



**YOUTH
SPORT
TRUST**

RESEARCH

PE and School Sport

The Annual Report 2024

About the Youth Sport Trust

The Youth Sport Trust is a children's charity founded in 1995 to harness the power of play and sport in children's education and development.

Our **vision** is a future where every child enjoys the life-changing benefits of play and sport

Our **mission** is to equip educators and empower young people to build bright futures

Together we create opportunities for everyone to belong and achieve

Read our 2022-35 strategy
Inspiring Changemakers,
Building Belonging:
www.youthsporttrust.org/strategy



Introduction from our CEO



I am delighted to share our third annual PE and School Sport Report with you, giving a detailed insight into the latest research and evidence on the current state of PE, school sport and physical activity.

As in previous years, this 'state of the nation' report looks at different perspectives, including insights from teachers and parents, whilst analysing the value and importance placed on physical activity in schools. We also explore the challenges this generation of young people is facing, and how the health and happiness of the UK's children measure up against other countries across the globe.

Sadly, as you will read in the report, headline findings remain bleak, with the health and happiness of our children and young people at an all-time low, and their mental health and wellbeing amongst the worst in the world. Less than a third of parents and teachers are aware of how active children should be, and activity levels have stagnated with less than half achieving the recommended 60 active minutes a day. As a result, too many children continue to miss out on the life changing benefits of play and sport and unless action is taken, I do not believe we will see significant change.

Despite this outlook there are positive findings within which can shape a way forward. As you will read, participation in school sport and physical activity is improving children's self-belief, mental toughness and wellbeing, with these wellbeing benefits notably greater for those from low affluence families. Additionally, increasing participation in PE, sport and play leads to better outcomes inside and outside schools.

As ever, I want to express my thanks to the many organisations, institutions and academics who have contributed to the development of this report through their insight, evidence and collaboration. A specific thank you goes to Sport England for their continued partnership with Youth Sport Trust including the support of funding from the National Lottery - this enables our work with partners across the sector and beyond.

As we release this report just weeks before the UK's General Election, we hope whichever party or parties form the next government they respond to this evidence-led call for change, and recognise it is time for action.

Whether it is improving health and wellbeing, balancing the demands of the digital age, building belonging and school engagement or closing the gaps created by disadvantage, there is no doubt play, physical activity and sport have a vital, and cost-effective role to play in the education and development of children and young people.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ali Oliver'.

Ali Oliver MBE

Chief Executive Officer, Youth Sport Trust

Our latest PE and School Sport Report highlights the issues facing children and young people today and the need to take urgent action. The world is rapidly changing – innovative thinking and creative solutions are required if we are to fully harness the power of physical activity to build brighter futures for children and young people.

This generation's wellbeing remains in crisis

Children and young people's happiness is at an all-time low, whilst loneliness and mental health disorders are on the rise. Mental health and wellbeing for children in the UK is amongst the worst in the world. The scale of the challenge requires an urgent response, not just to support this generation but to deliver the change needed so all children can grow up happier and healthier.

Increasing physical activity levels for children and young people must be at the heart of the solution

Given its potential to deliver a wide range of benefits to address the challenges this generation faces, increasing physical activity for children and young people must be made a priority. Children who are physically active on a regular basis have better mental, physical and social wellbeing and greater participation in sport and physical activity at school is positively associated with improved self-belief and mental toughness. Being sufficiently active in childhood is associated with improved academic performance and employability. The benefits of being physically active are many and varied – and must be accessible to every child.

Too many children are missing out on being active and we are not unlocking their potential

Currently, only 47% of children are meeting the UK's Chief Medical Officers' recommended daily activity levels. Less than a third of teachers (30%) and parents (31%) are aware that children should be active for 60 minutes a day, and awareness has fallen year on year. At the same time, the digitalisation of society has created a culture where seven in ten parents believe digital distractions mean their children are spending less time being active. We need to deliver societal change to elevate the role physical activity plays in children's day-to-day life.

Schools need support to put physical activity at the heart of the school day

At present, schools are struggling to leverage the power of physical activity to support young people and tackle challenges within education, including absence, low attainment and poor behaviour. The number of PE teachers and amount of PE hours taught in schools is declining, whilst PE, school sport and physical activity are not prioritised adequately. As a result, our education system is failing to develop children who are active and well. Cultural change is needed to elevate the value of PE, school sport and play.

This lack of progress is taking place against a backdrop of deepening inequalities

The cost-of-living crisis is having a negative impact on opportunities children and young people have to be active, particularly for those growing up in lower income households. Given that the wellbeing impact of school sport and physical activity is doubled for those from low affluence families, it is of significant concern that external factors may result in many missing out. Girls also continue to be less active than boys, and the 'PE enjoyment gap' continues to widen. Addressing these inequalities requires a focus on those with the greatest need for support.

The evidence within this report strengthens our passionate belief that every child should be empowered to be active every day, with schools playing a vital role in delivering opportunities. It is clear that change is needed to deliver on this ambition and our manifesto for action – published earlier this year – sets out a vision, building on this report's overarching narrative that **by increasing physical activity levels, we can develop young people who are happy, healthy and ready to learn.**

At a glance

30% 

of teachers¹ and 31% of parents² are aware children should be active for 60 minutes or more a day

1 in 5 

children in England are obese or overweight by the time they are five years old³

48% 

of parents believe cost-of-living increases have reduced opportunities for their child to be physically active⁴

81% 

of parents agree that they are concerned that young people are not getting enough physical activity⁵

70% 

of parents agree digital distractions mean their child is spending less time being active⁶

OVER
41,000

fewer hours of PE were taught in 2023/24 (285,164) compared with 2011/12 (326,277)⁷

38% 

of teachers say persistent absenteeism is an issue as well as poor pupil behaviour (50%) and staff wellbeing (47%)⁸

85% 

of parents agree cuts to PE, sport and breaktimes can negatively affect pupils' wellbeing⁹

83% 

of parents are concerned that young people spend too much time online and not enough with each other in person¹⁰

1 in 5 

children and young people in England have a probable mental health disorder¹¹

Key definitions and methodology

This is the third annual PE and School Sport Report produced by the Youth Sport Trust. The report contains a summary of the latest research, evidence and insight on the importance and impact of PE, school sport and physical activity. The report highlights the issues facing children and young people today and reinforces the need to raise public awareness of these issues and to inform and stimulate action. The world is changing rapidly and we need new thinking and solutions if we are to protect and nurture the health and happiness of the next generation.

The Youth Sport Trust have made a commitment to publish this report on an annual basis in support of our three objectives of our 2022-35 strategy: Urgent Action, Generational Shift and Societal Change. This year's report also complements the recommendations made as part of our manifesto for action.

The annual report will track awareness and attitudes to PE, school sport and physical activity over the next 10 years. We hope it will build a true 'state of the nation' picture for those working in this space, but also for parents and carers, policy makers and other public influencers who can become changemakers for children's health.

The report draws on the latest evidence from across the UK as well as insight from international sources. Whilst a large proportion of this report references data from England (using Sport England's Active Lives – Children and Young People Survey and others), we have incorporated available data from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as well as beyond wherever possible. As a charity, the Youth Sport Trust works with young people aged 0-25. Where relevant, this report will include research and evidence for this age range.

Unless otherwise stated, where we refer to 'parent' data, this has been collected from parents and carers of children aged 18 or under within Great Britain by YouGov Plc on behalf of Youth Sport Trust.

Similarly, unless otherwise stated, evidence on teachers' attitudes refers to data collected from primary and secondary teachers in England by Teacher Tapp, also on behalf of Youth Sport Trust. Teacher Tapp is a daily survey app that asks over 8,000 teachers questions each day and reweights the results to make them representative.

Where data from previous years is available, comparisons are included. Maintaining a line of sight on this data is essential if we are to understand trends over time and monitor societal change.

This report is fully referenced to enable further reading and investigation of the topics raised.

Key definitions and methodology

Definitions

Physical Education (PE) – the national curriculum subject. Learning to move and moving to learn. Teaching and learning is planned and progressive and makes explicit reference to physical development, whilst contributing to social, mental and emotional skills. The national curriculum for physical education aims to ensure that all pupils; develop competence to excel in a broad range of physical activities, are physically active for sustained periods of time, engage in competitive sports and activities and lead healthy, active lives.

Sport – a game, competition or activity needing physical effort and skill that is played or done according to rules in which an individual or team competes against others. In school it can form part of an enrichment offer and can be intra or inter-school.

Physical Activity – defined as any bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure and can be done at a variety of intensities, and accumulated through work, domestic chores, transportation, during leisure time, or when participating in sport, walking, cycling, active recreation, and active play.

Sedentary Behaviour – defined as any waking behaviour while in a sitting, reclining, or lying posture with low amount of energy used.

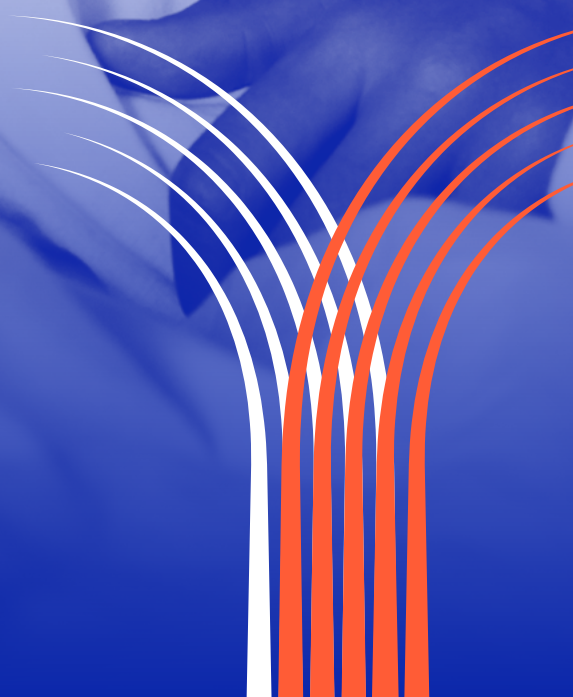
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Physical health



Low levels of physical activity

Physical inactivity is a major economic burden to national health systems worldwide¹⁴. Across the globe, 81% of young people do not meet the World Health Organisation's (WHO) recommended level of an average of 60 minutes per day of activity across the week¹⁵.

The Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) Physical Activity guidelines for the UK (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) are in line with the WHO recommendations¹⁶, that children and young people aged 5-18 years should engage in moderate-vigorous physical activity (MVPA) for an average of at least 60 minutes per day across the week¹⁷. The guidelines also advise that children should engage in a variety of types of physical activity to develop movement skills, muscular fitness and bone strength as well as minimising the amount of time being sedentary. For toddlers and pre-schoolers (aged 1-4 years) the recommendation is 180 minutes of physical activity per day and 30 minutes per day of tummy time for those infants not yet mobile. For disabled children and young people, the recommendation is 20 minutes of physical activity per day.

