence, promoting physical and sensory benefits, and developing essential safety awareness in and around water. Sessions are tailored to individual needs, and all pupils are encouraged to engage at their own pace, with fun and positive experiences as a priority.
- Physical activity across the school is overseen by a **Physical Activity Coordinator** who ensures a consistent, high-quality approach to physical education, school sport, and daily movement. As a qualified teacher, they work collaboratively with staff and external partners to promote inclusive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate physical activity opportunities for all pupils.
- Our children and young people have the opportunity to engage in **leadership opportunities**, through PE, sport, physical activity, movement or active play, in a way that is meaningful to them and reflects their abilities and preferences.
- Our school encourages and supports pupils to achieve a total of **60 minutes of physical activity daily, inside and outside the school day**, recognising the importance of movement for health, regulation, and wellbeing. For pupils with complex needs, this may include adapted activities, active play, or therapeutic movement at school, home or in the community. We work in **partnership with families** and carers to share strategies, resources, and ideas that make physical activity accessible and enjoyable beyond the school setting.

Links to practical resources to support movement and physical activity within this domain:

	The Daily Mile UK
	EU Moves Educational Resources
	Hey Kanga
	Disability Sport NI – Exercise and Activity Resources



6. Provide opportunities for children to take part in school sports

Rationale

From a policy perspective, schools need to ensure they are trying to meet the UN Sustainable Development Goals, such as Goals 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) and 4 (Quality Education, which is inclusive and equitable). School sport can be used as a way of

achieving these goals, fostering healthy habits and providing opportunities for long-term growth in children and young people with additional needs and disabilities. While some children may find it more challenging to take part in certain sports without modification or support, it is important to realise that some may feel competent performing sports alongside typically developing peers and have a desire to play both indoor and outdoor sports (Sekhri, 2019). As with their peers, participation in organised sport can lead to a variety of positive benefits linked with educational outcomes (Bird et al., 2013) and life-skills in children and young people with additional needs and disabilities (Bruner et al., 2021). In addition, participation in school sport has the potential to build physical health (e.g. better balance), mental health (e.g. feeling less stressed and having more confidence and self-belief) and social health (e.g. ability to relate and communicate more effectively with peers).

Current Situation

Programmes and organisations such as Special Olympics, Disability Sport NI, and Panathlon can support schools to enhance their provision of school-based sport opportunities. This support can include training and resources to help staff adapt and modify sports to accommodate children and young people with diverse needs and abilities (e.g. STEP framework), in-school virtual programmes with simplified competitions, and support for sports day activities. The Department of Education have provided funding to the Youth Sport Trust for their “Inclusion 2024” programme (Youth Sport Trust, 2024). The aim of the programme is to improve school sport provision for children with additional needs and disabilities by providing resources and training for teachers and teaching assistants to help children achieve their daily physical activity. In some circumstances, teachers may get the opportunity to receive training provided by National Governing Bodies to equip them to work with those who have additional needs and disabilities. It is worth recognising that resourcing may be an issue with the undertaking of some of these activities.

Key Pledge Statements Related to this Domain

- *Our school uses physical activity and play to support **the physical, social, emotional and mental health** of our pupils and promotes an active healthy living environment.*
- *Physical education, school sport, physical activity and play are an integral part of our **school improvement culture**.*
- *Our school has a **targeted approach** to improving the level of physical activity experienced by all pupils.*
- *Our school provides a **range of sporting opportunities** as an extension of the curriculum.*
- *Our school is committed to continually developing **confidence and competence of teachers and wider school staff** to enable them to deliver high quality physical education, school sport and physical activity.*
- *Our physical activity, movement and active play offer (including Physical Education and school sport) is **inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners**. It is informed through a **collaborative approach** engaging pupils, school staff and families, built around personalised challenge to ensure every pupil can engage, progress, and thrive.*
- *Pupils who would benefit from, and are suited to, **water-based activities** are given the opportunity to access swimming sessions in a safe, supportive, and enjoyable environment. The focus is on building water confidence, promoting physical and sensory benefits, and developing essential safety awareness in and around water. Sessions are tailored to individual needs, and all pupils are encouraged to engage at their own pace, with fun and positive experiences as a priority.*
- *Physical activity across the school is overseen by a **Physical Activity Coordinator** who ensures a consistent, high-quality approach to physical education, school sport, and daily movement. As a qualified teacher, they work collaboratively with staff and external partners to promote inclusive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate physical activity opportunities for all pupils.*
- *Our children and young people have the opportunity to engage in **leadership opportunities**, through PE, sport, physical activity, movement or active play, in a way that is meaningful to them and reflects their abilities and preferences.*
- *Children in our school are given opportunities, where appropriate, to take part in **competitive activities that are inclusive, supportive, and centred around fun and enjoyment**. We value the social aspects of sport—teamwork, friendship, and shared experiences—as much as the competition itself, and aim to create a positive environment where every pupil can participate with confidence and a sense of belonging.*
- *Our school encourages and supports pupils to achieve a total of **60 minutes of physical activity daily, inside and outside the school day**, recognising the importance of movement for health, regulation, and wellbeing. For pupils with*

complex needs, this may include adapted activities, active play, or therapeutic movement at school, home or in the community. We work in **partnership with families** and carers to share strategies, resources, and ideas that make physical activity accessible and enjoyable beyond the school setting.

Links to practical resources to support movement and physical activity within this domain:

	Every Sport for Everyone CCEA
	Disability Sport NI – Training and Coaching Resources
	Inclusive Sports Programme - Youth Sport Trust
	Motor Activities Training Programme Special Olympics Ireland

Implementing a Whole School Approach to Physical Activity, Movement and Play within Special Education Needs Settings.

Understanding the basic principles of implementation science is important for schools to effectively introduce a whole school approach to physical activity. It helps ensure that strategies are evidence-based, sustainable, and tailored to their unique school context, ultimately leading to more successful and lasting outcomes for pupils' health and well-being.

To help special education schools and other settings, such as specialist provision in mainstream, understand these principles better we developed this guidance document. This resource has been developed collaboratively with educators, the Education Authority, community organisations, researchers and families, ensuring that the strategies and practices reflect lived experience and promote meaningful participation in physical activity and play for all pupils.

Co-development Workshops

Informed by prior work by the research team on implementing physical activity interventions for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, a series of co-development workshops were hosted with the working group. Discussions focussed around understanding the context within which schools are working, implementation activities and resources, implementation strategies, and monitoring and evaluating outcomes. Analysis of these discussions have led to the advice and practical steps outlined within the following sections.

This guidance provides practical frameworks that should align with existing school priorities, adapt to a variety of special education contexts, and foster a culture where physical activity and play is a valued and integrated part of school life.

What contextual factors should be considered for a whole school approach to physical activity, movement and play within special education needs settings?

So far, the toolkits and guidance documents that have been developed for implementing whole school approaches to physical activity that have been developed with mainstream school settings in mind.

