



FEPI Reply to the GREEN PAPER on
“Promoting healthy diets and physical activity: a European dimension for the
prevention of overweight, obesity and chronic diseases”
15th March 2006

FEPI, the Federation of the European Play industry (www.fepi-play.org), represents in Brussels the interests of the most responsible manufacturers and distributors of both outdoor and indoor play equipment and safety surfacing. The products can range from inflatable structures to traditional slides, swings and everything in between.

FEPI is composed of 14 companies (located in 11 European countries: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, Sweden, UK) and 6 national federations (in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the UK) representing 188 members. The European Industry of Play has a turnover of 1 billion Euros and employs 8 000 people directly and 6 000 additional people indirectly. FEPI has received the mandate to raise awareness of the importance of children’s play and well-being.

FEPI would like to express its deep appreciation of the EU’s initiative to consult all interested parties in order to “*identify the possible contribution at Community level of promoting healthy diets and physical activity*”. The reason thereof, is that FEPI members are worried and concerned about the increase of obesity among European children and its consequences on children’s health. FEPI members believe that investing in playgrounds which are easily accessible for all children would help reduce the obesity epidemic and its consequent health and social costs for the European society. FEPI is convinced that, fulfilling children’s basic needs for free playgrounds will make children develop into happy, healthy, social and engaged citizens. By starting physical activity at an early stage and keeping teenagers (especially weak minority groups) within positive circles, FEPI is persuaded that we can secure a healthy development of the European citizens of tomorrow.

Please find below FEPI replies on some specific questions concerning physical activity.

1) What are the concrete contributions, which Community policies, if any, should make towards the promotion of healthy diets and physical activity, and towards creating environments which make healthy choices easy choices?

1. Recommendations to allocate more space for playgrounds

FEPI is calling for uniform recommendations and binding directives regarding the location, the size, the quality of playgrounds and the harmonisation of regulations allocating space for

playgrounds and sports areas in all EU Member States. FEPI recommends using the Finnish regulations as a concrete benchmark for town planners (see appendix 1), because they integrate playgrounds as a structural component of the constructed society and as part of the city infrastructure.

As explained in the Play & Value report enclosed (see appendix 2), playgrounds are a basis for life long learning, physical exercise and good habits. Playgrounds are the source of voluntary learning, action, risk management, friendship and togetherness, as well as fun, not only for children, but also for adults who are involved in the play and the growth/education of children. Playgrounds enable playful and versatile collaboration of different age groups and interaction between them. Beside the function of socially and culturally important public places, playgrounds broaden the area of learning environments and support the diversity of moving and learning.

2. Increase investment for playground construction and maintenance

In European countries, the investment for playground equipment, installation and construction is currently at approximately 4 euros per inhabitant per annum. Daytime care and education budgets are approximately 2,000 euros per inhabitant. Therefore by adding just one tenth, of one per cent of the day care and education budget, it would be possible to have a 50 per cent increase in expenditure on providing playgrounds and a wider choice for learning, growth and comfortable living.

2) On which areas related to nutrition, physical activity, the development of tools for the analysis of related disorders, and consumer behaviour is more research needed?

FEPI would recommend greater research be carried out in school environments especially in the ways to foster and increase physical activity within the learning process, and on its impact on children's health and willingness to move further. Furthermore, it seems that appropriate and detailed data on the link between physical inactivity and health are presently inexistent for the overall community, implying that accurate Europe wide research is still needed, which would allow a primary and fundamental mapping of the general situation and serve as a basis for the strategic political decisions.

3) What is good practice for the provision of physical activity in schools on a regular basis?

Since the consequences of sedentary hours can certainly cause:

- Cardiac and circulatory problems
- Insufficient oxygen support of the brain and all the other organs
- Problems of the digestive system
- Muscle tension and amyosthenia
- Dehydration of the intervertebral discs
- Reduction of bone density
- Problems with the backbone and the whole musculoskeletal system ¹,

FEPI believes that a central task of schools and educational institutions should be to prevent long and frequent sitting hours and to promote exercise as well as overall indoor / outdoor

¹ Oppolzer, U. (2004): *Bewegte Schüler lernen leichter*, verlag modernes lernen borgmann publishing

activities in the framework of safe and secure playing infrastructures. In this respect, FEPI's concrete suggestions could take the form of:

- a) Enhanced exercises and bodily experiences while learning, implying for example a combination of reading practices and conceptual learning with gymnastics activities. Thus, the learning process is based on holistic perception and results in long lasting memory. The school breaks also constitute an important part of the learning course especially if schoolyards and playing areas are designed and created respecting the children's need for informal learning.
- b) Increased outdoor activities at schools (additional lessons to be provided in outdoor environments).
- c) Intensifying the use of the whole body in the learning process (not only visual / hearing stimulus, but through all senses as well as the different learning styles. Motivate pupils' reactions and encourage children to move).
- d) Promoting physical education on a larger and longer scale, implying an increase in the weekly hours dedicated to physical education.
- e) Multiplying playgrounds facilities and diversified infrastructures for different ages of children. Developing the installation of climbing grips in edifices; increasing the construction of balancing structures; etc.
- f) Fostering the creation of activity points by e.g. table tennis tables, basketball and football systems, play equipment with climbing functions and skate equipments
- g) Encouraging exercise in the everyday life, suggesting offering workshops like dancing or judo.