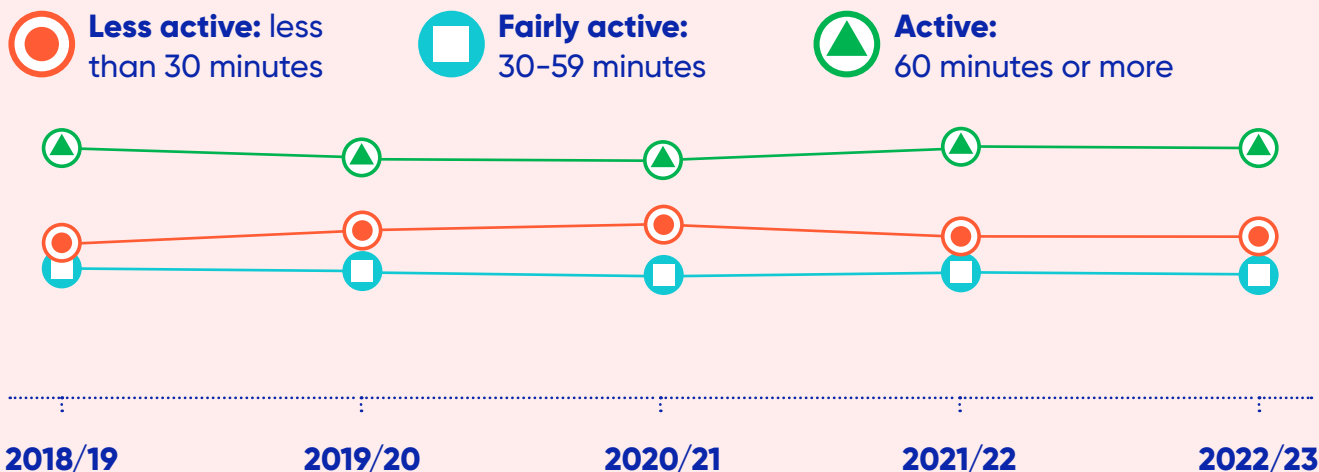
In the UK, despite these dedicated guidelines, children are still not active enough to maintain their health and happiness.

In England

only 47%

of young people aged 5-16 met the Chief Medical Officer's Guidelines in 2022/23¹²

Young people's (5-16 years old) daily physical activity levels over time in England¹³



Physical wellbeing across countries

Whilst none of the below data can be directly compared due to differences in sampling and measurements, it is useful and interesting to consider differences between different parts of the UK.

Activity levels in England

47% of children and young people are meeting the CMO guidelines of taking part in physical activity for an average of 60 minutes or more every day. Nearly a third (30.2%) do fewer than an average of 30 minutes a day¹⁸.

'Active 6' study data, using accelerometers to measure activity levels, shows that over a quarter of children within their study are now classed as very sedentary and very inactive – an increase from before the COVID-19 pandemic¹⁹. This study suggests that children's physical activity has changed post COVID-19 and this is further influenced by gender and socio-economic position. Participation in more informal play is decreasing with less than a third of children agreeing that they 'regularly play out' in their street (27.4%)²⁰.

Activity levels in Scotland

Scottish Health Survey 2022²¹ (released Dec 2023) found the average time children spent on sedentary activities on weekdays (excluding time at school or nursery) is 3.6 hours per day (an increase from 3.3 hours in 2015). Sedentary time on weekends has also increased from 4.5 hours per day in 2015 to 5.1 hours in 2022.

Scotland report that the proportion of all children aged 5-15 who undertake at least 60 minutes of activity on average per day in the previous week was 69% including school based activities and 59% excluding school based activities, reinforcing the importance of school based activity.



Activity levels in Wales

16% of young people (aged 11-16 years) in Wales meet the recommended physical activity guidelines²².

Activity levels in Northern Ireland

17% of children (aged 10-19 years) are meeting the physical activity guidelines in Northern Ireland²³.



Activity levels – looking further afield

The international Global Activity cards compare physical activity for children in 57 countries. The latest release was in 2022. A group of over 600 experts in the field graded countries on 10 common indicators related to physical activity in children and adolescents²⁴.

The latest release found Slovenia and Finland are top performing countries. For Slovenia, their score is high due to the combination of strong infrastructure (eg, Community and Environment) and total number of physical education minutes delivered in schools, as well as the tradition of systematic childhood fitness surveillance.

In Finland, documents that guide early childhood education and teaching include the role of physical activity in supporting growth, development and learning of children and adolescents of different ages. National physical activity promotion programmes have also been funded to create a more physically active culture in the educational infrastructure.

Of the list of 57 countries, England ranks 16th, Ireland 19th, Scotland at the bottom and Wales 53rd. However, this needs to be caveated as it is likely that this is to do with a lack of reliable data or insufficient information to assign a grade, showing in particular for Wales and Scotland the need to improve data collection methods.

Physical health

High levels of obesity

Alongside low levels of physical activity, nationally in the UK we also have challenges with high levels of obesity.

In a similar way to physical activity levels, whilst none of the below data can be directly compared due to differences in sampling and measurements, it is useful and interesting to consider differences between different parts of the UK.

In England, one in five children are classed as obese or overweight by the time they are five years old²⁵. In year six, the prevalence of obesity alone in children is 22.7%²⁶.

In Northern Ireland, one in four (25%) of children aged 2-15 years old are overweight or obese²⁷.

In Scotland, one third of children are classed as at risk of being overweight or obese, which is the highest levels since 2011²⁸.

In Wales, due to limitations with the latest child measurement programme data, we are only able to estimate that the proportion of children living with obesity varies from 10.6% to 14.1%²⁹.

Across all four nations this data is concerningly high given that obesity at this age can be linked to increased risk of premature death in adulthood³⁰.





New Research shows the increases in childhood obesity in England³¹

Additional longitudinal analysis of the National Childhood Measurement Programme data of children in England from 2006/7 to 2021/22 was conducted.

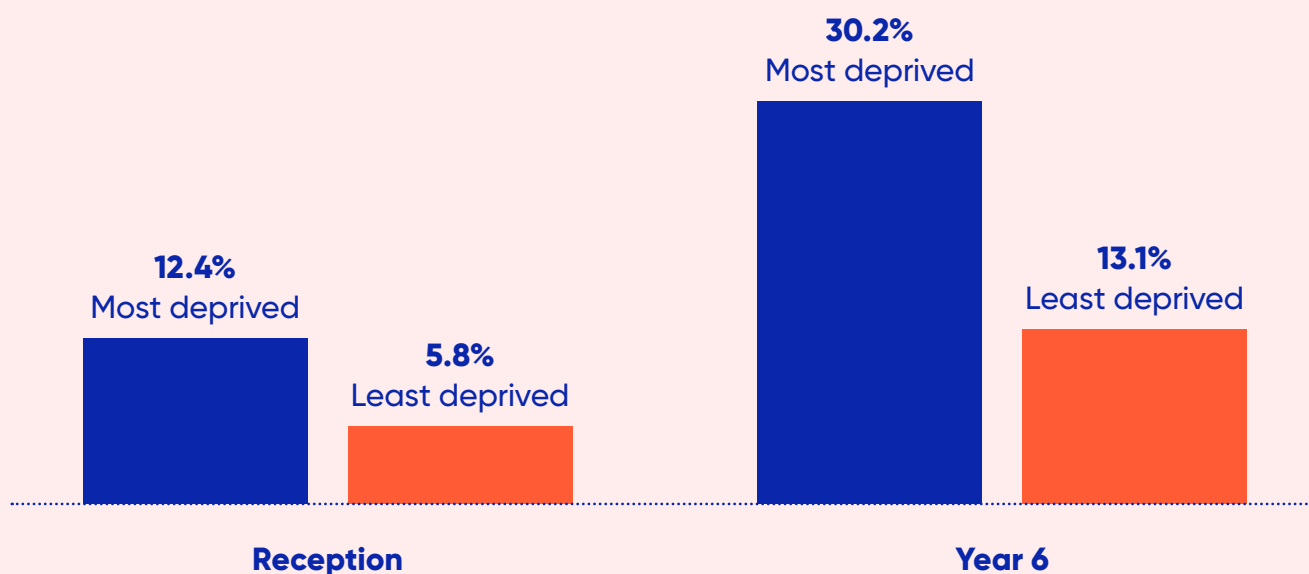
Researchers found sharp increases in obesity during the COVID-19 pandemic years which has persevered in older age groups of children.

They also found a widening gap in obesity levels between the most and least deprived areas of England, with obesity in the most deprived areas double that of the levels in the least deprived areas.

For Reception children living in the most deprived areas the prevalence of obesity was 12.4%, compared with 5.8% of those living in the least deprived areas.

For children in Year 6 living in the most deprived areas, the prevalence of obesity was 30.2%, compared with 13.1% of those living in the least deprived areas.

Obesity prevalence by deprivation in England³²





Mental health

Young people's mental health and wellbeing

In 2023, 10% of children and young people aged 10–17 who took part in the Children's Society household survey had low wellbeing. Analysis of the Understanding Society annual UK survey showed that for children across the UK, their happiness with their life as a whole has significantly decreased over time³³.

We are facing a children's mental health crisis

The latest Children's Society's Good Childhood report showed that children's (aged 10 to 15) mean scores for happiness with their life as a whole, their friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork were all significantly lower than when the survey began in 2009–10

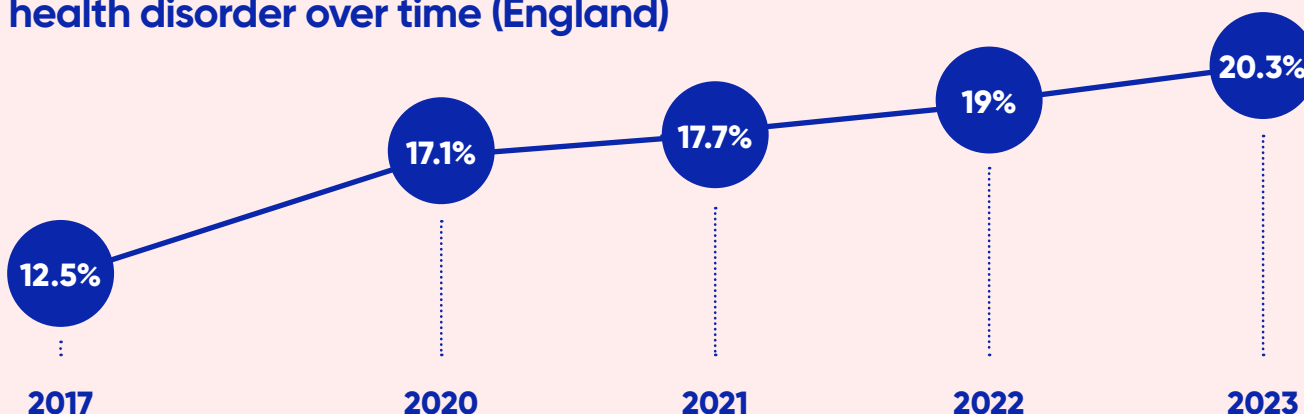


In line with this, the latest Princes' Trust Index³⁵ found that 40% of 16–25 year olds in the UK report to have experienced a mental health problem and a fifth (21%) report that their mental health has got worse in the last year. The annual report found this year had seen the biggest decrease yet in happiness, confidence and mental health among young people.



The proportion of children with a probable mental health disorder (aged 8 to 16 years old) has increased year on year since 2017³⁶

Proportion of children with a probable mental health disorder over time (England)



Mental health

Across countries

Whilst none of the below data can be directly compared due to differences in sampling and measurements, it is useful and interesting to consider differences between different parts of the UK.

Mental wellbeing in England³⁷

In 2023, around 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years had a probable mental disorder.

Mental wellbeing in Scotland³⁸

Around a fifth of young people in Scotland (aged 11-15) reported feeling lonely all or most of the time and around a third of young people reported anxiety, though over 80% had high life satisfaction.

35% of young people in Scotland (aged 11-15) report a low mood and/or are at risk of depression.

Mental wellbeing in Wales³⁹

46% of young people (aged 11-16 years) in Wales reported symptoms of poor mental health and around a third reported feeling lonely at least some of the time.

Mental wellbeing in Northern Ireland⁴⁰

Over 80% of 11 year olds and over 90% of 16 year olds report feeling worried or stressed. This is the poorest ever score for mental wellbeing of 11 year olds in Northern Ireland.

Over 40% of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland have a probable mental illness.