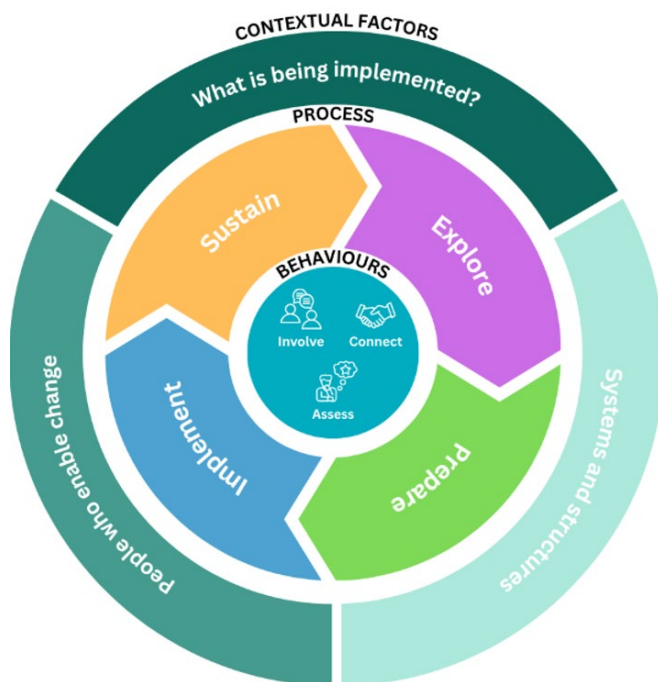


Figure 4: Implementation of Whole School Approaches
(adapted from Sharples, J., Eaton, J., & Boughelaf, J., 2024, p.4)

Individual characteristics need to be considered in how physical activity interventions or programs are adopted considering the pupils' physical abilities, cognitive abilities, communication, motivation, self-efficacy, health conditions and co-morbidities. Likewise, it is also important to explore teachers' knowledge and beliefs about physical activity, their skills and training needs, and attitudes and motivation. **Contextual factors** refer to the school's physical activity policies, leadership and culture within the school, funding, resources available, family engagement, community resources, and the environment and culture within the school. **School processes** include how physical activity interventions or programmes are embedded into the school curriculum or daily routines, teacher training and supervision, and what local data is collected and used. **Using an implementation science lens** helps identify practical strategies to embed, adapt and sustain such physical activity interventions or programs effectively.

When considering implementing physical activity interventions or programmes in special education settings, it is important to consider influencing factors in a structured way to examine the many things that may affect whether, how, and why a physical activity programme or intervention is successfully adopted, implemented, and sustained in the school environment.

These contextual factors generally fall under three key areas:

1. **What is being implemented:** Features of the physical activity intervention itself that could affect its success. Consider whether the approach is:
 - a. Informed by evidence and research
 - b. Right for your school
 - c. Feasible to implement
2. **Systems and structures:** Develop a school infrastructure that supports children to be more physically active across their school day e.g. time, roles, logistics.

However, it is particularly important to understand unique **individual characteristics, contextual factors, and school processes** when adapting or designing new physical activity interventions or programs in special education schools. All these factors will directly or indirectly influence how the initiative or programme is implemented and embedded within the school setting, as well as the effectiveness on pupil outcomes.

3. **People who enable change:** Ensure people are in place across the school from leadership teams to those in the classrooms who can support, lead and positively influence physical activity implementation.

Below are some important things to consider under each of these areas when it comes to implementing whole school approaches to physical activity in special education settings, but it is important to sit down with all the stakeholders from your school community to ensure all barriers and facilitators to this approach are identified.

Table 2: Summary of contextual factors for consideration in a whole school approach to physical activity, movement and play in special education settings

Contextual Considerations	
What is being implemented?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider the need to adapt the physical activity initiative for enjoyment and needs of all children including those with complex needs Collect information about the priorities, preferences, and needs of pupils, including those with complex needs, to guide implementation and delivery of the physical activity initiative Collect information about the priorities, preferences, and needs of school staff to guide implementation and delivery of the physical activity initiative. Consider how the physical activity initiative can be modified to fit and integrated into current work processes.
Systems and structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider how the physical activity initiative will be sustainably funded <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore external funding opportunities for delivering of the physical activity initiatives e.g. charitable grants, local council grants Consider how the current curriculum delivery could support the embedding of the physical activity initiatives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider the degree to which curriculum benchmarking metrics or established curriculum goals drive implementation and/or delivery of the physical activity initiative. Consider how the school can collaborate with other schools, academic institutions, healthcare providers and community providers to deliver the physical activity initiative Develop or review school policy on physical activity of the school community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure that physical activity is outlined in the overarching commitment, purpose, or goals of the school. Consider availability of space and prioritise the use of space within the school for the delivery of the physical activity initiative Ensure the availability of adaptive and supportive equipment and resources for children with more severe, profound or complex needs. Consider the availability and prioritise securing of adequate transportation for children in order to access physical activity initiatives if necessary. Develop and support formal and informal relationships, networks, and teams within and across the school for the delivery of the physical activity initiative. Develop and support high quality formal and informal information sharing practices within and between schools to learn from best practice regarding implementation of physical activity initiatives. Ensure opportunities and infrastructure are provided to staff to document the continued benefits of physical activity for all children. Ensure the prioritisation and protection of physical activity opportunities, formal and informal, for all pupils. Ensure that there is allocation and management of staff time dedicated to tasks and responsibilities related to the delivery of the physical activity initiative. Identify specific roles and responsibilities of staff in relation to delivering the physical activity initiative. Consider ways to collect both quantitative and qualitative information about the success of the physical activity initiative, from staff, pupils, families and school leadership.

People who enable change

- Consider how the **culture of the school** reflects a "nurturing" approach with flexibility to meet the individual needs of pupils.
 - Consider **parental beliefs** about, attitudes in relation to, and support of physical activity initiatives.
 - Consider the degree to which there are shared values, beliefs, and norms about the **inherent equal right of all children** to access and engage with the physical activity initiative, across leadership, staff and other school community members.
 - Consider the degree to which there are shared values, beliefs, and norms around caring, supporting, and **addressing the needs and welfare** of pupils in relation to physical activity.
 - Consider **current staffing levels and turnover** and allocate sufficient sustainable staffing for the delivery of the physical activity interventions. Consider novel staffing models to meet the staffing demands of the physical activity initiative implementation and delivery.
 - Consider and support the **training needs** of school staff to implement and deliver the physical activity initiative:
 - Consider approaches to increase staff capacity to deliver the physical activity initiatives including approaches such as 'train the trainer' models.
 - Consider the **capability, opportunity, and motivation** to implement the physical activity initiative of:
 - School leaders and Board of Governors
 - Opinion leaders
 - School staff
 - Parents and caregivers
 - Pupils
 - Wider school community
 - Consider ways to **attract and encourage staff** to get involved in the initiative, whether on the implementation team and/or to deliver the physical activity initiative.
 - Consider ways to **attract and encourage pupils** to get involved in the initiative, whether on the implementation team and/or participate in the physical activity initiative.
-

Resourcing a Whole School Approach to Physical Activity, Movement and Play

The success of any school-based physical activity intervention or programme depends on whether the necessary resources, such as funding, time, personnel, and infrastructure, are available and properly allocated. Without appropriate resourcing, even well-designed interventions may fail to achieve their intended outcomes.

Ensuring that physical activity interventions in your school are appropriately resourced will:

- **Facilitate successful implementation into daily workflows**
- **Ensure sustainability**
- **Support adaptation and flexibility**
- **Promote buy-in from all stakeholders** (such as leaders, staff, families and pupils)
- **Overcome barriers to implementation**
- **Increase efficiency and quality**
- **Ensure equity and inclusivity**
- **Help to monitor and evaluate progress**

Adequate resourcing for whole school approaches to physical activity in special education settings involves:

Table 3: *Resourcing a Whole School Approach to Physical Activity, Movement and Play in Special Education Settings*

Funding	Time	Personnel	Infrastructure and equipment
Consider how the school will fund the physical activity initiative- ensure that this funding is sustainable	Protect time that is allocated to physical education- make PE a priority	Investigate ways to increase staff confidence, motivation and capacity for delivering physical activity, such as through educational programmes or a "train the trainer" model	Prioritise space for physical activity, both indoors and outdoors
Source external funding from charitable funds, community funds and local authority funding	Ensure adequate time is allocated to staff to deliver physical activity, physical play and movement activities	Identify and train staff with a passion for physical activity as Physical Activity Champions	Investigate modes of transportation for getting children to and from additional sport and physical activity opportunities

Activities for Implementing a Whole School Approach to Physical Activity, Movement and Play

What actions should your school take to begin to create and implement a whole school approach to physical activity, movement and play?