It goes without saying that schools and more broadly all educational institutions but also commercial, disability, park and recreational institutes supporting active exercise, contribute to the development of healthier, safer and more confident children as well as citizens. Moreover, they subsequently play a fundamental role in a balanced lifestyle approach, combating the so called overweight and sedentary features of modern society and encouraging pupils and adults' development with better oxygen support and stress relief. Ultimately, it will also have a fundamental impact on state economies through the alleviation of health care spending as well as social implications, as was recently experienced in the French suburbs.

4) *How can the media, health services, civil society and relevant sectors of industry support health education efforts made by schools? What role can public-private partnerships play in this regard?*

In the case of schools and/or more generally town areas being provided with new playing facilities, FEPI believes that a partnership between all interested parties i.e. local governmental administrations, school pupils, parents, directors and teachers, inspectors, local communities, playground designers, health authorities and manufacturers is of the utmost importance in the success of a playground project. This would definitely result in a win / win situation, where beneficial outcomes would be shared by all parties contributing to the well being of the overall society. FEPI would therefore welcome the combination of such efforts and would concretely assist the European Commission in the elaboration and promotion of such platforms.

5) *In which ways can public policies contribute to ensure that physical activity be "built into" daily routines?*

FEPI regretfully acknowledges the overall lack of qualified professionals within local governing bodies, who would be capable of ensuring that children have free access to first-class playing opportunities and facilities. According to a well-documented research from the Institute for Athletics at the University of Copenhagen published in May 2004, it appears that a direct and fundamental correlation exists between the physical health of children and the quality of play spaces at schools and after-school playgrounds.

As a result, FEPI considers that public policies contributions can be instigated and promoted through the elaboration of specific legal recommendations aimed at encouraging and supporting the involvement of all the local community towards the refurbishing and/or the creation of playing areas. In other words, specific, legally based obligations should constrain urban architects to include playgrounds and sporting areas within the different phases of cities planning and establish a minimal quantity of required playing and physical area as a ratio per number of urban inhabitants or per geographical square kilometres.

6) *Which measures are needed to foster the development of environments that are conducive to physical activity?*

1. *Allocate more space for playgrounds and sports grounds (proximity)*

As described above, FEPI believes that children should be able to benefit from different styles and sizes of playing opportunities ranging from the small ones in private houses' gardens or on housing estates, to the playgrounds of residential areas or geographical municipalities with a precise distance criteria of maximum 500 metres enabling the child to walk safely to the physical facilities. Furthermore, a similar distance condition of 2-3 km should be applied for schoolyards and/or sports grounds.

2. *Increase neighbourhood's safety*

FEPI is of the opinion that one of the reasons explaining parent's reluctance to let their children play freely in outdoor spaces originates in their psychological feeling of insecurity. In this respect, efforts should be invested towards the increase of neighbourhood safety and specific projects should be funded to effectively combat uncertainty and overall urban diffidence.

3. *Increase play and sports area maintenance budgets*

FEPI believes that extra resources need to be invested in the maintenance of playgrounds so that they remain attractive and safe for children. Moreover, playgrounds should be examined on a regular basis by accredited experts and inspectors so as to determine if they still respect the same original fundamental conditions as when first installed.

4. *Create a partnership between local authorities, local communities and playground designers and manufacturers (attractiveness, accessibility)*

As explained above, FEPI is convinced that local consultation of families, communities and all interested parties is of vital importance to identify the needs of the citizens and to develop play facilities that are conducive to daily physical activity. Moreover, FEPI considers that involving parents as well as grandparents in the creation or refurbishment of local playgrounds will contribute to the fight against adult and senior obesity, since recent researches² on families with five year old children, demonstrated that when older generations allowed children to spend their time in front of TV or computer screens instead of bringing them to playing areas, the risk of adult obesity increased by about 7% for every hour of television watched by the children.

7) *Which measures, and at what level, would promote healthy diets and physical activity towards population groups and households belonging to certain socio-economic categories, and enable these groups to adopt healthier lifestyles?*

In the case of playgrounds, FEPI believes that creating numerous and diversified opportunities for free play in the vicinity of every child's residence, notwithstanding its socio-economic background or the financial status of the local government, would enable all children to adopt healthier lifestyles.

8) *How can the "clustering of unhealthy habits" that has frequently been demonstrated for certain socio-economic groups be addressed?*

FEPI is persuaded that schools and local governments have an important role to play in this regard.

9) *Which are the most important elements of an integrated and comprehensive approach towards the promotion of healthy diets and physical activity? Which role at national and at Community level?*

FEPI believes that the EU should create the legal and political framework towards an increased allocation of spaces for play and sports grounds at national and European level and provide funding for the creation, refurbishment and maintenance of play areas. FEPI is calling for the harmonisation of maintenance rules, which should include a general accreditation for playgrounds inspectors. Finally, FEPI urges and recommends the initiation of extensive partnership exercises between schools, local authorities, local communities, playground designers, manufacturers and in general terms, all other relevant interested parties for the completion of targeted policies / projects aimed at the prevention and the fight against obesity as a chronic disease.