Mental health

Evidence shows that loneliness in young people is strongly associated with poor mental wellbeing and mental health. The WHO Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) survey found that the UK had the highest levels of loneliness for girls compared to other countries within the survey, with 40% of 15 year old girls reported feeling lonely most of the time or always in the past year⁴¹. Young people are less likely to experience loneliness if they feel a sense of belonging in their school⁴². However, across the UK, all young people report lower levels of belonging at school than the OECD average. Around two thirds of pupils – 63% of pupils in England, 63% of pupils in Wales, 66% in Northern Ireland and 67% of students in Scotland – agreed or strongly agreed that they felt like they belong at school, compared to 75% in the OECD average⁴³.

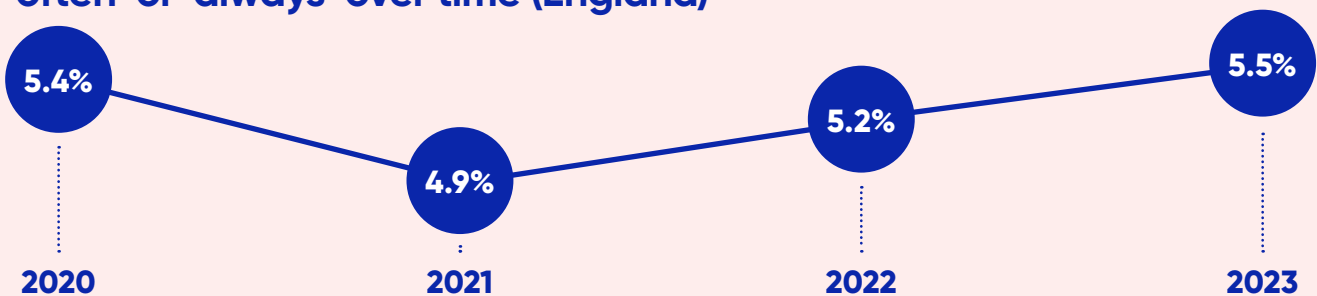


In 2023

5.5%

of children aged 11 to 16 years said they often or always felt lonely. This has remained stable year on year⁴⁸

Proportion of children feeling lonely 'often' or 'always' over time (England)⁴⁹



Research has found higher levels of sports participation is associated with higher levels of wellbeing including social identity and belonging⁴⁴. The latest NHS Digital data for children and young people in England shows that children aged 11 to 16 years old with a probable mental disorder were more likely not to have exercised in the previous 7 days (17.2%) than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (4.4%)⁴⁵. This highlights the important role that physical activity could play in supporting wellbeing. Additionally the 2022 'PlayDay' survey found children who regularly played out in their street had significantly higher levels of wellbeing during childhood as well as better mental health into adulthood⁴⁶.

A systematic review on the association between sedentary behaviour and mental health among children and adolescents found that higher sedentary behaviour was associated with increased depression, anxiety and other mental health problems later in life⁴⁷.



New Research – the UK has some of the lowest life satisfaction levels for young people internationally⁵⁰

The latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data (2022) shows that pupils in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland report significantly lower levels of overall life satisfaction than the average across Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development organisation (OECD) countries.

For average life satisfaction, this puts the United Kingdom at second from last in the OECD comparison table and near the bottom in the full country list. Comparing across the home countries, Northern Ireland has the highest life satisfaction scores, closely followed by Scotland and Wales and England has the lowest.

Average life satisfaction for OECD countries

Top 5 countries

Country	Score
Finland	7.41
Costa Rica	7.32
Netherlands	7.29
Mexico	7.26
Hungary	7.21

Bottom 5 countries

Country	Score
Korea	6.36
New Zealand	6.27
Poland	6.26
United Kingdom	6.07
Turkey	4.90

UK countries	Score
Northern Ireland	6.50
Scotland	6.48
Wales	6.16
England	6.01



***Digital
distractions***



70%

of parents agree that digital distractions mean their child is spending less time being active⁵¹

The World Health Organisation recommends that the amount of time being sedentary should be limited, particularly the amount of recreational screen time⁵². There is well documented evidence that high levels of physical activity, optimal sleep and low levels of negative sedentary time like screen time are associated with positive health benefits in children and young people⁵³.

New research on the impact of devices and sleep for adolescents⁵⁴



New research conducted in the United States using daily surveys with 475 adolescents found that for every hour adolescents spend playing video games, texting friends or scrolling social media it takes them ten minutes longer to get to sleep. Those who used devices in the hour before sleep took an additional half an hour to fall asleep.

Increasingly, young people struggle to balance the demands of a digital age.

When young people from low socio-economic backgrounds across the UK were asked what they spend their time on⁵⁵, the top four activities are most likely to be sedentary, indoors and potentially alone. They included watching TV/Netflix (60%), listening to music (57%), watching short video clips (54%) and gaming (51%). These all score higher than spending time with family (48%) and spending time with friends (51%).

In England, NHS data reinforces this, with evidence that children are spending more time playing video games than exercising or being outdoors. When asked about activities completed on 4 or more days out of the previous 7 days, children aged 11 to 16 years reported that 59.4% had played video games, 56% had exercised indoors or outdoors, 40% had enjoyed time outdoors in green space and 16.3% had taken part in groups, clubs or organisations outside of school time⁵⁶.

Evidence from analysis of the UK household longitudinal study found that young people who participated in more sports spent less time sedentary using screen based media and were happier⁵⁷.



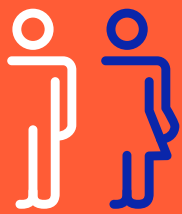
***Deepening
inequalities***

Deepening inequalities



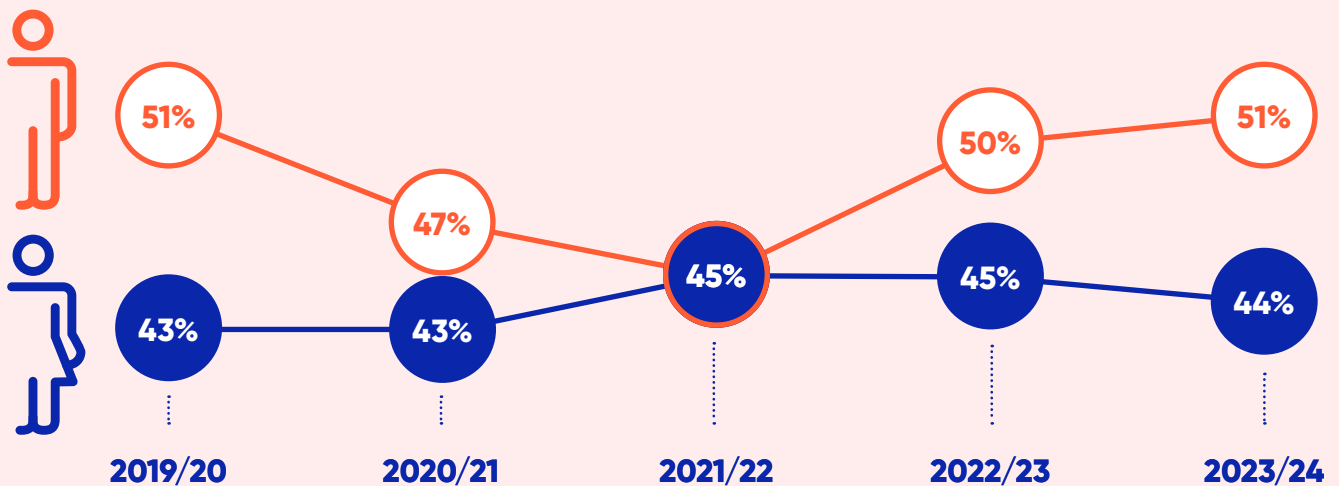
Globally there are inequalities in levels of physical activity between men and women, girls and boys, old and young and the socioeconomical advantaged and disadvantaged– this is unfair and unjust⁵⁹

World Health Organisation



Boys are more likely to be active than girls – this gender gap in physical activity levels appears globally⁶⁰

Proportion of girls and boys meeting physical activity guidelines over time (England)⁵⁸

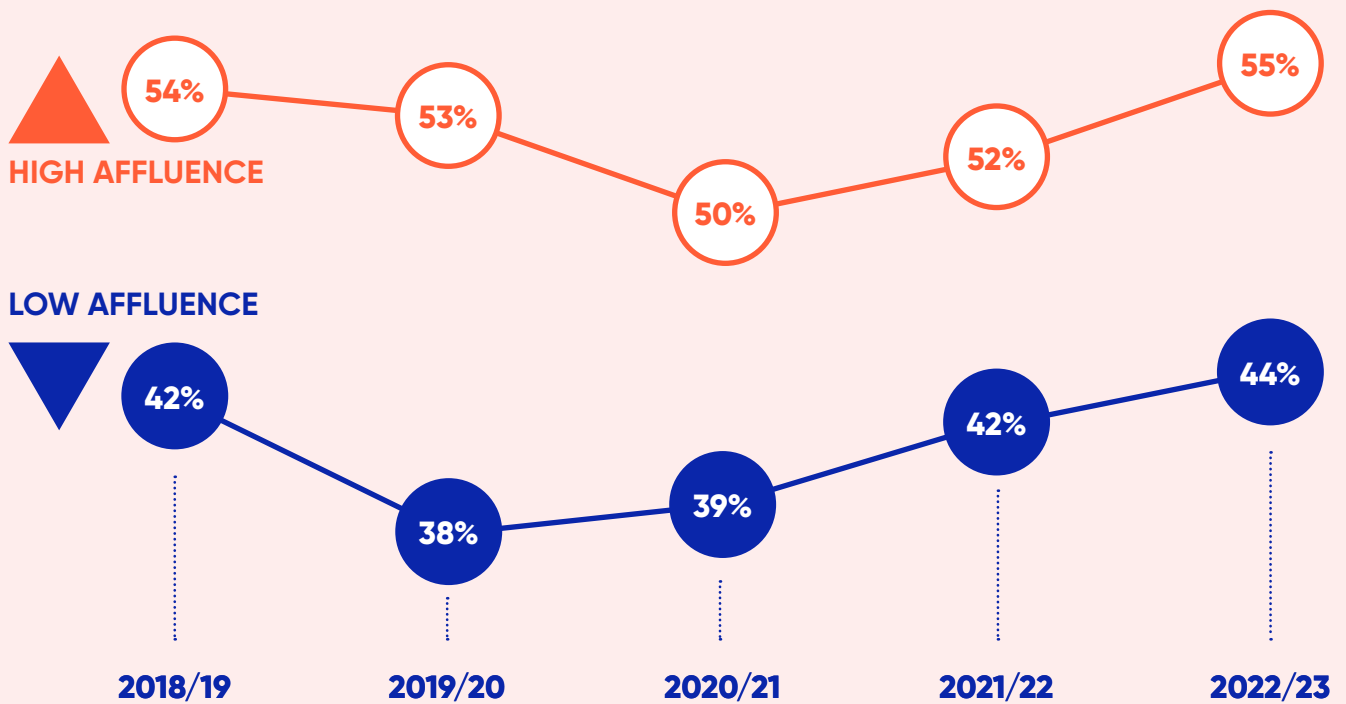


Deepening inequalities



In England, young people from low affluence families are less likely to be physically active compared to their peers from high affluence families⁶¹

Proportion of young people meeting physical activity guidelines over time from both low and high affluence families (England)⁶²



