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The Physical Activity for
Health Research Centre

Guide to evidence-based physical activity messaging and communication

Physical activity messaging and
communication resource

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Introduction

This guide is based on the principles of the Physical Activity Messaging Framework published in 2021 (Williamson et al., 2021) and aims to inform the creation of messages and other communications relating to physical activity. You are encouraged to work through this guide one step at a time, using each section to inform the next. There is an accompanying worksheet available for you to document the process as you work through this guide.

When working through this resource, you are encouraged to think about the reasons for decisions made at each step. This resource provides evidence-based top tips for creating and delivering physical activity communications at various points, but you could also consider the following questions: Are you able to draw on theory (e.g., psychological theories) to inform your message or communication? Are you able to work with the target audience, or use your previous experience with this group to inform decisions? Is there any existing evidence relating specifically to your target population that can help inform decisions?



Step 1

What are the aims of the message or communication?

■ Who is the intended target audience of the message or communication?

This can be a large or small population group characterised by a specific demographic or trait, for example, people with low levels of activity or people with a specific long term health condition.

Top Tip:

Evidence supports using targeted messages and communications rather than generic 'one size fits all' messages, as this can make messages more relevant and meaningful.

■ What is the context of the message or communication?

Are there any contextual considerations to be made that may affect the way a message is received? For example, the time of year, certain events (e.g., Olympics), global pandemic, or social/political movements?

■ What is the aim of the message or communication?

What do you want to change as a result of this message or communication? For example, do you wish to address barriers or fears relating to physical activity, or increase awareness of local opportunities? Consider outcomes that are realistic and relevant to your target audience. You should think about how your message may realistically achieve your aim. What would a logical pathway from message to end goal be?

Top Tip:

Evidence shows, that though important, messages and communications are unlikely to change behaviour itself in the short-term. Instead, think of more immediate outcomes or aims that may be important stepping stones to behaviour change. Examples may include improving awareness, motivation, confidence, or attitudes.

Step 2

What is in the message or communication?

What type of information will be included?

- There are at least three different types of information that may help achieve the aim(s) identified in Step 1.

■ “What to do” information

- Lets people know how much or what type of physical activity they should do

- E.g. “adults should aim take part in strengthening exercises twice a week”.

Top Tip:

Although the physical activity guidelines suggest 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity a week, we should not promote this as the minimum amount. Rather, we should make it clear that ‘some is good, more is better’ and that ‘every little helps’. It may also be important to convey that the guidelines can be made up in a way that suits each person.

■ “Why to do it” information

- Lets people know what the benefits (or consequences) of being active (or inactive) are

Top Tip:

Across various populations, evidence supports the promotion of short-term benefits that relate to mental and social health (e.g., physical activity makes you feel good), as opposed to promotion of longer-term physical health benefits (e.g., physical activity reduces your risk of heart disease later in life).

Step 2

What is in the message or communication? CONTINUED

■ “How to do it” information

Gives people practical advice or tips on how they can be more active, e.g. provides examples or signposts opportunities

What to do

- Aim for 10,000 steps a day
- Aim for 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity a week

Why do it

- Being active can reduce your risk of heart disease
- Take the stairs - feel less stressed
- Walk to boost your mood

How to do it

- Try walking during your lunch break
- Did you know we run a group walk for staff every Thursday at 12pm?

How will the message be framed?

Will the information in the communication be framed in a positive way to highlight the benefits of being physically active, or in a more negative way to highlight the consequences of not being active?

Top Tip:

Evidence generally supports the use of positively framed communications when aiming to promote physical activity.

Step 2

What is in the message or communication? CONTINUED

How will tailoring, targeting and personalisation be used?

Using tailoring, targeting and/or personalisation can make a message more meaningful and relevant to your target audience.

Tailoring refers to message content being relevant for a specific individual based on their own personal goals or individual data

Targeting refers to message content being relevant for a specific group, characterised by a certain demographic or trait.

Personalisation refers to message or communication content including personal information such as their name.

Top Tip:

The appropriateness and usefulness of tailoring, targeting and personalisation may depend on the type of message/communication you are developing, and it is possible to use more than one of these features in a communication (see examples below).

Generic

Increasing physical activity levels can improve your heart health.

Targeted

Adults should aim for round 30 minutes of exercise a day to improve heart health.

Tailored

You are only 10 minutes of exercise away from your daily goal.
Reach your target to improve your heart health!

Tailored & Personalised

Hi Chloë! You are only 10 minutes of exercise away from your daily goal.
Reach your target to improve your heart health!

Generic & Personalised

Hi Chloë! Increasing physical activity levels can improve your cardiovascular health.

Step 2

What is in the message or communication? CONTINUED

What language will be used in the message?

It is important to consider what language and choice of words are most appropriate for your target population (e.g., ethnically, culturally, and age-appropriate).

Different messages and communications may have different tones (for example, formal, encouraging, or threatening), and it is important that we consider the effect this may have on message effectiveness.

Top Tip:

Evidence suggests that using threatening tones in physical activity messages may be detrimental, and that people do not appreciate being “told off”. Evidence also exists in specific populations (e.g., in new mothers) that supports the use of encouraging, empathetic, and reassuring tones.



Step 3

How will the message be formatted and delivered?

In what way will the information be conveyed?

There are several ways in which the type(s) of information identified in Step 2 can be conveyed, including the use of text/ words (e.g., “physical activity is fun”), the use of images or videos (e.g., showing people having fun while being physically active), and the use of music (e.g., using ‘fun’ music).

Top Tip:

The “This Girl Can” campaign videos are a great example of using music to convey a message.

What will the format of the message be?

Physical activity communications can take several formats, including face-to-face conversations, radio or TV adverts, posters, leaflets, social media posts, emails, SMS or text messages. It is important to select a format that is appropriate for the target audience and aim identified in Step 1.

It is also important to think about the volume or length of the message. For example, how many words are used in a poster, or how many seconds does a TV advert last?

How will the message be delivered?

Who is the provider, messenger, or source of the communication? This could be, for example, health care professionals, family or friends, peers, the media, the Government, or a specific organisation.

Top Tip:

Existing evidence suggests that adults like to receive messages from peers, and that children and young people may prefer to receive message from sources other than GPs or teachers whom they may feel ‘lectured’ by. On the other hand, evidence suggests that older adults, those with long-term conditions and pregnant women value reliable sources such as health care professionals and NHS.

Step 3

How will the message be formatted and delivered? CONTINUED

What setting will the message be delivered in? (e.g., school, at home, at work, GP surgery, bus stop etc). It is important to consider which setting is most convenient or suitable for your target population and for the chosen format.

If relevant, it is important to consider how often will the message or communication will be delivered, at what time, and for how long? (e.g., 3 messages per week at 9am for 3 months).





Research

This resource is based on research from the University of Edinburgh. This research involved a modified Delphi study (Williamson et al., 2021a) with 40 international experts in which consensus was reached on the Physical Activity Messaging Framework and Checklist. The international consensus statement and user guide for the Framework and Checklist have also been published (Williamson et al., 2021b). Both of these studies (see below) are available open access for further information on this research.

Williamson, C., Baker, G., Tomasone, J.R. et al. The Physical Activity Messaging Framework (PAMF) and Checklist (PAMC): International consensus statement and user guide. *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* 18, 164 (2021).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-021-01230-8>

Williamson, C., Kelly, P., Tomasone, J.R. et al. A modified Delphi study to enhance and gain international consensus on the Physical Activity Messaging Framework (PAMF) and Checklist (PAMC). *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* 18, 108 (2021).

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