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England



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University

Protecting and improving the nation's health

Active mile briefing: implementation guide

A briefing for public health teams, commissioners, schools, headteachers and teachers

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Executive summary

Active mile initiatives can be defined as initiatives which support pupils to be active during the school day by providing regular opportunities for them to move¹ around a marked route for a dedicated period of time, for example 15 minutes, and at a self-directed pace. It is thought that if moving continuously for this amount of time, most children will accumulate the equivalent distance of approximately one mile. As such, they have been termed as active mile initiatives.

Active mile initiatives have gained in popularity and momentum over recent years. Their use has predominantly focused on primary schools, therefore there is limited research and/or information on their delivery with other age groups and/or settings such as nurseries and secondary schools. However, many of the principles are equally valid, for example they require no specialised equipment or resources.

The evidence base surrounding the implementation of active mile initiatives is evolving and further research is needed to inform influences on the quality of delivery and sustainability of these initiatives in schools. However, the evidence reviewed in this document indicates that:

- active mile initiatives are just one way in which schools can increase children's daily activity and should form part of a broader, more comprehensive whole school approach to physical activity
- active mile initiatives may require a level of planned adaptation to 'fit' within the unique contexts of the school as there is no one-size fits all approach
- schools would benefit from focusing on the quality of implementation and how the active mile initiative could be expanded, enhanced and/or extended as part of whole school provision
- active mile initiatives should provide an additional opportunity to be active during the school day, they are not equivalent to and should not replace Physical Education (PE)

This briefing accompanies, and should be used alongside, [Active mile briefing: evidence and policy summary](#) and [Practice examples of active mile initiatives in schools](#).

¹ It is acknowledged that there are many modes of travelling during an active mile initiative such as running, jogging, walking and pushing which shall be collectively referred to as 'move'

Active mile initiatives and their delivery in schools

Much of the research on active mile initiatives to date has focused on how they have been incorporated into schools in practice. The findings from this work suggest the following are the types of factors schools should be encouraged to think about and can be used to guide the adoption and implementation of active mile initiatives.

The type of active mile initiative

Factors relating to the characteristics of the specific active mile initiative have been shown to have an influence on delivery. Specifically, schools would benefit from considering:

- adaptability or flexibility of the initiative as well as the simplicity of the concept, where aspects of the initiative can be modified 'to fit' the school whilst still retaining their original purpose (for example its timing during the school day) ^{1,2}
- compatibility with ethos and values of the school, felt to be particularly important when choosing to adopt a programme and to secure staff buy-in ²
- the need for resources with good quality resources (for example pupil rewards such as certificates and stickers), more likely to be valued and used ²

The school context

Factors relating to the school setting (that is the physical, social and educational dimensions of the school), have been shown to have an influence on delivery. Specifically, schools would benefit from considering:

- the physical environment and outdoor space available for the initiative, where having adequate and accessible outdoor space has been shown to be important for sustainability ³
- the type of route used by the pupils (for example surface and its suitability for the weather, location and length) has been found to be related to pupils' enjoyment, with pupils preferring to use a grass surface rather than tarmac ⁴ while grass was found to be the least favoured by teachers due to inclement weather ¹
- accessibility of space has been found to be associated with the time of day the initiative was delivered, with more congestion experienced during the lunchtime period ²
- engaging with parents and the wider school community to encourage sustainability of the active mile initiative ⁵

The organisation of the school

Factors relating to the administrative structure of the school have been shown to have an influence on delivery. Specifically, schools would benefit from considering:

- staff buy-in and how to secure it to ensure efficient administration of the initiative² and its sustainability in the longer term³ - this can be aided by giving teachers control over when in the day they make use of an active mile^{1,5}
- the schools' physical activity policies and goals, specifically how well the active mile initiative aligns with existing strategies and practices²
- time and ability to establish the initiative within the school routine⁶, specifically the time needed to deliver the active mile sessions in order to reduce: the negative impact on learning time and/or erosion of curricular time; reduce pressure on teachers' workload; and ease competing demands related to other curricular needs^{1,2,5-8}

The participating pupils

Individual factors relating to pupils have been shown to have an influence on delivery. Specifically, schools would benefit from considering:

- promoting pupil autonomy to participate, that is, the degree to which pupils can exercise ownership over their own participation - autonomy over when (for example which days) and how (for example by running, jogging, walking or a combination of all three) to participate has been reported to be a favourable aspect of pupils' participation⁴
- the positive influence of peers, particularly on the development of social cohesion and fostering a fun and supportive activity environment^{2,4,7}
- the negative influence of peers, such as teasing based on their peers' ability to participate^{6,7} and stigmatising discourses targeted at overweight, those that move at a slower pace and/or less 'sporty' children^{6,7} - teasing may be more likely when individually-based competition is included as part of the active mile⁵
- potential compensatory behaviour, whereby increased activity during the school day could lead to pupils choosing more sedentary pursuits during their leisure time²

Staff delivering the active mile initiative

Factors relating to teachers and members of school staff responsible for delivering the initiative have been shown to have an influence on delivery. Specifically, schools would benefit from considering:

- introducing planned adaptations, such as the inclusion of games to maintain interest and provide a sense of fun⁷

- providing support and encouragement (for example such as feedback on progress, recognition of regular participation and commitment) and establishing when and how best to do so ^{4,5}
- role modelling physical activity behaviour by encouraging staff to participate in the active mile initiative with pupils ⁴⁻⁶
- ensuring consistency in how the active mile initiative is delivered from session to session and between one staff member and another ^{1,2,5}
- use of monitoring and goal setting and encouraging pupils to set themselves targets to achieve ^{2,4,5}

Ways to support the implementation of active mile initiatives

Several key issues relating to the implementation and use of active mile initiatives have been raised as part of the review and stakeholder consultation process when developing this briefing and which warrant further consideration. These are addressed below.

Sustainability

The value in any physical activity initiative is in its ability to promote long term participation and behaviour change. Despite some active mile initiatives having been established in 2012, their sustainability and ability to generate continued increases in children's participation is yet to be determined.

Physical activity programmes such as active mile initiatives, which are based on practitioner experience and perceived need, often evolve as a result of adaptations and/or pupil and staff responsiveness. Particular attention should be given to the quality of implementation and how teachers can be supported to expand, enhance and extend the active mile initiative as part of their whole school provision to ensure that pupils become and remain engaged.

In practice, as time progresses, the active mile initiative may develop into a broad programme of daily physical activity which incorporates simple and low-cost activities (see the Daily Boost in [Practice examples of active mile initiatives](#)). It is likely that optional active mile initiatives may be harder to sustain in the longer term therefore it is recommended that school senior management teams are encouraged to complete regular reviews of the active mile initiative to ensure that it continues to meet pupils' and staffs' needs and interests.

Alignment with whole school approaches to physical activity

Active mile initiatives are designed to help pupils accumulate additional physical activity. When used appropriately they could make a meaningful contribution to meeting a school's target of providing a minimum of 30 active minutes during the school day and help children to meet the Chief Medical Officers' physical activity guidelines ⁹.

Adopting an active mile initiative as part of a whole school approach to physical activity would help to ensure that it is used most effectively by: securing staff buy-in; raising its profile within the school; and establishing its place in the school's routine practice. The [Creating Active Schools Framework](#) ¹⁰ may provide a useful tool for schools to refer to

when planning their provision and identifying opportunities to introduce an active mile initiative.

Active mile initiatives as a replacement for Physical Education

Active mile initiatives are neither equivalent to nor should they be used as a substitute for PE. Such practices have been reported in the literature⁸ and would serve to undermine the importance of PE which, as a curriculum subject, has multiple and broader goals than focusing on the promotion of physical activity¹¹. Furthermore, use of active mile initiatives would also offset the multiple benefits of delivering an active mile initiative as a discrete activity during the school day.

Timing of the active mile initiative

As noted earlier, active mile initiatives can be used at different periods during the school day. However, timing of the active mile initiative can offer multiple benefits as well as opportunity costs, and schools will have to balance and/or adapt then and how they deliver the active mile initiative according to the school context and outcomes most relevant to their pupils' needs.

Inclusive physical activity opportunities such as active mile initiatives may help to reduce health inequalities among children and young people. For example, those active mile initiatives which take place during the curriculum are more likely to reach larger numbers of children than those which take place during more discretionary periods of the school day, for example break and lunchtime.

Before and after school active mile opportunities may be beneficial in allowing pupils to participate with their friends and/or family and may also help improve school attendance and punctuality (see Berrymead Junior School in [Practice examples of active mile initiatives in schools](#)).

Use of active mile initiatives during discretionary time periods may undermine necessary respite from learning and academic tasks, however pupils who choose to participate at these times are likely to do so for intrinsic reasons of fun and enjoyment which are essential for the promotion of long term participation. Active mile initiatives used during curriculum time, where all pupils participate at the same time, can be seen as more compulsory and therefore less enjoyable periods of activity. However, ensuring that pupils have some autonomy, for example over how they move, how fast they move and who they participate with, can help to mitigate these issues.