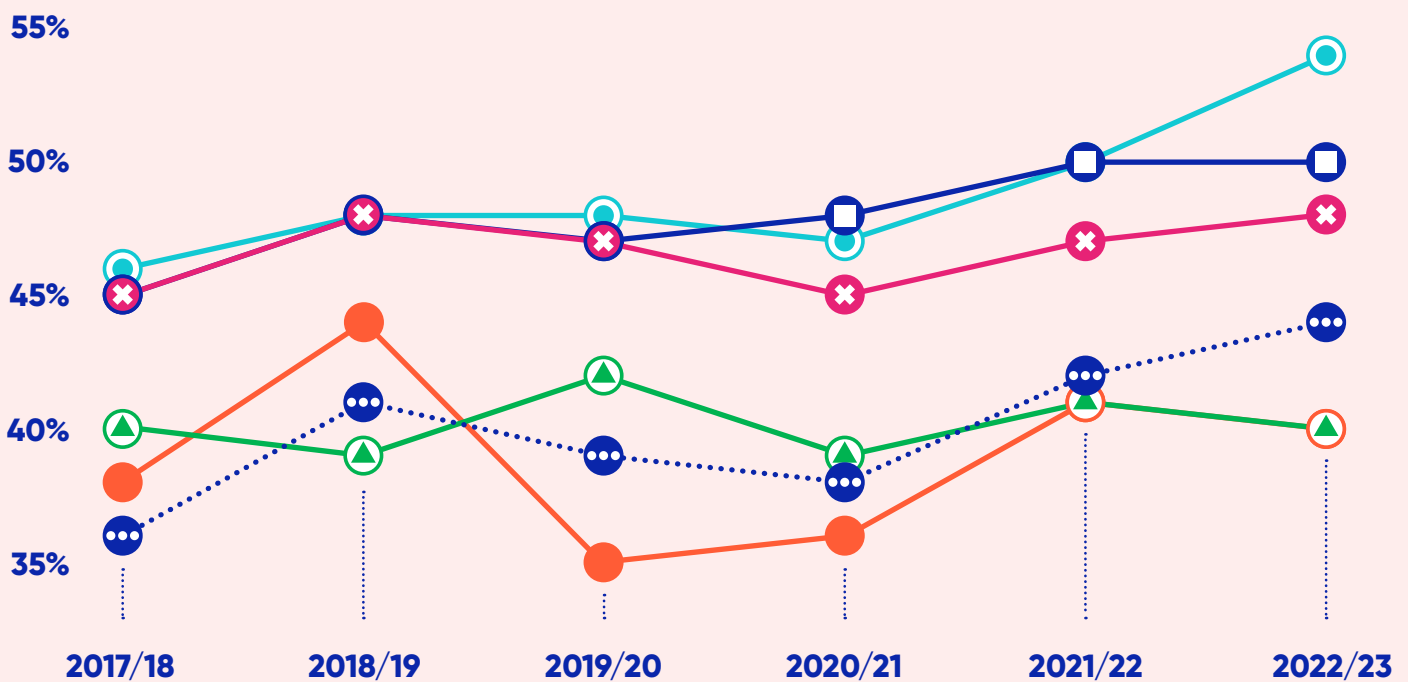
Deepening inequalities



Sport England Active Lives Children and Young people survey data in England consistently shows that children with a Black or Asian Ethnic background are the least likely to be active⁶⁴

Proportion of young people meeting physical activity guidelines over time from different ethnic groups (England)⁶³

White British White other Asian Black Mixed Other



Cost of living

Approximately 3.8 million people (1.8 million households) experienced destitution in the UK in 2022, including around one million children. This is almost two and-a-half times the number of people in 2017 and nearly triple the number of children⁶⁵. The number of pupils in England eligible for Free School Meals continues to increase, in 2024 nearly a quarter (24.6%) of pupils were eligible, an increase from 23.8% in 2023⁶⁶. Food insecurity is becoming a more prevalent challenge; 5% of pupils in England reported not being able to afford to buy food every day or almost every day⁶⁷ and 21% of young people have skipped meals to save money in the past year⁶⁸. It is widely known that economic inequality is a major driver of health inequalities⁶⁹. For example, for children living in the most deprived areas of England, obesity prevalence was twice as high compared to those living in the least deprived areas⁷⁰. Additionally, obesity data has also been strongly linked to deprivation status in Northern Ireland⁷¹.

New Research – ‘1,000 voices’ study shows barriers to physical activity for children from low socioeconomic families⁷²



Young people are aware of the cost of living situation surrounding them and the impact it has on their daily lives. 39% of young people from a low socio-economic background said ‘can’t afford it’ is the barrier that stops or makes it difficult for them to take part in sport and physical activity. 35% said that the cost of living crisis was having a negative impact on their sports participation.

In a global study across seven countries, it was found that children from high-income households spend more time playing sport each week compared to those from low or medium income families⁷³. Therefore, it is likely that the cost of living crisis may have a negative impact on activity levels for young people from low affluent families. Research conducted by the University of Bristol found that in 2022, the median cost of community or school club physical activity sessions were £6.67 and £3.88 respectively. Just half (52%) of school based clubs were free to parents and 34% were partly subsidised⁷⁴. Sport England’s ‘Activity Check In’ data shows that the impacts of the cost of living increases have been more pronounced among disadvantaged groups. Parents were asked about changes they had made to their children’s sport and physical activities due to the increases in the cost of living, 7% of parents said they have cancelled children’s membership to sports activities and 12% have reduced the regularity of paid activities for their children⁷⁵. NHS Digital data shows that more than 1 in 4 children aged 8 to 16 years old with a probable mental health disorder in England had a parent who could not afford for their child to take part in activities outside of school or college compared to 1 in 10 of those unlikely to have a mental health disorder⁷⁶.

Deepening inequalities

Parent research conducted by the Youth Sport Trust in 2024 found 40% of parents feel that the cost of living increase has had a long term negative impact on their child's wellbeing and 48% believe it has had a negative impact on the number of opportunities their child has to be physically active, play and take part in sport. 48% of parents agree the challenges associated with the cost of living increases make it more difficult for them to be active as a family⁷⁷. This is in line with findings from last year.

Research conducted with teachers in 2024 by the Youth Sport Trust found that 19% identified the impact of the cost of living on pupils as one of the key issues their school is currently dealing with. This was a higher concern for primary school teachers than secondary school teachers (25% vs 13%)⁷⁸.

New Research – impact of cost of living on children's activity levels⁷⁹



The Active 6 study, led by researchers at the University of Bristol, explores children's physical activity levels. They compared accelerometer-measured activity data from year 6 children in Bristol before the pandemic in 2017/18 and after the pandemic in 2022. Their data found that **socioeconomic differences have increased with fewer of the highly active children and more of the inactive children in the study being from households with lower educational qualifications.**

New Research – How PE and sport can help⁸⁰



Recent research conducted by State of Life and the Youth Sport Trust, identified the causal effect of interventions on wellbeing. Analysis was conducted using Sport England's Active Lives children and young people survey data and found that the impact of physical activity at school on wellbeing is almost double for those children with SEND and/or receiving Free School Meals (FSM) than for those who are not. From this we can conclude that **the benefit is greater for those children in greatest need.**

Gender

There is an established gender gap between girls' and boys' physical activity levels and this is increasing. This gender gap exists globally. Data from 298 school based surveys from 146 countries around the world representing 1.6 million young people found that more girls are inactive than boys with 85% of girls classed as insufficiently active compared to 78% of boys⁸¹. An increasing gender difference with age was observed for all indicators as examined by the Global Health Behaviour in School-aged children (HBSC) study too⁸². Boys in England also enjoy taking part in physical activity significantly more than girls; 85% of boys enjoy it compared with 74% of girls⁸³.

In the UK, the Active 6 study found, using accelerometer data, that the gender gap has widened for those participating in the study. Only 8% of girls are now classified in the highly active profile compared to 30% in 2017/18 whilst the proportion of highly active boys increased since 2017/18⁸⁴. This reinforces previous data by adding a level of reliability through the accelerometer approach compared to a self-reported methodology.

Findings from a national survey of young people by the Youth Sport Trust identified the most prevalent barriers for being active at school. For girls, these include a lack of confidence, when they have their period and that they don't like other people watching them. These barriers were consistent regardless of activity level. Boys are less likely to report any barriers to being active at school; 38% of boys report that nothing stops them from taking part in sport and physical activity in school⁸⁵.

Periods are a big barrier to physical activity for girls. For secondary aged girls in England, 'when I have my period' is a top barrier to participating in sport at school. Less active girls take part in PE significantly less often when they have their period compared to more active girls. Less active girls are those who reported taking part in physical activity on one or no days of the week and more active are those who reported taking part in physical activity on five or more days of the week. Overall, only 51% of girls said that they *always* take part in PE when they have their period. Girls would like greater understanding and empathy to be shown by their school to help them do PE when they have their period, with greater flexibility to participate to their ability and better options for PE kit to feel more comfortable. Nearly half (48%) of girls said that they would not feel comfortable talking to their teacher about periods⁸⁶.

Promising new research by Manchester Metropolitan University found that sports participation positively predicts self-belief and 'mental toughness', which in turn positively predicts markers of wellbeing. This effect was found to be greater for girls than boys⁸⁷. This shows the potential gains for girls if we can support them to participate in sport.

Special Educational Needs and Disability

There are over 1.5 million pupils in England with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and the number of pupils with SEND and educational healthcare plans continues to increase⁸⁸. Evidence shows that those with SEND are generally less active, whilst activity levels seem to fall faster with age for children with SEND⁸⁹.

Certainly, students with SEND are 23% less likely to participate in extra-curricular sport and physical activity clubs than their peers⁹⁰. Worrying about getting hurt, how they look and not knowing what to do stops many disabled children being active⁹¹. Those with SEND also enjoy taking part in physical activity and PE less than those without SEND⁹².

Those with SEND are more likely to report that a lack of confidence stops them from being active at school compared to their peers without SEND. Barriers also exist for them in taking part in more physical activity outside of school⁹³. Those with a disability or long-term health conditions are also less likely to have positive attitudes towards physical activity compared with those without a disability or long-term health condition⁹⁴.

The impact of intersectionality between SEND status and gender is important, and is illustrated by a recent report from Access Sport, which explored teenage girls with SEND's attitudes towards sport and exercise. It found that most teenage girls with SEND understand the benefits of sport and exercise but experience additional barriers on top of girls of the same ages without SEND and are frustrated by the lack of suitable opportunities. Half of teenage girls with SEND report it would be easier for them to be active if coaches or leaders better adapted activities to meet their needs; many teenage girls with SEND feel coaches or leaders don't understand their impairment, health condition, illness or disability⁹⁵.

Nonetheless, children and young people with SEND have a desire to be more active compared to those without SEND, suggesting an unmet need for this population⁹⁶. Additionally, children and young people with SEND are motivated to take part in sport and physical activity to feel a sense of belonging and be more independent⁹⁷.

Girls-only opportunities help teenage girls with SEND to find enjoyment in sport and participating with other girls with SEND is important for many⁹⁸.



Ethnicity and culture

Over a third of pupils (35.7%) in schools in England are from a minority ethnic background⁹⁹. Alongside this, a fifth (20.2%) of pupils were recorded as having a first language which was known or believed to be other than English¹⁰⁰.

Young people from a Black or Asian background have seen no long term growth in activity levels and the gap between these young people and all other backgrounds has widened over the last five years¹⁰¹. Additionally, the rate of destitution among Black, Black British, Caribbean or African-led households in the UK is three times their population share, suggesting that these communities are also likely to be most affected by increased cost of living pressures¹⁰². Notably, Asian and Black communities were the most likely to live in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in the UK than any other ethnicity¹⁰³ suggesting potential intersectionality between ethnicity and socioeconomic status for many children and young people from Asian and Black communities.

