

Plan to give pupils fish oil capsules

Isabel Oakeshott
Deputy Political Editor

CHILDREN are to be given daily fish oil capsules at school under plans being considered by the government.

The Department for Education and Skills believes the supplements could boost youngsters' brainpower and improve behaviour in the classroom.

The plan follows mounting concern that children are not getting enough omega 3 fats in their daily diet because of the rise in use of convenience food. Alan Johnson, the education secretary, has confirmed that the government is looking into providing the capsules as part of the drive to improve nutrition in schools.

The Food Standards Agency, the government's advisory body, is conducting a large review into the effect of omega 3 fish oil supplements on children's behaviour, the results of which will determine whether or not ministers push ahead with the proposal.

"The government is committed to ensuring that children are provided with healthy food and the nutrients they require during the school day, not just to aid their physical health but to ensure they can study hard and behave well," said Johnson.

His department would examine the Food Standards Agency's findings "with interest", he added.

Omega 3 fatty acids play a key role in brain cell development. The richest source is oily fish such as sardines, salmon and mackerel.

Post-war baby boomers were dosed with cod liver oil, another source of omega 3,

when they were growing up in the 1940s and 1950s to compensate for food rationing. However, there are concerns that modern diets do not contain enough of the substance.

Almost half the fat from which the brain is built is made up of one of the omega 3s. Some scientists believe the evidence of the health benefits is so strong that omega 3 should be included in formula food for babies.

Some schools have already trialled the supplements, with impressive results.

In one pilot scheme, involv-

£ In one scheme with primary pupils who received a daily dose 81% showed improved reading

ing eight and nine-year-olds who received a daily dose at Newhall Park primary school in Bradford, 81% of the pupils showed improvements in reading, 67% in writing, and 74% in maths.

Teachers at schools where the supplements have been used also report significantly improved concentration levels in classes.

Another recent study suggested the supplement could improve performance in examinations.

Pupils aged 15 and 16 at Fleetwood sports college in Lancashire took capsules for 12 weeks in the run-up to their GCSEs last year. On average, they exceeded their predicted results by one grade.