Identifying the activities or work you will do to create a whole school approach to physical activity is critical as it will help ensure that the implementation process is well-planned, focused, and achievable.

Table 4: Summary of implementations activities supporting the promotion of physical activity and play through whole school approaches

What work will you do as a school?				
Teaming Up	Staff Training	Engage Stakeholders	Review Curriculum and School Policy	Monitoring and Evaluation
Consider how the school can collaborate with other schools, academic institutions, healthcare providers and community providers to deliver the physical activity initiative	Consider and support the training needs of school staff to implement and deliver the physical activity initiative.	Collect information about the priorities, preferences, and needs of pupils , including those with complex needs, to guide implementation and delivery of the physical activity initiative	Consider how the current curriculum delivery could support the embedding of the physical activity initiatives	Consider ways to collect both quantitative and qualitative information about the success of the physical activity initiative, from staff, pupils, families and school leadership.
Develop and support formal and informal relationships, networks, and teams within and across the school for the delivery of the physical activity initiative.	Develop and support high quality formal and informal information sharing practices within and between schools to learn from best practice regarding implementation of physical activity initiatives.	Collect information about the priorities, preferences, and needs of school staff and leadership to guide implementation and delivery of the physical activity initiative.	Consider the degree to which curriculum benchmarking metrics or established curriculum goals drive implementation and/or delivery of the physical activity initiative.	Consider how the physical activity initiative can be modified to fit and integrate into current work processes .
		Consider ways to attract and encourage pupils to get involved in the initiative, whether on the implementation team and/or participate in the physical activity initiative.	Develop or review school policy on physical activity of the school community	
		Consider ways to attract and encourage staff to get involved in the initiative, whether on the implementation team and/or to deliver the physical activity initiative.	Ensure the prioritisation and protection of physical activity opportunities , formal and informal, for all pupils.	
		Consider ways to attract and encourage families to get involved in the initiative, whether on the implementation team and/or participate in the physical activity initiative.	Ensure that physical activity is outlined in the overarching commitment, purpose, or goals of the school .	

Strategies for embedding a Whole School Approach to Physical Activity, Movement and Play in Special Education Settings

Our work with stakeholders from across special education settings — including teachers, classroom support staff and school leadership, as well as the Education Authority Northern Ireland, and community groups that support children and young people with additional needs and disabilities and their families — has highlighted several specific implementation strategies that should be considered when implementing a whole school approach to physical activity. Leveraging existing school assets while providing school-specific implementation strategies may be most beneficial for supporting successful physical activity promotion in primary schools.

These strategies are highlighted in Figure 3 below:

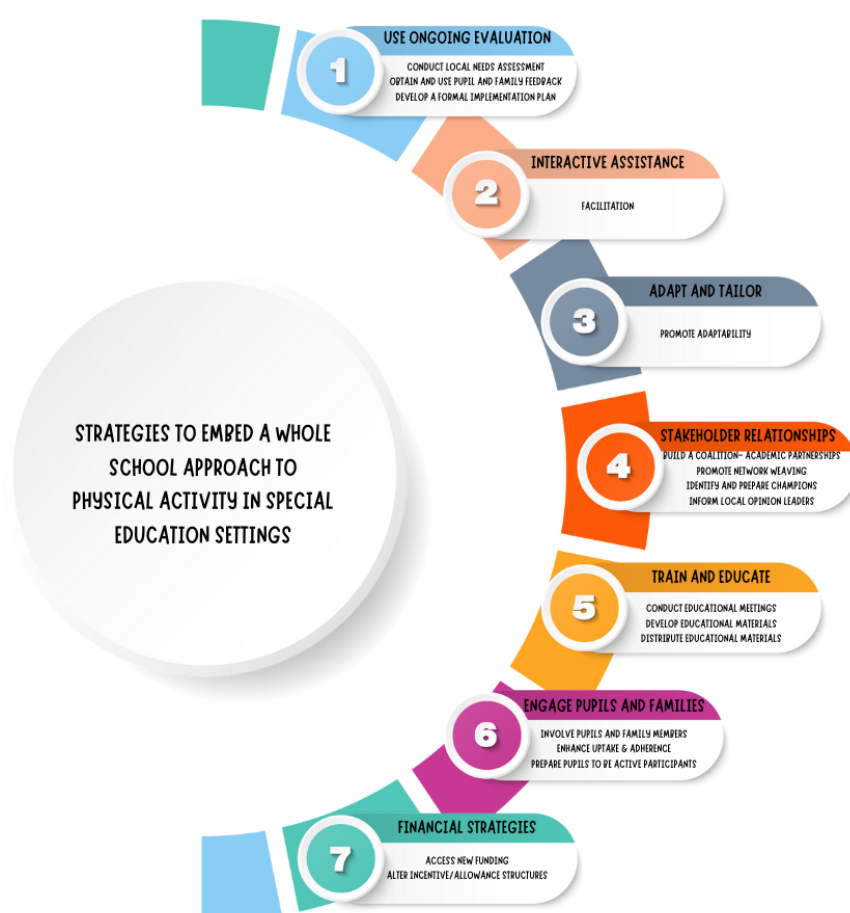


Figure 5: Strategies to embed a whole school approach to physical activity in special education settings

Some of the key strategies for embedding whole of school approaches to physical activity, movement and play in special education settings are outlined below:

Stakeholder Relationships

Identify and Prepare a Champion!

One of the key implementation strategies to enhance the success of developing and implementing a whole school approach to physical activity is to identify and prepare physical activity champion(s) within your school. A physical activity champion is a dedicated individual in the school who is tasked with spearheading and fostering an active school culture, subsequently coordinating a comprehensive school physical activity programme. For some schools the most logical person to serve as a school physical activity champion is the physical education (PE) teacher. However, this might not be feasible for all special education settings. Studies have shown that non-PE teacher champions (such as a non-PE specialist teacher or classroom assistant) might potentially have the advantage of being more aware of the challenges and priorities faced in the classroom setting, and therefore potentially have more influence for embedding physical activity approaches across the school (Moore et al., 2018). Schools should choose individuals with a personal or professional passion for physical activity in the school setting.

The physical activity champion is often responsible for general oversight and co-ordination of physical activity programmes and initiatives in the school, leading the whole school approach to physical activity implementation team, and assessing the school's needs, resources, environment, policies and staff attitudes regarding physical activity promotion. Additionally, the physical activity champion is responsible for the development of action plans, identifying targets for new physical activity opportunities, selecting evidence-based strategies, setting goals, and matching resources to needs (Carson, 2013).

Once identified and recruited, the school physical activity champion should be provided with training and ongoing support in their role. Initial in-service training can be provided by the BASSE programme team (www.buildingactiveschools.co.uk). This training will provide skills training related to school needs assessment, strategies for implementation, goal setting, and action planning. The goal is to be able to provide this within a network of physical activity champions from different schools across the region.