Certainly, additional barriers to physical activity are noted in ethnic groups that report prioritising educational attainment over physical activity (such as Asian Bangladeshi and Chinese ethnicities) or report a lack of culturally appropriate physical activity opportunities for girls in particular (for communities of Muslim faith)¹⁰⁴. In turn, 43% of British Muslim women report that current sports facilities are not appropriate for them¹⁰⁵.

Children and young people from both Black and Asian communities (particularly in Black girls and Asian boys) have also seen significant reductions in their positive attitudes towards physical activity when compared with the academic year 2017-18¹⁰⁶, which may also be somewhat responsible for lower physical activity levels in these populations.



***Parents'
perceptions
and attitudes***

Parents' perceptions and attitudes

Research conducted annually by the Youth Sport Trust surveying parents in Great Britain helps us to track parental attitudes towards PE, school sport and physical activity over time¹⁰⁷.

Parents recognise the benefits that sport and play have for young people and awareness of these benefits is increasing over time as parents begin to understand the benefits of sport and play over and above solely physical fitness.

Parental awareness of the benefits of sport and play

Benefit	2022 ¹⁰⁸	2023 ¹⁰⁹	2024 ¹¹⁰	
Physical health	75%	78%	86%	▲
Mental wellbeing	74%	75%	77%	▲
Being fit	72%	74%	81%	▲
Social wellbeing	63%	63%	67%	▲
Increased confidence	67%	65%	68%	▲
Resilience	N/A	49%	54%	▲
Giving a sense of belonging	46%	53%	53%	▲
Good life skills	69%	72%	76%	▲
Better self-regulation and behaviour	N/A	N/A	53%	
Better concentration and learning	49%	50%	50%	▲
Being a good leader	33%	40%	40%	▲
Being a competitive person	27%	33%	35%	▲
Increased attendance and engagement	N/A	N/A	31%	
Looking good	20%	20%	21%	▲

Arrows show comparisons between 2022 and 2024 data

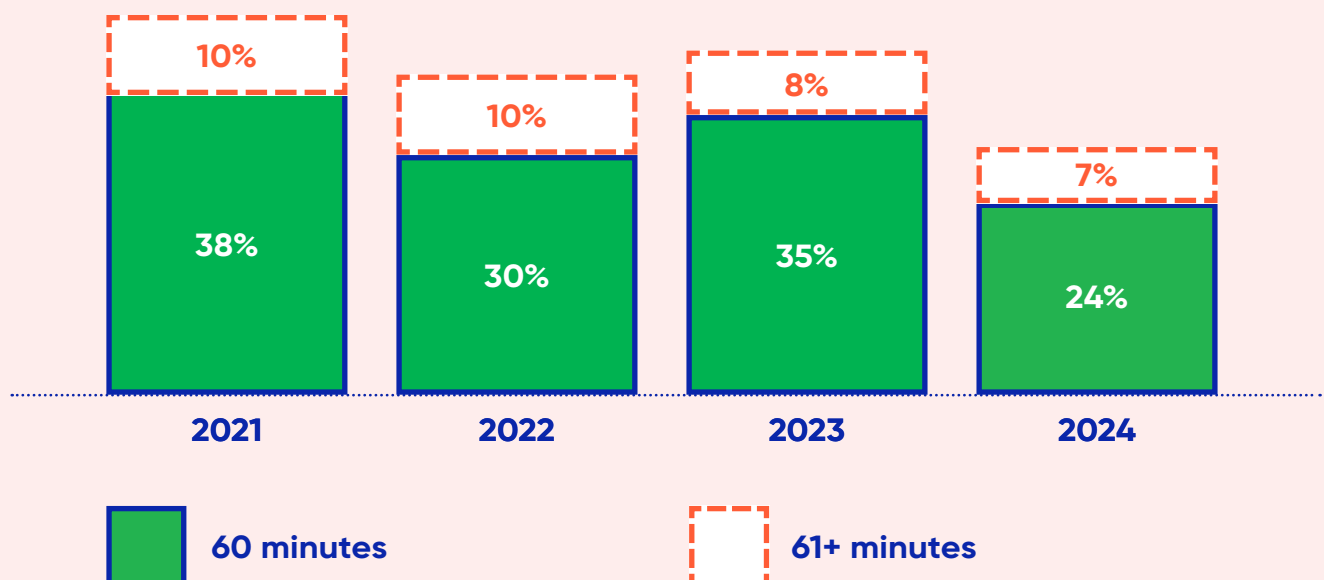
Parents' perceptions and attitudes

The latest data shows that 81% of parents are concerned that young people are not getting enough physical activity, and nearly half (49%) agree that their child(ren) does not do as much physical activity as they should. 84% of parents are concerned that young people are spending too much time sitting and not enough time being active¹¹³.

However, parental awareness of the recommendations in the CMO guidelines for children aged 5-18 remains low and has decreased from previous years, with only 31% knowing that children should be active for at least 60 minutes¹¹⁴.

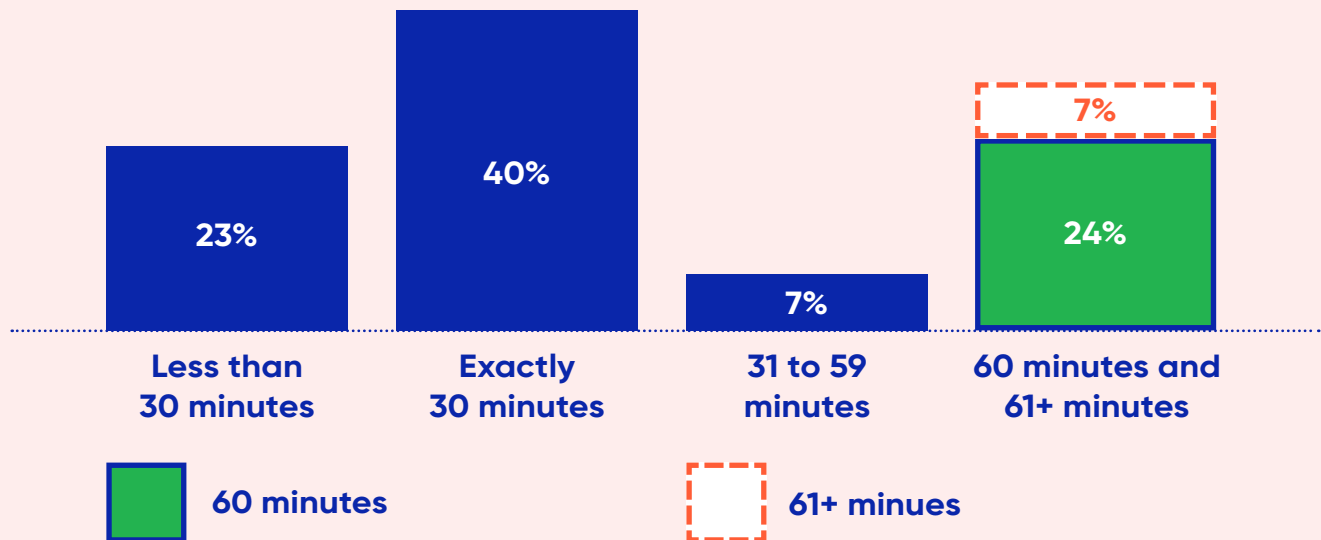
ONLY 31%
of parents are aware of the recommendations in the Chief Medical Officers' (CMO) guidelines¹¹¹

The percentage of parents who believe children should be active for 60 minutes or more a day continues to fall¹¹²



Parents' perceptions and attitudes

Parental perceptions of physical activity guidelines for young people in 2024¹¹⁵



Parents are concerned about their children's mental health

43% of parents are concerned about their child's mental health¹¹⁶. In 2022, pupil wellbeing at school was the biggest influencing factor for choice of secondary school and second for primary schools after location. In 2024, this remained the case, reinforcing the importance that parents place on how schools support their child's mental wellbeing. Two thirds (66%) of parents believe that the wellbeing of pupils is more important than their academic attainment¹¹⁷.

7 in 10 parents (71%) want children's wellbeing to be measured at least once a year¹¹⁸. Nearly three quarters (73%) of parents agreed that schools should measure the wellbeing of pupils just as they do with academic progress¹¹⁹.



***Why PE, school
sport and physical
activity matter***

Why PE, school sport and physical activity matter

Evidence shows a wealth of benefits that come from being active. PE, school sport and physical activity helps make young people healthier, happier and less distracted.

With improved...



Physical health

Better physical health and healthy weight¹²⁰

Improved cardiovascular fitness, muscular fitness, cardiometabolic health, bone and functional health and reduced risk of cardiovascular disease¹²¹

Aids sleep¹²²



Mental health

Better mental health¹²³

Resilience¹²⁴

Reduction in depressive symptoms¹²⁵



Social wellbeing

Less lonely¹²⁶

Increased feeling of belonging to school¹²⁷

Increased confidence to interact with others¹²⁸

Wellbeing, self-belief and mental toughness^{129, 130}

Teamwork and communication¹³¹



Brain function

Improved learning, memory and attainment¹³²

Positive links to academic attainment and emotional regulation¹³³

Why PE, school sport and physical activity matter

In addition to the already established evidence base, exciting new research released this year has continued to demonstrate a range of benefits of PE, school sport and physical activity.

New Research – sports participation links to wellbeing¹³⁴

Powerful new research conducted by Manchester Metropolitan University on behalf of the Youth Sport Trust shows the wellbeing benefits of sports participation that can be gained for all students.

The research found that, greater sports participation in school is associated with higher levels of wellbeing.

Sports participation is a significant predictor of self-belief and mental toughness which are key life skills for young people.



New Research – inactivity during childhood is harmful for health into young adulthood¹³⁵

New research explored the relationship between sedentary time, physical activity and total fat mass in over 6,000 children aged 11, followed up at age 24, as part of the Avon Longitudinal study of children in the UK.

Analysis found that persistently accruing more than 60 minutes a day of physical activity is associated with a decrease in total fat mass and BMI (Body Mass Index) over time into young adulthood. This shows the importance of maintaining at least 60 active minutes a day from childhood and beyond.

The study also showed that increasing sedentary time from childhood through to young adulthood is associated with increased BMI and total fat mass in young adulthood. This study provides longitudinal evidence that sedentary time is harmful for health in childhood and into young adulthood.



Why PE, school sport and physical activity matter

New Research – being active has a positive effect on children’s happiness¹³⁶



Recent analysis by State of Life working with the Youth Sport Trust has found that physical activity in school has a positive effect on life satisfaction.

This analysis used the ‘Wellbeing-adjusted Life Year’ or WELLBY value which is the Treasury recommended value for Wellbeing¹³⁷.

The research found that being active for half an hour a day in primary school has a positive effect on happiness. This has an economic value of £1,000 per year for children in years 3 to 6, while the effect on life satisfaction for years 7 to 11 has an economic value of £1,900 per year.

The economic value of the provision of physical activity in schools is at least £4.5bn and could be double this.

New Research – Sports Participation for Academic Success¹³⁸



A longitudinal cohort study conducted in Australia with a sample of 4,241 children identified that continued sports participation is associated with lower odds of being absent from school, better performance on attention and working memory and higher numeracy and literacy scores.



***The role
of schools***

The role of schools

Schools are in a unique position to provide universal, equal access to sport and physical activity. As outlined in the latest Ofsted report on Physical Education (PE), *'for many pupils, PE will be the first and only place where they are taught safe, efficient and intelligent movement'*¹³⁹. The report also highlights the important role that high quality PE in schools can play in challenging ingrained inequalities and levelling the playing field.

PE is a compulsory part of the national curriculum for all pupils in England, from Year 1 to the end of Key Stage 4. Whilst academies in England are not required to teach the national curriculum, they do need to teach a 'broad curriculum'. Ofsted also stipulate that in England, all pupils are entitled to 'high-quality PE'¹⁴⁰.