² Play Today, Winter 2005, commenting on a report appearing in *The Journal of Pediatrics*

10) *Are there issues not addressed in the present Green paper, which need consideration when looking at the European dimension of the promotion of diet, physical activity and health?*

FEPI acknowledges that with respect to children's well being, there are numerous fundamental philosophical issues that need consideration: urbanisation, reduction of family time, the importance of free play and dramatic reduction of time allocated to play.

1. Urbanisation

With a substantial view to the growth of cities and the intensity of modern urbanisation of Europe, the debate on whether the European lifestyle is actually healthy for human beings is an inevitable consequence. Adults at the peak of their productivity might thrive but children as well as elderly people have a hard time. Their natural needs are not respected by the urban and social development of today's world.

Society has drastically changed. Modern transport habits have negatively affected children and teenager mobility since they presently heavily depend on their parents - who, in turn, have less and less time to devote to their family - for their personal transport to organised, physical and social activities. As a result, children can hardly discover their own world through the same cognitive, personal and natural testing methods, having enabled their parents to develop into healthy adults, but more often they learn through computer and video games.

Due to this akinetic modern leisure activity, the only two senses being presently stimulated are hearing and sight with a possible biological consequence that could structurally jeopardize the evolution of the human species.

Room for play decreases as urbanisation increases and very often recreational spaces used for sports or play activities, are transformed into office buildings and housing estates.

2. Importance of free play

Freedom of play is an important part of our children's development into harmonic adults, yet it is not generally respected in the patterns of urban European life. Children are guarded and protected by adults more than ever before and all their common basic activities are, generally speaking, supervised and organised by mature people: in day care, by care assistants; at school, under the authority of teachers; during their spare time, supervised by additional adults. These contacts are of course natural and beneficial for a great variety of developmental reasons however, when 'contact' equates 'control', the benefits become questionable and FEPI is concerned that the above exposed lack of freedom might have an impact on children's development, notwithstanding their right to play. Of particular relevance to the issue of child development and obesity is also the need for children to manage risk when playing. The opportunity to experience risk makes play more exciting and challenging resulting in longer sustained activity, thus helping to combat the danger of obesity, quite apart from being a key part of child development. Children's fundamental right to play, as stated in article 31 of the UN resolution, means to most European children that their time, possibilities, room to play and enjoyment of being children, should be respected. The very basic background of the latter statement is that children learn best through play. Their social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional development originates in the early stages of their growing phase and these competences are stimulated through outdoor play. Children need free, uncontrolled play in the company of their peers to develop genuinely and to acquire the fundamental skills of learning

to interact with other human beings, facing sometimes radical and risky situations. In summary, if we aim to obtain healthy, friendly, well-balanced, inquisitive and creative citizens in the future, we need to stimulate exactly these competences in our children's everyday life. Competences that children willingly and enthusiastically acquire through varied, well equipped and safely designed playgrounds facilities and spaces.

3. Decreased time allocated to play

The UNESCO studies on children's allocated time for play³ demonstrates that it has dramatically decreased over the recent years. Time spent at school has proportionally increased in comparison with the greater time spend by parents at work. According to the Michigan University Institute for Social Research, the time children devote to studies has substantially increased by almost 50 % and consequently, their time for playing has drastically declined from 12 to 3 hours per week. In light of the above, with a view to strongly and urgently reversing the tendency, FEPI urges policy makers to restore a playing and physically active friendly environment through the application of European based legal frameworks.

11) Which of the issues addressed in the present Green paper should receive first priority, and which may be considered less pressing?

From a playground industry perspective, the priority should be put on ensuring that every child can easily access play areas within walking distance from their place of residence, so that the healthy habit of performing daily physical activity continues and is perpetuated through to adulthood.

Conclusion

As expressed above, FEPI, the Federation of the European Play Industry, regrouping the most responsible manufacturers and distributors of both outdoor and indoor play equipment and safety surfacing in Europe (www.fepi-play.org), is truly concerned about the escalating and growing tendencies of modern society and shares the preoccupations expressed by the European Commission DG SANCO in as much as obesity, overweight, sedentary lifestyles and lack of physical activity are negatively affecting the economic, health and overall balance of contemporary developed societies.

In this respect, FEPI urges the European, national and local political institutions to proactively initiate and coordinate explicit strategies or actions, aimed at increasing physical playing activities and promoting the overall movement of younger generations⁴ as well as fostering adult and senior exertion in coordination with their younger age groups.

FEPI therefore remains at the total and absolute disposal of the European Commission for the development of such targeted actions and, through its national members network, offers a complete coordination of the overall European play industry sector for a professional, highly ranked and qualified completion of the commonly determined activities.

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³ Italy: Too little time and space for childhood, Ray Lorenzo, Innocenti Studies 3, 1992

⁴ along the lines developed and explained above

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