Promote Network Weaving- Build a Coalition!

To promote and maintain physical activity, movement and active play in special education settings, it is important to engage and partner with people from the school and local community. Working together with families, local organisations like Special Olympics, Disability Sport NI, Playboard NI and NI Forest Schools Association, and nearby schools or universities can make a big difference (Dauenhauer and Stoeper, 2022).

Schools may like to organise workshops or information sessions for parents and community members to talk about the benefits of physical activity on health and wellbeing of children and young people with additional needs and disabilities. Sending newsletters, using social media or giving internal and external partners an opportunity to volunteer and participate in activities within the school can help to grow these networks.

Collaboration with local community partners like sports clubs or leisure centres can boost the availability of appropriate and accessible opportunities both within and outside of regular school hours.

Local universities, such as the BASSE team at Ulster University, can support schools by assessing PE or physical activity needs within the school, helping to find and plan evidence informed physical activity or play-based programmes, or conducting research to enhance activities. Students from these universities can also assist with running initiatives and activities as placement opportunities or module activities within their degree programme. Such partnerships not only boost the experience of physical activity and play for pupils but also provides university students valuable experience working with children and young people with additional needs, and help schools create sustainable physical activity programmes that last into the long-term.

Train and Educate

Conduct Educational Meetings

Training and educating teachers, school staff, and families is a vital step in implementing a whole school approach to physical activity as it fosters buy-in and support from staff and leadership, promotes collective responsibility, enhances staff motivation and autonomy, and ensures a collaborative learning environment that promotes high quality play and physical activity opportunities (Webster, 2023).

Staff and family education should (Daly-Smith et al., 2021):

- Develop an awareness and knowledge of the benefits of physical activity, movement and play for children and young people with additional needs and disabilities.
- Provide an overview of national and international guidelines and recommendations for physical activity and play.
- Enhance attitudes towards physical activity, movement and play.
- Empower and increase confidence to implement physical activity, movement and play initiatives.
- Promote idea generation for specific programmes or approaches to implement in school setting.
- Share examples, demonstrations and direct experiences.
- Allow for tailored ongoing support of staff and families.

Additional training for Physical Activity Champions should (McKown et al., 2024):

- Develop leadership competencies such as engaging stakeholders, facilitating change, and inspiring others.
- Develop specific skills related to implementing whole school approaches to physical activity and play such as conducting a needs assessment, steps to initiate and strategies to manage a whole school approach to physical activity and play.

Where Do We Start? The Physical Activity, Movement and Play Audit

When planning to implement a whole school approach to physical activity, the best place to start is with an audit or a thorough assessment of the current provision of physical activity within your school. This assessment will help you understand the existing strengths, gaps, and areas for improvement. It ensures that the approach is tailored to the specific needs of the school community and sets the foundation for an effective, sustainable programme.

Instructions for Completing the Audit of School Physical Activity, Physical Play and Movement in Special Education Settings

1. Review Audit Pledge Statements:

Read and discuss the pledge statements within the audit tool to evaluate how effectively your school is implementing strategies to promote physical activity. Categorise each pledge statement as either:

- a. Emerging (practice at an early stage)
- b. Establishing (practice in place)
- c. Embedded (practice robustly in place)
- d. Exemplary (practice that should be shared)

2. Gather Evidence:

Reflect on what evidence you have to support your responses. This might include observations, photographs, videos, interviews, or case studies. Also, consider what additional data you may need to demonstrate any changes in the provision of physical activity at your school.

3. Use Findings to Update Your Policy:

Based on your assessment, utilise the insights gained to develop, review, or revise your physical activity policy. Set three-to-five key development targets for the upcoming year.

4. Prioritise Areas for Improvement:

For each area you have assessed, identify its priority level by considering:

- a. Importance of the change
- b. Cost involved
- c. Time and commitment required
- d. Overall feasibility for your school to implement these changes

We would also encourage special education schools and settings within the region to support the BASSE research programme, to review the impact of this tool and guide the future development of resources and activities across special educational settings. You can support the research programme by:

- Sharing your completed audit with us, which will help us build a comprehensive understanding of local provision, strengths, and areas for development.
- Providing your feedback on the audit tool, including sharing examples and case studies that can be disseminated.

[Link to Appendix 1 School Physical Activity, Movement and Play Audit Tool](#)

Four Steps to Implementing a Whole School Approach to Physical Activity, Movement and Play

There are several enablers that will support a whole school approach to physical activity and these factors are relevant to each of the physical activity domains that we see in special education settings (Table 5). It is the combined effect of these enablers that will have the greatest impact on physical activity, physical play and movement of children and young people in school. Schools are therefore encouraged to consider how each of these apply to their own school context prior to implementing any of the proposed actions.

Table 5: Summary of enabling factors in the promotion of physical activity and play through whole school approaches

Enabler	Rationale
Leadership	<i>Effective leadership is essential for successfully implementing a Wellbeing Support Approach (WSA) in schools. Leaders can be school staff, external experts, or even pupils, and they help guide and coordinate efforts to ensure the program works well. Without clear leadership, teams often struggle, making the process less effective.</i>
Advocacy and Promotion	<i>Advocacy and promotion are essential for engaging stakeholders and raising awareness about the benefits of physical activity in schools. To enhance these efforts, it is important to assess the needs of the pupils, identify champions, establish relationships with key decision-makers, and organise events and campaigns that encourage active participation. Using evidence, involving pupil leaders, and collaborating with community groups can help foster lasting support for school-based physical activity programmes.</i>
Partnerships and community links	<i>Building strong partnerships with key community stakeholders helps coordinate and promote physical activity in schools. This involves strengthening existing relationships and creating new ones with parents and carers, local authorities, other schools, community groups, and sectors like sport and voluntary organisations. To make these partnerships effective, it's important to ensure clear goals, active community involvement, mutual benefits, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation.</i>
Training	<i>Staff training is crucial for successfully embedding a whole school approach to physical activity into practice, and this training can be pre- or in-service training. Not enough or poor-quality training can make it harder to implement the program effectively. Resistance from staff or school leaders to new practice can be a barrier to implementing a whole school approach, but proper training helps overcome this by guiding staff on how to incorporate this into their current ways of working.</i>
Monitoring and Evaluation	<i>Monitoring and evaluating are essential to assess the success of a whole school approach to promoting physical activity and should be continuous from the start. This involves setting clear goals, collecting data regularly, and using findings to improve activities and strategies. Both school staff and external partners can carry out these tasks, with external evaluations offering added expertise and objectivity.</i>

Once you have considered how each of these enablers applies in your own school context, you can begin the process of implementing a whole school approach to physical activity, movement and play.

There are **four key steps** in this process (see Figure. 2) based on the Exploration, Preparation, Implementation, Sustainment (EPIS) Framework (Moullin et al., 2019). These steps, along with the important activities to undertake during each step, are outlined below:



Developing a School Physical Activity, Movement and Play Policy

School leaders (senior teachers, principals, governors and administrators) play an important role in increasing the physical activity of children and young people within the school setting. They are responsible for developing and implementing school policies related to physical activity (Nathan et al., 2018). School leadership support for implementing those physical activity policies is also key to their success. Evidence has shown that dedicated whole school physical activity policies can have a positive impact on the physical activity, play and movement behaviours of children and young people in school settings (Woods et al., 2021).

Many school physical activity policy frameworks exist and are available for you to use to develop a Whole School Policy for Physical Activity, however, we have provided a simple physical activity, movement and play policy template as Appendix 2 to this guidance document.