The effectiveness of delivering active mile initiatives during different times of the school day to increase children's' total physical activity is unknown. It is worth noting that for some, participation in an active mile may replace sedentary time but for others this may

replace other forms of physical activity (for example free play such as playing tag or football).

Consequently, schools are encouraged to embed physical activity through the use of high-quality programmes as part of the school day which empower young people to make independent choices about their physical activity behaviour.

Safety

Change of clothing and footwear are non-essential elements of participation in most active mile initiatives thereby removing some of the common barriers to participation in physical activity; however, clothing and footwear which is fit for purpose is a prerequisite of safe practice for physical activity¹². This is particularly important given the intention for these initiatives to be used in all weathers and the suitability of some school environments and surfaces for participating in inclement weather.

Inclusivity

Active mile initiatives are promoted as being inclusive opportunities which are suitable for most children regardless of age, ability or circumstance. To be truly inclusive, there is a need to define participation more broadly to address the needs of all pupils and focus on the multitude of benefits these initiatives can bring rather than a single outcome such as fitness. For example, children with minimal mobility should still be encouraged to participate, by fulfilling a peer leader/champion role, monitoring distance, or handing out counting blocks/lap bands.

Creating a supportive school context can help to sustain engagement particularly for the least active children who potentially have the most to gain from participating in terms of their health (see Desk to Daily Mile in [Practice examples of active mile initiatives in schools](#)).

Engaging the whole school community to support physical activity opportunities by training teaching support staff, volunteers and potentially parents to lead an active mile initiative may be a viable option to strengthen the capacity of the school to deliver the initiative. This is particularly so given specialist knowledge or expertise is not necessary for such informal activity.

Teacher flexibility and autonomy

Teachers and school staff have a significant and influential role in the implementation of initiatives in schools. Given the diversity associated with school settings, it is unlikely that a 'one size fits all' approach to implementing an active mile initiative will be effective. Teachers and school staff will need to exercise a degree of flexibility while

balancing autonomy to adapt delivery to suit pupil needs and circumstances. However, consideration must be given to whether modifications may strengthen outcomes associated with the initiative and enhance sustainability or undermine its aims, objectives and pupil experience.

Suitability of the school environment

Adequate space, pupil preference and playground density are important factors to consider when scheduling active mile initiatives, particularly for engaging pupils for sufficient duration and intensity to benefit their health. Accessibility to outdoor space is likely to be perpetuated by the time of day the active mile initiative is taking place. Active mile initiatives which take place during curriculum time may have an advantage over lunchtime active mile initiatives in this respect, when space is more of a premium (See Selsted C of E primary school in [Practice examples of active mile initiatives in schools](#)).

Use of PE and Sport Premium to support active mile initiatives

PE and Sport Premium funding ¹³ should be used to make additional and sustainable improvements to the quality of PE and sport primary schools offer. The funding provides a good opportunity to upskill staff and embed running initiatives as part of longer-term school strategies for inspiring daily physical activity (See Active Cumbria in [Practice examples of active mile initiatives in schools](#)). However, it should not be used to support capital spend, such as the installation of running tracks or surfaces, and schools are encouraged to demonstrate, through a self-review, which of the 5 key indicators any expenditure addresses. These include:

- the engagement of all pupils in regular physical activity
- the profile of PE and sport is raised across the school as a tool for whole-school improvement
- increased confidence, knowledge and skills of all staff in teaching PE and sport
- broader experience of a range of sport and activities offered to all pupils
- increased participation in competitive sport

Top tips for teachers

Before beginning an active mile initiative

Recruit a Champion

Identify a member of school staff who can fulfil the role of Champion for the active mile initiative. The success of this role is more dependent on credibility, ability to influence and galvanise both staff and pupils, willingness and capacity, rather than seniority. An interest in physical activity is desirable but not essential.

Identify what support is available

The use of young leaders and peer champions can be very effective and help to engage and sustain fellow pupils' participation.

Consult with key stakeholders

Speak to staff, governors, pupils and parents to gauge their interest in an active mile initiative and any potential barriers plus strategies to negate or minimise their impact.

Identify aims and priorities

Include what success means for the school and how it could be sustained and embedded into practice. In doing so it is important to also identify any potential unintended outcomes from the initiative, for example a compensatory reduction in attendance at after school clubs and reduction in free play during breaktime.