There is a suggestion that as PE plays such a key role in schools, and given the benefits it has for young people, it should be considered a core subject alongside Maths, English and Science. The Physical Education Expert group concluded in their paper that PE should be a core subject in England as it *'would stimulate significant health and educational attainment benefits, lead to improved physical, mental and personal wellbeing of children, develop essential life skills and lead to whole school improvements'*¹⁴¹. Over two thirds (67%) of parents agree PE should be a core subject on the national curriculum and the majority (85%) believe schools should be providing at least 2 hours of PE a week and ensuring every pupil is active for 30 minutes a day as per the Government obesity strategy recommendation¹⁴².

A scoping study exploring the potential of PE found key stakeholders (PE subject leaders, teachers of PE and school leaders) identified a range of opportunities that could arise from PE becoming a core subject. These included benefits for pupils (i.e., supporting health and wellbeing, attendance, academic achievements), benefits for staff (i.e., professional development, specialist training, leadership opportunities) and benefits for the subject (i.e., raised status, curriculum time, resourcing)¹⁴³.

Young people's experiences of PE, physical activity and school sport

Encouragingly, around three quarters (74%) of girls and the majority (85%) of boys, responding to a recent national survey for young people by the Youth Sport Trust reported that they enjoy taking part in physical activity¹⁴⁴.

The majority of girls (87%) and boys (91%) say they understand why being active is good for them, though only 57% of girls and 73% of boys are happy with the amount of physical activity they do. Boys also are much more likely to say that they feel like they can be themselves when being active compared to girls and feel significantly better when doing physical activity compared to girls¹⁴⁵.

The role of schools

Overall, 86% of boys and 64% of girls surveyed as part of the latest Youth Sport Trust national survey for young people report that they enjoy taking part in PE. For both boys and girls, the top three motivators for being active at school include having fun, being with their friends and getting fit and healthy¹⁴⁶.

Around two thirds (64%) of boys and half (48%) of girls surveyed agreed that the skills they learn in PE can help them outside of school. However, agreement to this statement decreases as both boys and girls get older. For girls, those classed as 'less active' agree significantly less that the skills they learn in PE can help them outside of school¹⁴⁷. The Youth Sport Trust's 'Class of 2035' report also shows that young people's awareness of the benefits they can get from PE and physical activity have declined since 2015¹⁴⁸.

Positively, nearly two thirds of girls (64%) and the majority of boys (79%) surveyed said they would like to be more active in school, of these over half (55%) of girls and 77% of boys would like more PE specifically. In general, pupils believe their school encourages them to be active but this decreases with age¹⁴⁹.

57% of pupils in Wales said that they enjoyed PE lessons 'a lot'. In line with the findings from Youth Sport Trust's national children's survey in England, boys in Wales were more likely to say they enjoyed PE (67%) than girls (49%) and primary aged students were more positive (69%) than secondary school pupils about enjoying PE (47%). Enjoyment of PE has a knock-on impact on engagement in physical activity and sport, with the Welsh survey finding 13% of boys and 18% of girls saying they would do more sport if they enjoyed PE more¹⁵⁰.

Youth Voice

Research evidence suggests that youth voice can play a role in increasing engagement with school¹⁵¹ reiterating the importance of embedded youth voice within a school sport offer. In England, the Youth Sport Trust's national children's survey data found that around two thirds (63%) of boys and over half of girls (57%) would like to have a say in the activities they do in PE and after school clubs¹⁵². Similar proportions of young people in Wales (44%) would like to have a say in planning and organising school activities and events¹⁵³.

Over a third of boys (36%) and girls (37%) in Wales reported that they would do more sport if there were more opportunities to do sport that suited them suggesting that there is still a need to respond to pupils needs and desires. Looking at PE specifically, only 15% of pupils feel that their ideas about PE and school sport are always listened to while 45% feel listened to sometimes¹⁵⁴.

The role of schools

PE kit

PE kit can influence attitudes and engagement with physical activity at school. A recent study found that PE kit plays a major role in influencing the high dropout rates of teenage girls in school sport¹⁵⁵. Nearly one in five girls at KS4 reported that not liking the PE kit is a barrier to them being more active at school¹⁵⁶.

The Youth Sport Trust's Girls Active survey found that only one in five girls (21%) said that they liked their school's PE kit and didn't think it needed to be improved¹⁵⁷.

Providing girls with a choice and influence over what they wear for PE at school has been found to positively influence body image and self-esteem¹⁵⁸. Over half of girls (56%) responding to the Youth Sport Trust's latest Girls Active survey would like to have more options to choose from. Currently only 32% agreed that their PE kit makes them feel confident, 47% agreed it made them feel comfortable, 25% felt it made them feel smart and 47% agreed it made them feel athletic¹⁵⁹. In contrast, boys report feeling significantly more confident in their PE kit compared with girls; 51% of boys feel confident compared with 32% of girls¹⁶⁰.

New research shows associations between school uniforms and inequalities in physical activity levels¹⁶¹



Recent analysis conducted by researchers at the University of Cambridge suggests school uniforms could be restricting young people's physical activity in school.

Looking at data across 135 countries, they found that countries where school uniform is required to be worn, fewer children meet the WHO recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity than in those countries where school uniforms are less common.

New Research on parents' perceptions of PE kit¹⁶²



Research conducted by the Youth Sport Trust with YouGov asked parents of both girls and boys for their perceptions of their child's PE kit. It demonstrated a disconnect between parents and young people's perceptions of PE kit. It found that parents generally are happy with the PE kit at school, they feel that it is suitable and that they are well informed about what kit is needed. There are some concerns about affordability of PE kit with nearly a fifth (18%) disagreeing that the PE kit is affordable for them as a family. 14% also feel that the PE kit is a barrier for their child's participation in PE and physical activity at school.

PE, school sport and physical activity is still not prioritised adequately in schools

There are still a number of challenges that schools experience relating to the prioritisation of PE, school sport and physical activity. In part this could be addressed with more high quality research evidence demonstrating the efficacy of school based physical activity interventions. A recent scoping review identified the importance of research measuring and reporting contextual factors to allow these to be better understood¹⁶³.

UK public health guidance states that 30 minutes of physical activity should be provided each day during schooltime to help children achieve the physical activity guidelines – however, among teachers and parents, awareness of this varies. 64% of parents think primary schools and 72% believe that secondary schools are recommended to provide 30 minutes of activity a day¹⁶⁴. Awareness is worryingly slightly lower amongst teachers, with only 60% of teachers knowing schools are recommended to provide at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day. This is in line with data from 2023. Awareness is higher amongst primary school teachers with 76% identifying 30 minutes or more compared to 47% of secondary teachers. One in five teachers (17%) believe there is no minimum recommendation. Even amongst subject experts awareness is low, only 69% of secondary PE teachers were aware of the recommended levels of activity schools should provide.

Every school should be doing 2 hours of PE per week to help children achieve 30 minutes a day. Despite this recommendation, the latest Ofsted report on PE found that many schools do not match the ambition of the national curriculum for PE and that the quality of activity in PE lessons is variable. The research also found a small number of pupils in both primary and secondary schools routinely miss PE so that they can receive support in other areas of the curriculum, meaning not all pupils have equal access to PE in the curriculum¹⁶⁵.

Working with Teacher Tapp, the Youth Sport Trust asked primary and secondary teacher about their awareness of the amount of physical activity children aged 5-18 should engage in daily as a minimum. In 2023, 35% of teachers were aware of the amount of time recommended in the CMO guidelines¹⁶⁶. In 2024 awareness has decreased to 30%. Secondary teachers' awareness was lower than primary teachers' awareness (24% secondary vs 36% primary)¹⁶⁷.

Less than half (42%) of parents feel that their child gets the right amount of time for sport and play during PE lessons¹⁶⁸, a decrease on previous years where over half (53%) believed this¹⁶⁹. 43% of parents this year believe that their child should get more time for sport and play during the curriculum. Only 28% of parents believe that their child's school provides inspirational PE lessons¹⁷⁰.



New Research – an evaluation of a national PE teacher training programme¹⁷¹

The Secondary Teacher Training programme in England was a programme that aimed to improve the quality of school sport, PE and physical activity in Secondary Schools. It focused on broadening opportunities and improving the quality of physical activity offer in schools.

There were 10 project locations delivering 130 CPD sessions to staff from 157 schools. Over 2,500 secondary schools engaged in the programme.

The programme found that staff confidence and competence to deliver inclusive physical activity was enhanced through the networking, collaboration and training experienced as part of the programme. 80% of students reported now having more choice in which activities they did in PE.

Support received as part of the programme (CPD, training and networking) was well received, with 98% of educators reporting their understanding of wider stakeholders' value of PE, school sport and physical activity had benefitted. In addition, 95% of educators reported increased connectivity within and between schools and 99% agreed that there was increased provision of high quality opportunities for all children to take part in PE, school sport and physical activity.

Primary teacher training is still not sufficient to equip educators to teach PE

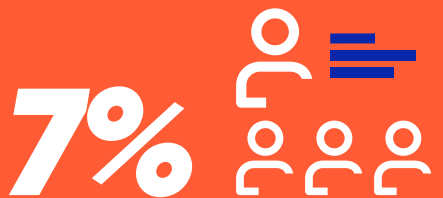
Teacher confidence to teach PE in primary schools is a consistent challenge. This is mostly as a result of a lack of prioritisation and focus on PE within initial teacher training. **Only 56% of primary school teachers feel confident to deliver PE¹⁷².**

The role of schools

The number of PE teachers and PE hours taught in school are declining

In 2022/23 there were 24,026 secondary school PE teachers in England. This is a decline since the peak of 26,005 in 2011/12 but a slight increase in the previous five years from a low of 23,113 in 2017/18¹⁷⁶.

Since London hosted the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games...

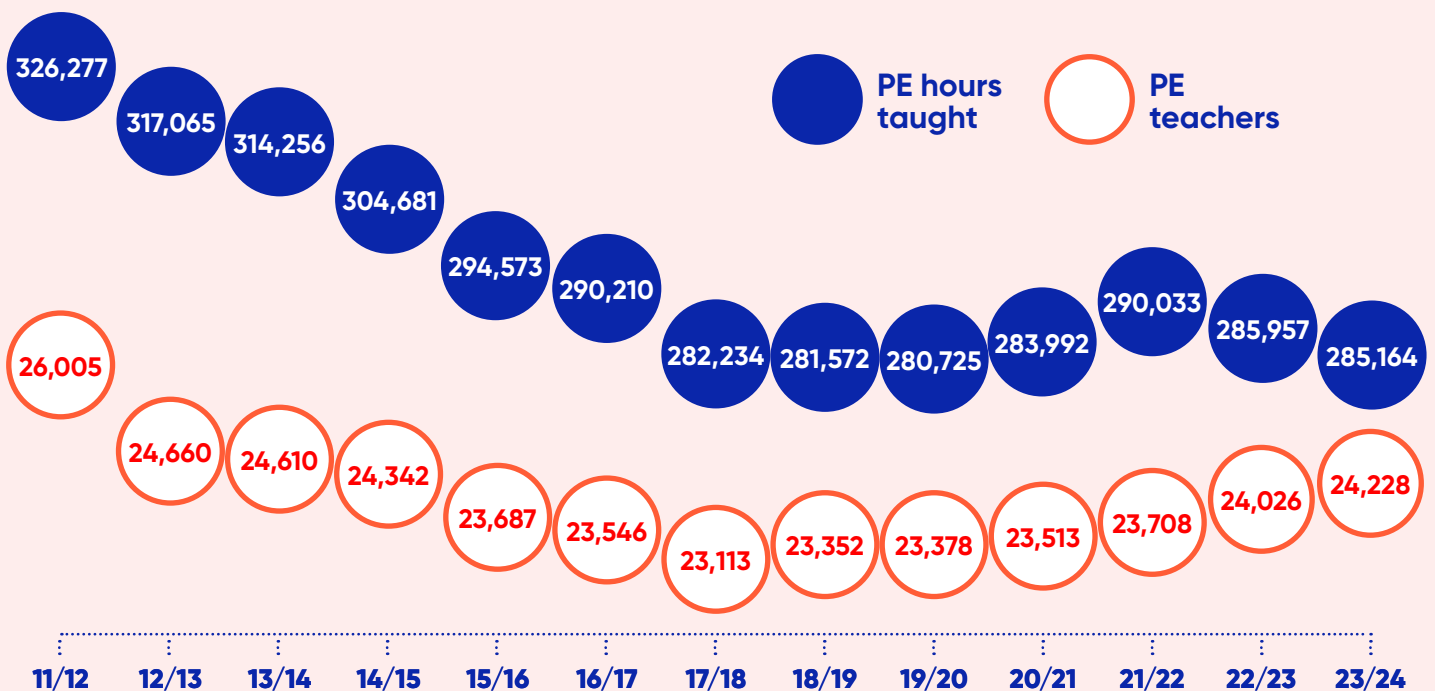


decrease in the number of PE teachers in England from 26,005 in 2011/12 to 24,228 in 2023/24¹⁷³



fewer hours of PE were taught in 2023/24 (285,164) compared with 2011/12 (326,277). The largest decrease in PE hours has been seen for KS4 and KS5¹⁷⁴