[Link to Appendix 2 School Physical Activity, Movement and Play Policy Template](#)

Monitoring and Evaluation Plan

A monitoring and evaluation plan is an essential component of a whole school approach to physical activity and play as it provides a structured way to track progress, measure success, and guide improvement (Singletary et al., 2019).

A multi-method approach should be taken to data collection including:

- Observations of staff behaviours and pupil activity play and movement.
- Surveys and checklists around engagement, participation and enjoyment.
- Audit or assessments of school environments, resources and policies.
- Interviews and focus groups with staff, pupils and families.

The monitoring and evaluation plan should be unique and adaptable to meet the needs of the individual school. Each unique plan will emphasise local ownership and support iterative action planning for improvement and sustainability.

What should we measure?

Examples of components of the whole school approach to measure include:

Component	Description
Inputs	Resources and training available (e.g., PA champion, space)
Activities	Implementation actions (e.g., staff training, curriculum reviews, stakeholder engagement activities)
Outputs	Physical activity and play opportunities delivered (e.g., number or minutes of activity offered)
Outcomes	Behaviour change in pupils/staff; policy/environment changes
Impact	Long-term change in pupil activity levels, school culture

Consider measuring outputs, outcomes and impact at the pupil, staff and whole school level. For example:

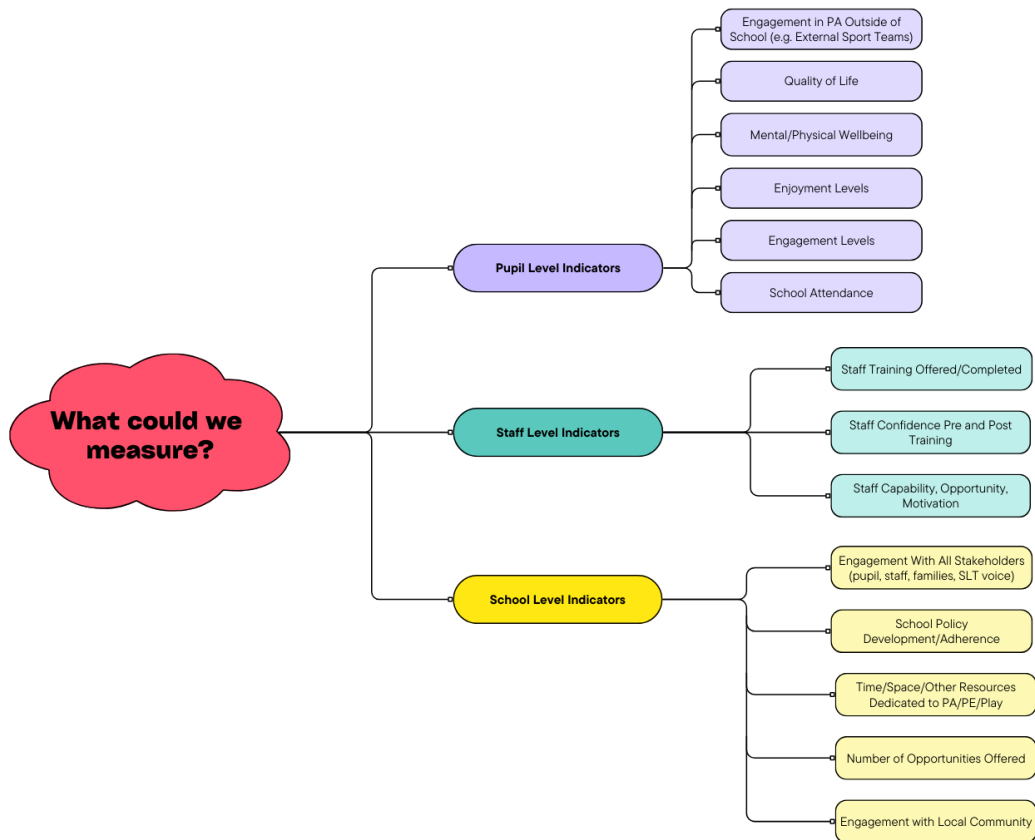


Figure 4: Example indicators at each socioeconomic level

Remember:

- Use staff and pupil voice to refine your delivery each academic year.
- Celebrate wins (e.g., the playful class award, active teacher award).
- Include an action planning session post-evaluation to adapt activities or goals.

Conclusion

This guidance document, developed as part of the ***Building Active Schools in Special Education*** project, supports the implementation of a whole school approach to physical activity, movement, and play in special education settings. It emphasises the importance of embedding movement throughout the entire school day—across curriculum, routines, environments, and relationships—guided by principles of implementation science to ensure sustainable, inclusive, and meaningful change for all learners. By fostering a more active school culture, this approach aims to have a lasting positive impact on children and young people’s physical health, mental wellbeing, and overall quality of life.

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Glossary

Active classrooms

Classroom environments where physical activity is incorporated through physically active breaks during curriculum lessons or via environmental or task restructuring.

Active travel

Walking, cycling, scooting or other active means of travelling to school as an alternative to motorised transport (cars etc.).

Additional needs and disabilities

Refers to conditions or circumstances that require extra support for an individual to participate fully in educational, social, or daily activities. These needs may include physical, sensory, cognitive, emotional, or behavioural differences that can impact learning and development. Disabilities are typically characterised by long-term impairments that affect functioning, whilst additional needs can encompass a broader range of support requirements that may not necessarily qualify as a disability but still necessitate tailored interventions to ensure inclusion and participation.

Movement behaviours *(for the context of movement within the Whole School Approach to Physical Activity, Movement and Play)*

Movement behaviours within a 24-hour period refer to all physical activities and rest-related activities that individuals engage in throughout the day. This includes physical activity (such as exercise, active commuting, and play), sedentary behaviour (such as sitting and screen time), and sleep. Together, these behaviours form a complete cycle of movement and rest over a 24-hour period, influencing overall health and well-being.

Peer-led

An activity facilitated and supported by a pupil who is an experienced role model and/or has received training to assist and guide other pupils.

Physical activity

Physical activity is a broad term referring to all bodily movement that uses energy. It includes all forms of physical education and sport activities. However, it is wider than this, as it also includes indoor and outdoor play, outdoor and adventurous activities, active travel (e.g. walking, cycling, rollerblading, scooting) and routine, habitual activities such as using the stairs.

Light Physical Activity: Activities that do not noticeably increase your breathing or heart rate. Examples include stretching or light household tasks.

Moderate Physical Activity: Activities that increase your breathing and heart rate but still allow you to hold a conversation. Examples include brisk walking or dancing.

Vigorous Physical Activity: Activities that significantly increase your breathing and heart rate, making talking difficult. Examples include running or aerobics.

Physical activity policy

A set of guidelines, rules, or principles established by an organisation, government, or institution to promote, support, and sustain physical activity among individuals or populations.

The aim is to encourage active lifestyles, improve health, and ensure accessible and safe opportunities for physical activity.

Physical education (PE)

Physical education is the planned, progressive learning, timetabled within the school curriculum and delivered to all pupils. This involves both ‘learning to move’ (i.e. becoming more physically competent) and ‘moving to learn’ (e.g. learning through movement, a range of skills and understandings beyond physical activity, such as co-operating with others). The context for the learning is physical activity, with children experiencing a broad range of activities, including sport and dance.

Physical environment

The school buildings, grounds, and equipment, including aspects such as the design and location of the premises; the provision of space for physical activity; and facilities for learning and active play.

Physical inactivity

A level of physical activity that fails to meet current physical activity recommendations.

Physical literacy

The motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life.