Reinforce the importance of PE

Develop a policy which provides advice on delivering the active mile initiative within the curriculum but which protects the importance of PE as a curriculum subject and prevents the use of an active mile initiative as part of PE.

Review physical activity policies

Consider relaxing any potentially restricting physical activity policies, for example the need to change footwear and/or clothing, whilst not compromising health and safety, in order to make participation easier.

Train school staff

Provide training for school staff (including adults other than teachers) to assist with any administration associated with the active mile initiative and address any potential issues with it.

Trial delivering at different times of the day

Run the initiative before school, during class time and breaktimes and lunchtimes and establish which is most manageable to deliver, appealing and beneficial to pupils.

During the implementation of an active mile initiative

Secure Senior Management Team (SMT) support

Encouraging SMT to participate in the active mile initiative and/or be visible in the area while the initiative is underway is particularly useful during early delivery but can also be beneficial in sustaining motivation for, and interest in, participation.

Focus on the benefits for pupils

Communicate and reinforce the multiple benefits of participating to pupils, particularly the more immediate short-term benefits, for example fun, opportunity to get some fresh air and spend time with friends.

Develop a supportive climate

Recognise individual participation and reward individual effort rather than make comparisons between pupils.

Provide varied opportunities and cater for all pupils

Consider different forms of engagement and roles an active mile initiative can offer, for example pupil ambassador/peer leader, monitoring distances covered and milestones achieved, and issuing rewards. Incorporate developmentally appropriate practices which recognise individuals' differing and changing capacities for physical activity. For example, allow pupils to participate at their own level and pace (that is using a combination of different ways of moving/travelling).

Be flexible

Ensure there is an appropriate balance between pupil autonomy and initiative structure. For example, one option may be the delivery of a combination of one regular/fixed running session a week and one more flexible 'open' session.

Emphasise fun and enjoyment

Focus on developing a positive activity experience over and above competition or distance covered.

Use a buddying system

Encourage pupils to participate together and facilitate social cohesion.

Provide role models

Encourage staff to participate and become role models for the initiative to help make physical activity high profile within the school

Explore links to learning

Examine opportunities to embed learning within and through the use of the active mile initiative, for example, via the introduction of cross-curricular learning opportunities.

As the active mile initiative develops

Signpost pupils

Community-based walk/run opportunities may be available locally to facilitate pupils' participation beyond school (for example Junior Parkrun) and in which case signpost pupils to these and encourage them to participate with friends and family.

Monitor and evaluate progress

Collectively review the initiative on an ongoing basis to ensure it continues to meet pupils' needs and adapt and tailor it accordingly. Monitor the impact it is having, for example in line with the agreed aims for the school. Discuss possible adaptations with other members of staff, and possibly pupils, within the school and the active mile Initiative provider/support team. Communicate any adaptations clearly, apply them consistently and monitor the changes to limit unintended adaptation.

Use the active mile initiative as part of daily physical activity

Consider if and how the active mile initiative could be implemented as part of a strategy to include daily physical activity within the school's provision.

Additional resources

Whilst it is recognised that there are many other local variations of active mile initiatives, support for the implementation is available from active mile providers which operate at a national level. The following list is not exhaustive and is intended to serve as a quick reference point.

School based active mile providers

Golden Mile

The Golden Mile is a safe, simple and measurable health and physical activity initiative accessible to all age groups regardless of ability. Find out more at www.premier-education.com/golden-mile

Marathon Kids

Marathon Kids is a free programme which gives primary school children the opportunity to run or walk multiple marathons over the school year. Find out more at www.kidsrunfree.co.uk/mk

The Daily Mile

The Daily Mile is simple and free and gets children out of the classroom for fifteen minutes every day to run or jog, at their own pace, with their classmates, making them fitter, healthier and more able to concentrate in the classroom. Find out more at www.thedailymile.co.uk

School-based active mile events

Go Run for Fun

GO Run For Fun is an international children's health and fitness campaign, designed to inspire children to be more active through fun, short distance running events and a pupil-led educational programme. Find out more at www.gorunforfun.com

Race for Life Schools

Opportunity for schools to receive resources and support to host their own Race for Life event based on a distance (or multiple distances) of the schools choosing. Find out more at <https://raceforlife.cancerresearchuk.org/schools>

Examples of practice to support the delivery of active mile initiatives are provided in [Practice examples of active mile initiatives in schools](#).

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