Change in numbers of PE hours taught and PE teachers in Secondary Schools in England over time¹⁷⁵



Extra-Curricular provision is changing, increasing pressure on schools

The way children are active has changed since the pandemic. Children's activity is now dependent on more structured activities such as active clubs and is less dependent on unstructured activities such as playing with friends after school¹⁷⁷. There is also evidence of a shift from community to school provision, with school based active club participation higher in 2022 compared to 2017 and community based club participation lower in 2022 compared to 2017. This places an increasing pressure on school provision. However, only half (52%) of parents feel their child gets the right amount of time for sport and play at school during extra-curricular time e.g. lunchtime, after school clubs. This is a decrease from 2023, where 59% of parents felt that their child got enough time¹⁷⁸.

Extra-curricular provision and wrap around care by schools has been identified as a potential strategy to support pupil attendance^{179, 180}. A study using interviews with school staff found positive pupil outcomes including increases in confidence, sense of belonging, self-esteem and fitness associated with after school clubs¹⁸¹.

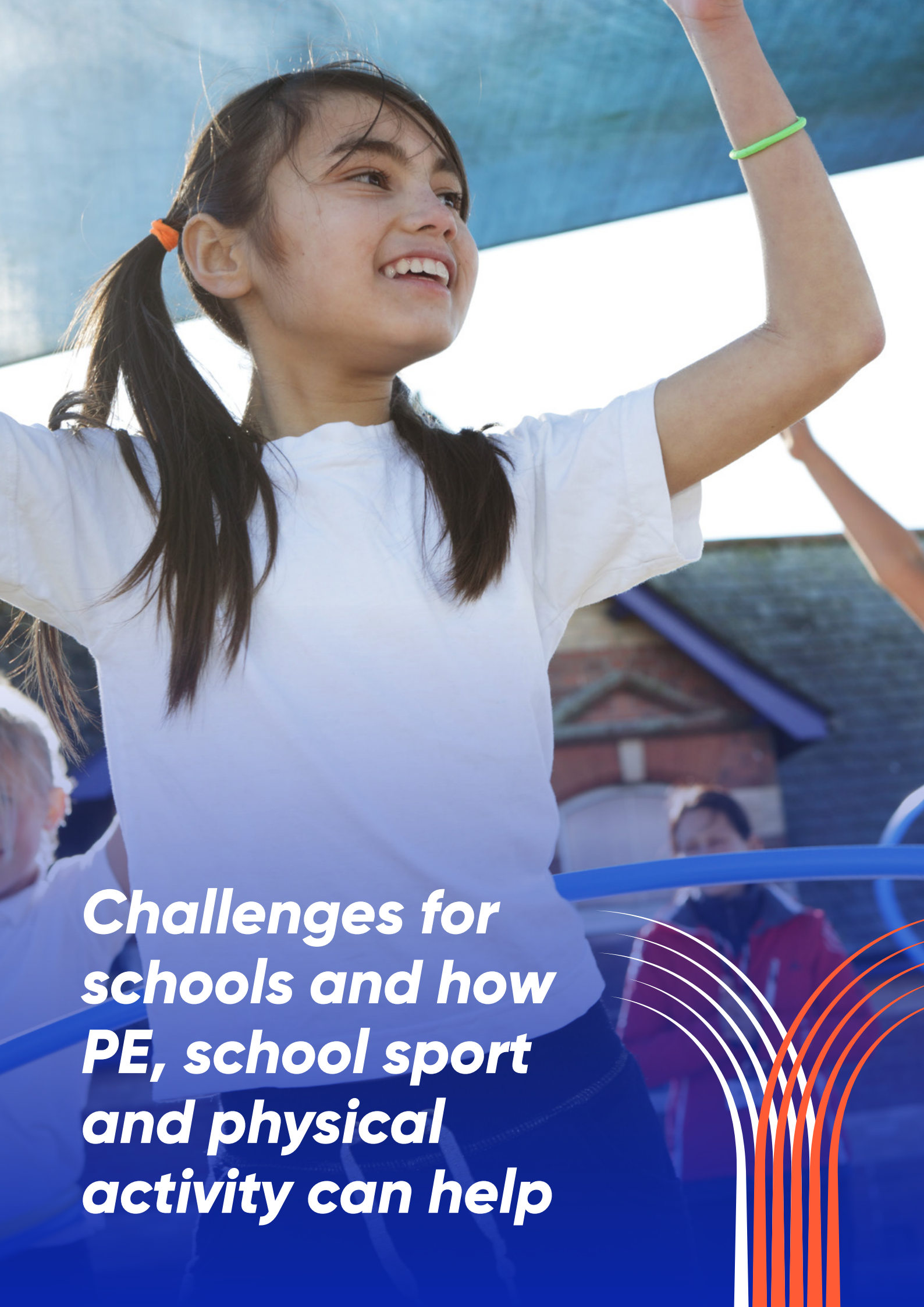
The extended services in schools programme which ran between 2003 and 2010 provided evidence to support the value of extra-curricular school activities. As a result of the programme, 82% of schools reported greater pupil enjoyment in school, 54% reported reduced behaviour problems, 31% saw reduced exclusions and 69% felt it had some influence in raising attainment¹⁸². However, the recent Ofsted report found that over half of schools do not monitor attendance at extra-curricular clubs which means it is difficult to evidence the inclusivity of such activities more recently.

New research links extra-curricular sports participation to education and employment in early twenties¹⁸³



Using longitudinal data from the Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England 2 (Our Future), the Educational Policy Institute explored participation in extra-curricular activities in secondary schools.

They found a positive association between attending sports clubs in secondary school and being in employment or education at age 21/22.



***Challenges for
schools and how
PE, school sport
and physical
activity can help***



Challenges for schools and how PE, school sport and physical activity can help

There is a clear role for schools in PE, school sport and physical activity provision for young people. In turn, though it is not a silver bullet, evidence shows it can also help to address some of the key challenges schools are facing.

Challenge: Absence and attendance

Absenteeism is becoming a significant issue for schools. The overall absence rate was 7.6% in the 2021/22 academic year, with 22.5% of pupils persistently absent which is double the pre-pandemic rate¹⁸⁴. 4 in 10 (38%) of teachers surveyed as part of our latest Teacher Tapp survey identified persistent absenteeism as an issue they are dealing with at the moment in their school¹⁸⁵.

In England, 35% of young people eligible for free school meals were persistently absent from school in the Spring Term of academic year 2023/24. In comparison, 17% of young people not eligible for free school meals were persistently absent from school during this time.¹⁸⁶

The correlation between levels of absence and educational attainment is well known¹⁸⁷ and therefore opportunities to support attendance at school need to be considered. The House of Lords report on persistent absence identifies there is a role for sports based interventions to improve attendance. They recommended additional government investment and research to ascertain the link between sports based interventions and improved attendance¹⁸⁸.

New Research shows the link between poor mental health and absenteeism¹⁸⁹



The Prince's Trust Natwest Youth Index is an annual report based on a YouGov survey of 16-25 year olds across the UK.

This year it found that one in five (21%) of young people in the UK have missed school or work in the past year due to their mental health.

Challenges for schools and how PE, school sport and physical activity can help

New Research – sense of belonging is a key driver of attendance¹⁹⁰



New research conducted by ImpactEd aims to help schools understand some of the challenges that exist around attendance. The study included questionnaire data from 30,000 pupils between the ages of 4 and 18 during Autumn term 2023 in England.

A key finding was the interrelatedness between school absenteeism and a sense of belonging. Those pupils who are persistently absent had lower scores in response to the question 'I feel like a real part of the school'. Compared to pupils with 100% attendance, persistently absent pupils scored 13% lower on feeling respected at school and 14% lower in feeling proud of their school. Girls were also found to have a weaker sense of belonging to the school community than boys.

Challenge: Pupil behaviour is worsening

42% of teachers taking part in a recent Ofsted survey reported that pupil behaviour has worsened since the pandemic¹⁹¹. Over a third (37%) of teachers responding to a survey by teaching union NASUWT¹⁹² reported having experienced physical abuse or violence from pupils. The majority of teachers responding to the survey (90%) report experiencing verbal abuse or violence from pupils in the last 12 months. 82% say that these experiences affect their morale and enthusiasm for their job, which is a challenge in a sector already struggling with teacher retention. 50% of teachers surveyed through our latest Teacher Tapp research identified poor behaviour of pupils as one of the key issues their school is dealing with at the moment¹⁹³. This was the most identified issue overall by the teachers asked. This was higher for secondary schools (56%) than primary schools (43%).

Increased proportions of teachers are reporting that misbehaviour stops or interrupts teaching. For every 30 minutes of lesson time, an average of 7 minutes is lost due to misbehaviour¹⁹⁴. However, evidence shows the impact that sport-based interventions can have on youth crime and violence. This may mean that PE, school sport and physical activity can offer similar and transferable benefits to improve pupil behaviour in schools¹⁹⁵.

Challenge: Overall wellbeing in schools is suffering – both pupils and staff

As outlined within this report – young people's wellbeing is currently at an all-time low. As young people spend so much of their lives in school, there is a role for schools to play in supporting their overall wellbeing.

Challenges for schools and how PE, school sport and physical activity can help

Teachers are concerned, with 97% of teachers reporting they are concerned about the mental health of young people in their school¹⁹⁶ and worryingly, the majority (79%) don't believe that the appropriate support is available to help them address these needs in school¹⁹⁷. 60% of teachers agree that children's wellbeing should be measured in schools at least once a year across England¹⁹⁸. The Youth Sport Trust's Teacher Tapp survey of teachers in England found 34% of teachers identified the poor mental health of pupils as one of the key issues that their school is dealing with at the moment¹⁹⁹.

In addition, 47% of teachers report teacher and staff wellbeing as one of the top issues their school is currently dealing with²⁰⁰. Overall staff shortages in schools are reducing levels of expert teaching and are a barrier to teachers accessing CPD²⁰¹. Teacher wellbeing has continually been reported as lower than the general population and teacher wellbeing has again declined significantly over the last year²⁰². 78% of teachers report being stressed, over a third (36%) report experiencing burn out (a 7% increase on 2022) and 39% of teachers and education staff experienced mental health issues themselves in the past academic year²⁰³. A quarter of teachers (25%) reported that they were considering leaving the state school sector in the next 12 months for reasons other than retirement²⁰⁴.