Physical Play

An umbrella term for a wide variety of movement, exploration, and challenge activities that engage a child’s body. It includes gross and fine motor activities and is generally classified into four categories: outdoor play (e.g., running, climbing, exploring nature), indoor play (e.g., dancing, building forts, active video games), free play (self-directed activities with no adult supervision), and structured play (organised activities like football or gymnastics).

Play

Play is a child’s natural, voluntary activity through which they explore, understand, and make sense of the world. It is characterised by being fun, flexible, challenging, and driven by their own interests, without external goals or rewards. Play provides children with freedom, time, and space to observe, test, imitate, and enjoy their environment and relationships.

School travel plan

A written or digital document created, managed, and overseen by the entire school community to encourage and support sustainable active travel.

Social environment

A combination of the quality of relationships among staff and pupils, as well as between them. It is affected by relationships with parents and the wider community and focuses on fostering meaningful connections among all the key stakeholders within the school community.

Sport

Any organised physical activity or game that involves skill, competition, and rules, undertaken for enjoyment, competition, or health benefits. School sport is the structured learning that takes place beyond the curriculum (i.e. in the extended curriculum) within school settings; this is sometimes referred to as out-of-school-hours or extra-curricular. Again, the context for the learning is physical activity. The ‘school sport’ programme has the potential to develop and

broaden the foundation learning that takes place in physical education. It also forms a vital link with 'community sport and activity'.

Whole School Approach

An approach that extends beyond classroom teaching and learning to influence all aspects of school life. This includes teaching content and methods, school governance, collaboration with partners and the wider community, as well as school and estate management. It is a cohesive, collective, and collaborative effort by the entire school community to enhance pupil learning, behaviour, and well-being.

Terms for children, adolescents, and young people

Children: aged under 19 years. School-aged children are generally assumed to be aged over 5 years.

Adolescents: aged 10–19 years.

Young people: aged 10–24 years.

Youth: aged 15–24 years.

Appendix 1: School Physical Activity, Movement and Play Audit Tool

[Adapted from the PESSPA Toolkit (Learn Sheffield, 2022) using the MADi framework for adaptations]

Pledge Statement	Domain	Emerging (practice at an early stage)	Establishing (practice in place)	Embedded (practice robustly in place)	Exemplary (practice that should be shared)	Priority Rank
Our school uses physical activity and play to support the physical, social, emotional and mental health of our pupils and promotes an active healthy living environment.	Sensory and Behavioural Regulation, Physical Play, Active Classrooms, Quality Physical Education, Organised Physical Activity, School Sport	Our school understands the benefits that being active can have on a pupil's physical health and wellbeing and discuss this with pupils during lessons to promote an active lifestyle.	Our school works with a range of partners and includes physical activity within discussions around outcomes for pupils. We are active in signposting physical activity to families and showcase the benefits that being active can have on social, emotional, mental and physical health.	Our school uses physical activity to support the physical, social, emotional, and mental health of our pupils and promotes an active healthy living environment.	Our school monitors the impact that physical activity has on the physical health and social, emotional and mental well-being of our pupils. Interventions, which include being active, support whole school and community engagement in addition to individual pupil needs.	
All pupils have the opportunity to be physically active daily within the broader curriculum (including a variety of light, moderate and vigorous intensities).	Active Classrooms, Physical Play, Organised Physical Activity	Resources and tools are shared across the school to all teachers, increasing awareness and planning of how physical activity can be implemented into their planning of learning experiences	The majority of teachers are successfully implementing aspects of physical activity into their classroom each day. Best practice is shared across the school from those who have managed to successfully embed physical activity.	All pupils have the opportunity to be physically active daily within the broader curriculum (including a variety of light, moderate and vigorous intensities).	Opportunities to be physically active are frequent and varied in all classrooms across the school. Teachers regard physical activity as a teaching tool and professional dialogue supports rapid sharing of innovative practice.	
Physical education, school sport, physical activity and play are an integral part of our school improvement culture .	Sensory and Behavioural Regulation, Physical Play, Active Classrooms, Quality Physical Education, Organised Physical Activity, School Sport	Our school has an improvement plan for physical education, school sport, physical activity and play.	Provision of physical education, school sport, physical activity and play is visible within school for all stakeholders.	Physical education, school sport, physical activity and play are an integral part of our school improvement culture.	Physical education, school sport, physical activity and play are fundamental to our whole school culture and embedded in all aspects of school life.	

Our children receive physical education lessons which are quality assured in line with the monitoring of other curriculum areas.	Quality Physical Education	Monitoring of Physical Education is taking place to develop an understanding of the quality of Physical Education teaching across the school.	Systematic monitoring of Physical Education lessons, often involving the PA coordinator and school leaders, ensures that a robust understanding of the quality of teaching across the school exists.	Our children receive Physical Education lessons which are quality assured in line with the monitoring of other curriculum areas.	Physical Education is routinely monitored with effective systems in place that support consistently high-quality teaching of Physical Education.	
Our school has a targeted approach to improving the level of physical activity and play experienced by all pupils.	Sensory and Behavioural Regulation, Physical Play, Active Classrooms, Quality Physical Education, Organised Physical Activity, School Sport	Our school has an increasing awareness of the importance of physical activity and play and has identified key themes for the development of opportunities for pupils to be more physically activities.	Our whole school plan for physical activity and play considers the physical environment, social environment and the range of opportunities to be active. Monitoring is starting to lead to targeted opportunities for the least active pupils.	Our school has a targeted approach to improving the level of physical activity and play experienced by all pupils.	Our embedded targeted approach results in staff and pupils having the opportunity to devise and engage in a wide range of physical and play activities. Appropriate targeting ensures that all pupils are physically active.	
Our school provides a range of sporting opportunities as an extension of the curriculum.	School Sport	Our school offers a number of sports clubs and activities across the academic year which pupils are encouraged to attend	Sports clubs and activities take place at school regularly and attendance at these is monitored. A wide range of sports are available for pupils to explore their relationship with sport.	Our school provides a range of sporting opportunities as an extension of the curriculum.	A varied extra-curricular offering is developed in partnership with pupils. Careful monitoring of the attendance of all pupils in extra-curricular opportunities are provided for all, including the least active.	

Our school is committed to continually developing confidence and competence of teachers and wider school staff to enable them to deliver high quality physical education, school sport, physical activity and play.	Sensory and Behavioural Regulation, Physical Play, Active Classrooms, Quality Physical Education, Organised Physical Activity, School Sport	Staff who teach Physical Education regularly complete an audit of their developmental needs. The school continuing professional development (CPD) offer is developed to meet identified needs	All staff are actively encouraged to attend targeted and strategically identified CPD which addresses their identified development needs. Some CPD is provided to develop wider school staff.	Our school is committed to continually developing confidence and competence of teachers and wider school staff to enable them to deliver high quality Physical Education, school sportphysical activity.	CPD is regular, sustainable, monitored and accessed by all staff leading to high quality teaching and learning.	
Our physical activity, movement and active play offer (including Physical Education and school sport) is inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners . It is informed through a collaborative approach engaging pupils, school staff and families, built around personalised challenge to ensure every pupil can engage, progress, and thrive.	Sensory and Behavioural Regulation, Physical Play, Active Classrooms, Quality Physical Education, Organised Physical Activity, School Sport	Inclusive practices are in place to engage all pupils. Staff collaborate with pupils to shape meaningful physical activity in the school. Provision is beginning to meet the differing needs of all pupils.	Our school is starting to target identified groups of pupils to ensure appropriate differentiation meets their needs. Personal challenge is increasingly a feature of provision.	Our physical activity, movement and active play offer (including Physical Education and school sport) is inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of all learners. It is informed through a collaborative approach engaging pupils, school staff and families, built around personalised challenge to ensure every pupil can engage, progress, and thrive.	The school can evidence that all pupils, staff and families have worked collaboratively to contribute to the 'school voice' to shape PA provision. All pupils are supported to identify and work through their personal challenges in relation to PA, active play and movement behaviours.	