Given this challenge, change is needed to reverse the poor wellbeing seen in both staff and students in schools. A 'Well School' approach involves placing as much emphasis on health and wellbeing as academic performance. Advocated and supported by the Youth Sport Trust, Well Schools focus on three pillars; Well Led, Well Prepared and Well Equipped.

Research conducted by the University of Manchester found that within Well Schools, teachers reported statistically significantly lower levels of depersonalisation/cynicism and higher levels of personal accomplishment. In addition they reported higher levels of feelings of teacher efficiency in engaging pupils, use of instructional strategies and in classroom management. Pupil surveys found pupils reported encouraging levels of physical health and a sense of belonging. Case study schools reported their pupils were happier and healthier which then had a positive impact on pupils' engagement with learning and academic performance with physical activity playing a key role across all three²⁰⁵.

Challenge: School readiness

School readiness, as defined in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework for England, refers to giving children *'the right foundation for good future progress through school and life'*²⁰⁶. Teachers report that nearly half of children (46%) are not school ready when they start reception²⁰⁷. 65% of reception and early years teachers surveyed by the Youth Sport Trust and Teacher Tapp agreed or strongly agreed that children entering reception this year are not as school ready as children were prior to the pandemic²⁰⁸. However, 89% of parents believe that their children are school ready by the time they start reception²⁰⁹.

Challenges for schools and how PE, school sport and physical activity can help

Physical development is an important part of school readiness²¹⁰. The number of children starting school with or at risk of a movement difficulty has increased in recent years and teachers feel that children are starting school less physically school ready than they have in the past²¹¹. Teachers report they are seeing children entering reception with physical development challenges and 10% report seeing children with an unhealthy weight. These challenges were more pronounced for schools with greater levels of deprivation as measured by the percentage of young people eligible for free school meals. 16% of teachers in the most deprived schools raised unhealthy weight as a concern compared to 7% of teachers in affluent schools²¹².

Given that greater physical activity in childhood can lead to greater physical activity into adolescence and adulthood, it is important to develop a lifelong love for physical activity from an early stage. In turn, this likely has benefits for children's physical development, as well as their physical literacy and school readiness, from an early age²¹³.



***Positive steps in
the right direction***

Positive steps in the right direction

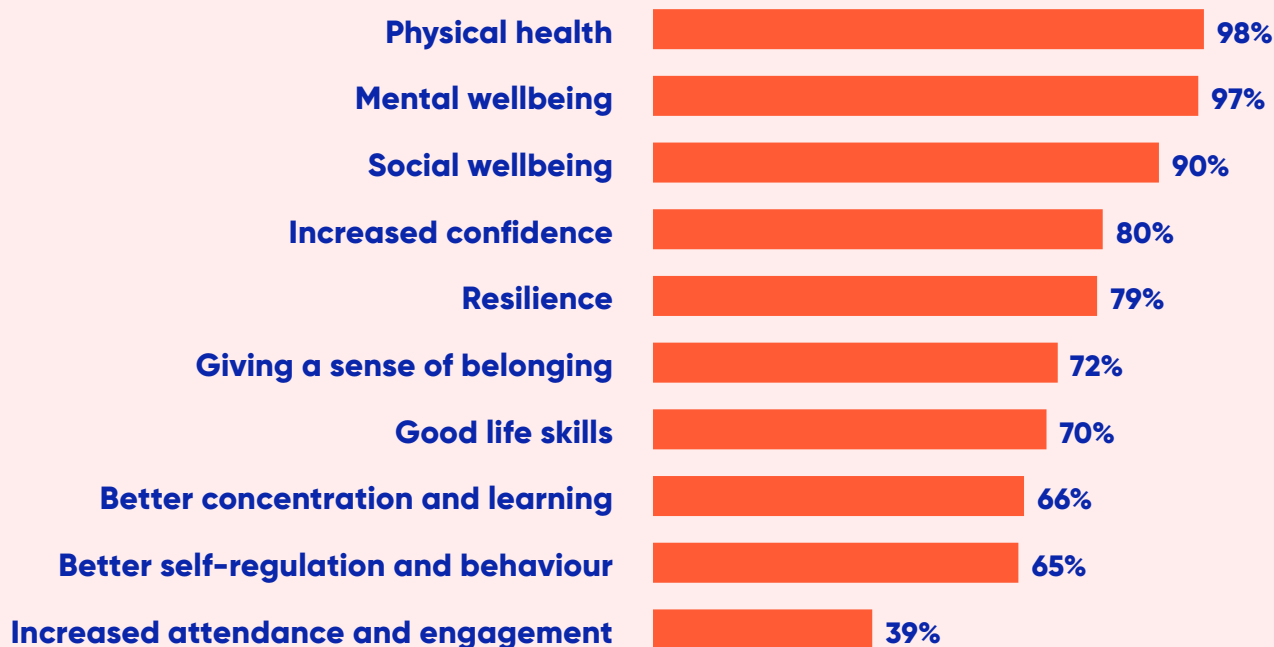
Parents see the value of being active, with 2024 data showing 70% of parents encourage their children to be active and play sport²¹⁵, a significant increase from 60% in 2022. Almost all (92%) parents in 2024 also believe that 'sport and play are important parts of every young person's education and development', this is also a significant increase from previous years.

However, over half of parents (52%) are concerned that children do not have enough spaces to play. Parents in Scotland show even higher levels of concern (40%) than England (17%)²¹⁶.

Positive steps: Teachers' value of PE and school sport

The latest Youth Sport Trust and Teacher Tapp teacher research revealed that teachers are acutely aware of the benefits of PE, school sport and physical activity for young people.

How does sport and play help young people according to teachers?²¹⁴



Positive steps in the right direction

Positive steps: Parents' value of PE and school sport

Parents surveyed as part of the Youth Sport Trust's 2024 YouGov research generally understand the importance of PE and school sport. A fifth (21%) of parents would be more inclined to choose a school which has a strong focus on PE and school sport²¹⁷ and 39% of parents would like to see their child's school making a pledge to get children more active in school, an increase from 31% last year²¹⁸. 85% of parents are concerned that cuts to PE, school sport and breaktimes in schools are likely to have a negative impact on pupils' wellbeing²¹⁹.

Parents play a key role in modelling physical activity and supporting children to be active²²⁰. Mothers in particular are seen as key to influencing activity levels of children^{221, 222}. For young people from low socio-economic groups boys are more likely than girls to feel encouraged to be active by their parents²²³. It is therefore important to continue to improve parents' awareness of the wealth of benefits experienced as a result of engagement in physical activity.

Positive steps: International comparisons on PE, school policy and government influence show the potential role it could play

The latest 'Global Activity cards'²²⁴, show higher performing countries are likely to have policies in place around PE provision, active school policies, parental support and access to facilities and equipment.

The cards that show the strongest Government influence over physical activity are New Zealand, South Korea, Finland and Chile where they have strong examples of leadership and commitment to physical activity for children and young people as well as allocating funding and resources. There was not enough data to score England on this measure, however, it is clear that the improvement of leadership and commitment to physical activity for children and young people, as well as allocating funding and resources, has potential to improve the status in England.

Positive steps in the right direction

Positive steps: the potential value of a national campaign

Youth Sport Trust research with parents found that in Great Britain, 56% of parents would support a national campaign to promote the importance of 60 active minutes per day²²⁵.

The WHO Global Action Plan on Physical Activity (GAPPA) provides a series of recommendations for improving physical activity around the world. In 2022, the first global status report was released which compared current progress and provision around the world²²⁶. It found that only 52% of countries have had a national campaign on physical activity and only 30% promote physical activity in early years childcare settings.

Positive steps: Work has been completed this year in England to develop a consensus on Physical Literacy ensuring clarity over the concept

A physical literacy consensus statement for England was published in September 2023²²⁷. This concluded that *'Physical literacy is our relationship with movement and physical activity throughout life'*. The consensus has been developed to facilitate a shared understanding of physical literacy for all those working across the sector. The statement provides a framework to ensure that all children and young people have positive experiences of sport and physical activity that are fun and help them develop. By having a better understanding of physical literacy we can begin to adapt policy, practice and programmes to ensure it meets all children and young people's needs. Evidence shows that young people with high physical literacy levels have higher physical activity levels, happiness and resilience²²⁸.

Positive steps: Play Sufficiency legislation has been made mandatory for Scotland and Wales

Article 31 of the United Nations convention on the rights of the child includes a specific right for all children to engage in play²²⁹. 'Play sufficiency' is a policy adopted by both the Welsh and Scottish governments in recent years and aims to ensure that all children have access to opportunities to play. A 2019 evaluation of the policy in Wales concluded that, as a result of the policy change, *'much has been achieved in terms of partnership working, raising awareness of children's right to play and reconfiguring services and spaces to create opportunities for playing'*. This is encouraging and demonstrates transferable lessons could be applied to policy in both England and Northern Ireland²³⁰.

What next?

The scale of the crisis in wellbeing children and young people face requires a comprehensive response. As this report has demonstrated, increasing opportunities to be physically active has wide-ranging benefits that can address challenges including worsening mental health, obesity and loneliness.

Taking part in physical activity improves physical, mental and social wellbeing, supports the development of skills and fosters positive habits that can empower young people to manage their wellbeing throughout life. Every child should be supported and empowered to achieve 60 active minutes a day, of PE, sport and play, and access the benefits that go hand-in-hand with elevated activity levels.

We are clear that immediate, urgent action is needed. Earlier this year the Youth Sport Trust launched our manifesto for action – shaped by leading voices from education, sport, physical activity, and health and wellbeing. Together, we are calling for a new, long-term joined-up national plan guaranteeing every child access to 60 active minutes a day by creating a nation of active and well schools. This plan should:

- 1 resource a dedicated coordination and delivery team** working across a family of schools in every community.
- 2 introduce a new national wellbeing measurement** for children, to track progress and target interventions.
- 3 protect and increase spaces for play and physical activity** in every locality, and provide co-curricular sport for all children.
- 4 reimagine Physical Education**, making it a core subject developing physically literate children, healthy learners and active citizens.
- 5 formalise existing youth sport leadership opportunities** into a national young sport volunteers programme delivering year-round social action.

Not only could adopting this plan provide immediate benefits to support a generation that is unhappier, unhealthier and more distracted than previous generations, but it provides a preventative, low-cost early-intervention model that can reduce the number of young people reaching crisis point and help get upstream of many of the challenges presenting in education including around attendance, attainment and behaviour.

What next?



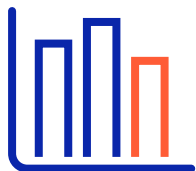
With a General Election taking place next month, political parties and leaders will be putting the finishing touches on their visions for the future of the country. Children and young people's needs and aspirations must be at the heart of the campaign and an immediate priority for whoever forms the next government.

Parents, teachers and children are resolute in their belief that increasing opportunities to be physically active is vital for this and future generations. During this election campaign, political parties must rise to the challenge and set out how they will unlock the power of physical activity to put young people's wellbeing first and build a brighter future for every child. Their willingness to rise to the challenge will shape our nation's future.

For more information about the Youth Sport Trust's manifesto for action, please visit www.youthsporttrust.org/manifesto

Further reading

For the latest information on PE, school sport and physical activity please see our online Knowledge Bank



Contains key evidence about young people and physical activity, play and sport



Updated on a regular basis to make sure it contains the latest information



You can filter and search to help you find the statistics or evidence you are looking for



You can access factsheets which summarise statistics on key topics

Find out more

www.youthsporttrust.org/knowledge-bank

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