<p>Our school provides two hours of high-quality, timetabled multisensory and movement focused physical education per pupil per week, delivered in a collaborative approach to meet the diverse and complex needs of our pupils, ensuring that activities are adapted, inclusive, and meaningful for every learner. Physical Education is planned and delivered in a pathway approach that supports meaningful participation, social engagement, sensory regulation, and physical development.</p>	<p>Quality Physical Education</p>	<p>Our school strives to provide two hours of Physical Education per pupil per week, delivered by a trained teacher with the dedicated support of classroom assistants. Physical Education is timetabled within curriculum time.</p>	<p>Our school monitors provision to ensure that all pupils access two hours of increasingly high-quality, timetabled multisensory and movement focused Physical Education per week, delivered by a trained teacher with appropriate support. Staff work collaboratively to meet the diverse and complex needs of our pupils, striving to ensure that activities are adapted, inclusive, and meaningful for every learner.</p>	<p>Our school provides two hours of high-quality, timetabled multisensory and movement focused Physical Education per pupil per week, delivered in a collaborative approach to meet the diverse and complex needs of our pupils, ensuring that activities are adapted, inclusive, and meaningful for every learner. Physical Education is planned and delivered in a pathway approach that supports meaningful participation, social engagement, sensory regulation, and physical development.</p>	<p>Our school consistently provides two hours of high-quality, timetabled multisensory and movement focused Physical Education per pupil per week through a pathways approach. School leadership, champions and staff work to ensure this provision occurs regardless of other events, activities, priorities in any given week.</p>	
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<p>Pupils who would benefit from, and are suited to, water-based activities are given the opportunity to access swimming sessions in a safe, supportive, and enjoyable environment. The focus is on building water confidence, promoting physical and sensory benefits, and developing essential safety awareness in and around water. Sessions are tailored to individual needs, and all pupils are encouraged to engage at their own pace, with fun and positive experiences as a priority.</p>	<p>Sensory and Behavioural Regulation, Quality Physical Education, Organised Physical Activity, School Sport</p>	<p>Pupils who would benefit from and are suited to water-based activities have the opportunity to take part in swimming activities before they leave primary school.</p>	<p>Our school works with swimming providers to ensure lessons meet the needs of our pupils who take part in water-based activities. Children and families are given ideas and activities prior to water-based activities to build water confidence and enjoyment of the activities.</p>	<p>Pupils who would benefit from and are suited to water-based activities are given the opportunity to access swimming sessions in a safe, supportive, and enjoyable environment. The focus is on building water confidence, promoting physical and sensory benefits, and developing essential safety awareness in and around water. Sessions are tailored to individual needs, and all pupils are encouraged to engage at their own pace, with fun and positive experiences as a priority.</p>	<p>An ambitious swimming programme ensure that all pupils that are suited to water-based activities make progress towards learning to swim. Pupils can communicate their understanding of water safety. The school engages with partners to provide pathways to participation outside school.</p>	
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Physical activity across the school is overseen by a Physical Activity Coordinator who ensures a consistent, high-quality approach to physical education, school sport, and daily movement. As a qualified teacher, they work collaboratively with staff and external partners to promote inclusive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate physical activity opportunities for all pupils.	Sensory and Behavioural Regulation, Physical Play, Active Classrooms, Quality Physical Education, Organised Physical Activity, School Sport	Physical activity across the school is overseen by a physical activity co-ordinator who reports to school leaders and governors about the quality of provision.	Physical activity across the school is overseen by a Physical Activity Co-ordinator who is actively supported by school leaders and given some dedicated time to quality assure and support the improvement of provision.	Physical activity across the school is overseen by a Physical Activity Coordinator who ensures a consistent, high-quality approach to Physical Education, school sport, and daily movement. As a qualified teacher, they work collaboratively with staff and external partners to promote inclusive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate physical activity opportunities for all pupils.	The Physical Activity Co-ordinator is a school leader who drives high quality physical education, school sport and promotes physical activity, movement and physical play. The culture of the school supports all aspects of provision.	
Our children and young people have the opportunity to engage in leadership opportunities , through PE, sport, physical activity, movement or active play, in a way that is meaningful to them and reflects their abilities and preferences.	Physical Play, Active Classrooms, Quality Physical Education, Organised Physical Activity, School Sport	Opportunities are in place for pupils to learn to lead within Physical Education, school sport, physical activity, movement and play in school. This may be most developed in curriculum activities, for example leading a partner in an activity during PE.	Increasing opportunities are in place for pupils to learn to lead within Physical Education, school sport, physical activity, movement and play in school. Development of physical activity leaders includes activities at playtimes and outside the curriculum.	Our children and young people have the opportunity to engage in leadership opportunities, through Physical Education, sport, physical activity, movement or active play, in a way that is meaningful to them and reflects their abilities and preferences.	Engaging in physical activity leadership opportunities is encouraged as a social development opportunity that impacts on all curriculum areas and pupil behaviours. Opportunities are identified systematically for pupils, based on their preference and ability, and pupils have the opportunity to take part in a variety of leadership roles throughout their time at the school.	

<p>Children in our school are given opportunities, where appropriate, to take part in competitive activities that are inclusive, supportive, and centred around fun and enjoyment. We value the social aspects of sport—teamwork, friendship, and shared experiences—as much as the competition itself, and aim to create a positive environment where every pupil can participate with confidence and a sense of belonging.</p>	<p>School Sport</p>	<p>Competitive opportunities are provided for our pupils throughout lessons and school sports day activities.</p>	<p>Children are Pupils are encouraged, where appropriate, to engage in competition regularly throughout our Physical Education, school sport, and physical activity offer which includes pupils taking part in 'Personal Challenge'.</p>	<p>Children in our school are given opportunities, where appropriate, to take part in competitive activities that are inclusive, supportive, and centred around fun and enjoyment. We value the social aspects of sport—teamwork, friendship, and shared experiences—as much as the competition itself, and aim to create a positive environment where every pupil can participate with confidence and a sense of belonging.</p>	<p>The school provides a wide range of opportunities for all pupils, where appropriate, to participate in competition. Pupils are targeted to ensure appropriate, inclusive and supportive opportunities for all. Pupils are able to meaningfully engage in opportunities to develop social skills, work as part of a team and build resilience, and the school fully engages with the sportsmanship principles of competition, ensuring a focus on fun.</p>	
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<p>Our school encourages and supports pupils to achieve a total of 60 minutes of physical activity daily, inside and outside the school day, recognising the importance of movement for health, regulation, and wellbeing. For pupils with complex needs, this may include adapted activities, active play, or therapeutic movement at school, home or in the community. We work in partnership with families and carers to share strategies, resources, and ideas that make physical activity accessible and enjoyable beyond the school setting.</p>	<p>Sensory and Behavioural Regulation, Physical Play, Active Classrooms, Quality Physical Education, Organised Physical Activity, School Sport</p>	<p>Our school communicates supportively with parents and carers about the importance ensuring that children meet guidelines of 60 minutes daily physical activity for health and wellbeing.</p>	<p>Our school has a clear strategy to support teachers, classroom assistants, parents and carers to help children to achieve 60 minutes physical activity daily, inside and outside the school day. Monitoring of the strategy is starting to lead to targeted support for pupils' and families.</p>	<p>Our school encourages and supports pupils to achieve a total of 60 minutes of physical activity daily, inside and outside the school day, recognising the importance of movement for health, regulation, and wellbeing. For pupils with complex needs, this may include adapted activities, active play, or therapeutic movement at school, home or in the community. We work in partnership with families and carers to share strategies, resources, and ideas that make physical activity accessible and enjoyable beyond the school setting.</p>	<p>Our school community has a shared understanding of the importance of physical activity and how all children will achieve 60 minutes daily physical activity, including targeted pupils. Key outcomes reflect the priority for our school.</p>	
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Appendix 2: School Physical Activity, Movement and Play Policy Template

Physical Activity, Movement Behaviour and Play Policy

Policy Title: Physical Activity, Movement and Play Policy

Policy Number: [Optional]

Consultation That Has Taken Place: e.g. *this policy has been developed by a working group (including, give names) which has consulted with parents, pupils, staff etc. (say how briefly)*

How the Policy will be Disseminated to Schools Community:

Approved By: [Board of Governors/Principal Name]

Date of Implementation: [DD/MM/YYYY]

Review Date: [DD/MM/YYYY or Annually]

Person(s) Responsible for Implementation and Monitoring:

Links to Other Policies/Documents:

- Health and Wellbeing Policy
- Behaviour Management Policy
- Physical Education (PE) Policy
- School Travel Plan
- Curriculum and Assessment Policy
- Pupil Wellbeing and Engagement Plan
- School Development Plan
- Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy

1. Rationale

At [School Name], we recognise the essential role of physical activity and healthy movement behaviours in supporting the physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing of our pupils. This policy outlines our commitment to creating an active school environment that aligns with national curriculum requirements and supports our whole-school development plan.

The policy may include reference to:

- The ethos of the school as a health promoting school
- The national targets encouraging a minimum of one-hour physical activity per day
- The decreasing levels of physical activity among children

- Physical activity affecting the ability of children to learn effectively
- The role of the school in contributing to family and community health and wellbeing
- Anything else?

2. Policy Aims

A primary aim should be outlined:

For example:

To promote a culture of movement that supports the health and wellness of everyone in the school community, including pupils, staff, and families.

or

To foster an environment that actively encourages and enables all members of the school to engage in regular movement and physical activity.

Objectives

Schools should also outline the agreed upon objectives decided in consultation with stakeholders from the school community. *What are the intended outcomes of your physical activity policy?*

Examples of Objectives:

- To ensure clear and consistent promotion of physical activity across both the curriculum and the wider school environment.
- To support pupils in achieving recommended physical activity levels as outlined in national guidelines.
- To promote active lifestyles and reduce sitting time among pupils and staff.
- To align school practices with curriculum expectations for physical education and health.
- To integrate movement opportunities across the school day and curriculum.
- To support school development goals related to pupil wellbeing, engagement, and academic performance.
- To broaden pupils' awareness, attitudes, and experiences related to physical activity and healthy lifestyles.
- To build pupils' confidence and self-esteem through physical activity, while encouraging teamwork and cooperation.

3. Curriculum Alignment

In accordance with [CCEA The Northern Ireland Curriculum](#) :

- Physical Education (PE) will be delivered in line with grade-level expectations, ensuring progression of movement skills, health knowledge, and physical literacy.
- Health and Wellbeing strands will be embedded across learning areas to support knowledge about active living and healthy behaviours.
- Cross-curricular opportunities (e.g., science, maths, geography) will include movement-based or outdoor learning where appropriate.

4. Implementation and Practice

How will the objectives be met? What will be referenced and acted on in your policy?

Consider how you might address each domain of physical activity in Special Education Settings.

Examples are given below:

4.1 Movement for Sensory and Behavioural Regulation

- Incorporate movement-based strategies throughout the school day to support sensory regulation, attention, and emotional wellbeing—such as sensory circuits, movement breaks, and calm body activities.
- Provide staff with training and resources to identify and implement appropriate physical strategies that assist pupils with behavioural regulation and support individual learning needs.

4.2 Physical Education

- Physical Education (PE) lessons will be inclusive, developmentally appropriate, and promote enjoyment and lifelong participation in physical activity.
- Pupils will be provided with 2 hours of PE per week per the NI curriculum guidance.

4.3 Active Classrooms

- Movement and physical activity will be integrated into classroom routines and learning strategies.
- Teachers will be supported with resources and training to facilitate active learning (e.g., Forest School sessions will be offered as part of the school's commitment to outdoor, experiential learning that promotes physical activity, resilience, and emotional wellbeing).
- Teachers are encouraged to include active breaks (e.g., brain breaks, movement games) during extended periods of seated learning.

4.4 Physical Play

- Pupils will have access to structured and unstructured physical activity opportunities during break time and lunch.
- Outdoor environments will be designed and maintained to encourage safe and active play.

4.5 Organised Physical Activity (OPA)

- All pupils will be supported to engage in 60 minutes of physical activity per school day, through PE lessons, active lessons and play breaks, movement for sensory regulation and school sport and through organised physical activities.
- Example of Programmes: e.g. Daily Mile, DrumFit, Wiggle time

4.6 School Sport

- A variety of sports, clubs, and physical activity opportunities will be offered during the school day to promote additional participation.

5. Additional Action Items

Promotion/Encouragement/Publicity/Information About Physical Activity

E.g. displaying bright colourful posters/pupils work etc encouraging physical activity, posters etc promoting/detailing after school clubs etc.

Consultation

How will pupils/parents be asked for their ideas (e.g. for activities or after school clubs)? How can views be taken into account in decision making?

Inclusion

How will the policy deal with equal opportunities e.g. complex needs, all ages, gender, ability differentiation?

Training for Staff/Volunteers

Ensuring all staff involved receive appropriate INSET and other training, making sure all parent/volunteer coaches hold appropriate qualifications

Safety and Risk Assessment

First aid training and Risk Assessment

Facilities/Resources

Do you need to consider facilities or look at purchasing new resources?

Use of Wider Opportunities

Links to Community Organisations

Say how school will develop/maintain links other organisations and opportunities etc as appropriate

Parental Involvement

Plans for sharing policy with parents and carers as well as highlighting the benefits of physical activity and involving parents and carers in physical activity with their children.

6. Staff Roles and Responsibilities

Examples:

- School Leadership: Ensure physical activity is prioritised in strategic planning and resource allocation.
- Teachers: Integrate movement into classroom activities and follow the PE curriculum.
- PA Champion/Coordinators: Lead the implementation of this policy, monitor participation, and support staff with training and planning.
- Parents/Guardians: Encourage active lifestyles at home and support school-based initiatives.

7. Monitoring and Evaluation

How will you know whether the objectives have been met? How will physical activity be monitored and reported in school? Who has responsibility for monitoring?

Examples:

- Regular review of pupil participation rates in PE and extracurricular activities.
- Annual evaluation of policy impact on pupil wellbeing and academic engagement (aligned with the School Development Plan).
- Feedback from pupils, parents, and staff will inform ongoing improvements.

8. Review and Communication

This policy will be reviewed every [1–3 years], or sooner if required, and updates will be communicated to the whole school community through newsletters, meetings, and the school website.

Signed:

Principal: _____

Date: _____

Pupil Council? Parents? Board of Governors?

