

1. Campaigns, strategies and action plans

This Girl Can

The This Girl Can (TGC) campaign has been one of, if not the, most successful recent campaigns for promoting physical activity for women. Focussing on the normalisation of women of all shapes, sizes and stages of life, being active in ways that are right for them with an ambition to meet the motivations of women including friendships, fun, time for themselves and social connection.

The TGC campaign on the whole has focussed on adult women rather than girls and young women. This is reflected in the imagery and TV campaigns and we know the importance of 'relatable role models and imagery' (*which relates to our ambition for a national campaign).

The Youth Sport Trust has worked with Sport England and the This Girl Can team and developed specific resources for secondary schools to support girls develop and lead a TGC campaign in their school. There is a strong connection and promotion aligned with our own Girls Active programme, which focuses on taking a long-term sustained approach to engaging girls.

More recently, TGC has developed Studio You, an online platform for secondary schools in England to access free video-based PE lessons, particularly targeted to less-active girls through activities like yoga, dance, boxing, combat. Additionally, a recent partnership with Bodyform provides educational materials to support teachers.

Recent Government strategies

In recent months, the Government has published the new Sport Strategy – Get Active – as well as the School Sport and Activity Action plan. The Youth Sport Trust has welcomed the ambition in these strategies. We are particularly pleased that there is an aspiration for more than a million young people to be active (as measured by meeting the Chief Medical Officers' recommendation of being physically active for at least 60 minutes each day) by the end of the decade.

We have consistently called for a national campaign to highlight this guidance and are delighted that this has been included within the Sport Strategy. To make the kind of societal change that we need, it is vital that such a campaign focuses on a range of audiences including children and young people, and parents and carers. This is particularly important given that only 31% of girls feel encouraged and supported to be active by their dads, compared to 50% of boys. This campaign should aim to replicate the success of previous campaigns such as '5 a day,' with an ambition to dramatically raise awareness of the importance of being physically active, aligned to measurement of progress and accountability.

We are also pleased by the creation of the National Physical Activity Task Force. This offers a forum to bring different government departments together, and our hope is for a more holistic approach to implementation to generate a larger impact. Working in this way can hopefully inspire more government departments to see the opportunity associated with increasing physical activity levels. Key to this is ensuring that the Department for Health and Social Care is fully invested, as there is enormous preventative health potential which can support the NHS by delivering a happier, healthier nation. We anticipate that the Task Force will include a focus on children and young people (including youth voice) in due course, and are looking forward to sharing our own insights around how government can provide leadership to deliver the transformational change that we need.

However, whilst these strategies and plans are welcome, alone they do not go far enough. There needs to be accompanying delivery plans to demonstrate how progress is going to be delivered and monitored. Without these, there is a risk that momentum will be lost at a time when children and young people are crying out for action. Organisations across the sector – those working with children and young people, and across sport more broadly - are primed to maximise their impact, but the reality is that political leadership is needed.

Successful progress also requires specific engagement with under-participating and under-represented groups to help inform delivery, to make sure that all children and young people are provided with opportunities to be physically active. Providing a platform for young people to share their voices offers an effective way to understand barriers and opportunities, and to use these to shape provision and deliver high-quality, engaging experiences based

on their needs. This is also important to help identify key transition points during childhood at which participation rates can drop-off – such as entering secondary school, and the onset of puberty – in order to tailor specific support and interventions as required.

2. Gender disparities in sport and exercise participation

The enjoyment gap in PE

- Enjoyment of PE for girls has consistently been lower than for boys. Since 2016, this gap has widened, with enjoyment for girls falling whilst enjoyment for boys has remained static. In 2016, 74% of all girls said they enjoyed PE; by 2023, this had fallen to 63%. Meanwhile, 86% of all boys said they enjoyed PE in both 2016 and 2023.
- The gap becomes particularly pronounced at secondary school, where the proportion of girls saying they enjoyed PE falls to just 59%, while this remains at 84% for boys in secondary school.

The enjoyment gap widens with age:

Enjoy taking part in PE (YST, 2023)	Girls	Boys
KS2	83%	90%
KS3	60%	84%
KS4	53%	80%

For many girls and young women, school and their involvement in PE and school sport offers their first opportunity to be physically active. This is an opportunity to inspire a passion and foster the development of a life-long commitment to being active. However, this will only happen if opportunities are delivered in a way that is enjoyable and rewarding.

Physical activity participation levels over time

Activity levels – number of days a week with 60+ minutes physical activity a day (Youth Sport Trust, 2023)	Girls (all ages)	Boys (all ages)
2016-17	3.4 days	3.9 days
2017-18	3.2 days	3.5 days
2018-19	3.4 days	3.7 days
2020-21 (*COVID)	3.2 days	3.3 days
2021-22 (*COVID)	3.3 days	-
2022-23	3.3 days	3.9 days

Activity levels – an average of 60+ minutes physical activity a day (Sport England, 2023)	Girls (all ages)	Boys (all ages)
2017-18	40%	47%
2018-19	43%	51%
2019-20 (*COVID)	43%	47%
2020-21 (*COVID)	45%	45%
2021-22	45%	50%

Activity levels – an average of 60+ minutes physical activity a day (Sport England, 2023)	Girls (KS3 and 4 combined)	Boys (KS3 and 4 combined)
2017-18	38%	46%
2018-19	42%	49%
2019-20 (*COVID)	45%	50%
2020-21 (*COVID)	46%	42%
2021-22	48%	50%

Activity levels – an average of 60+ minutes physical activity a day (Sport England, 2023)	Girls (KS2)	Boys (KS2)
2017-18	38%	44%
2018-19	41%	50%
2019-20 (*COVID)	38%	45%
2020-21 (*COVID)	41%	44%
2021-22	40%	46%

Activity levels – an average of 60+ minutes physical activity a day (Sport England, 2023)	Women (adults 16+)	Men (adults 16+)
2015-16	60%	65%
2016-17	60%	64%
2017-18	61%	65%
2018-19	62%	65%
2019-20	60%	63%
2020-21	60%	63%
2021-22	61%	66%

Barriers to participation

Nearly two thirds of all girls (64%) want to be more active in school, but there are many barriers that stop them taking part including lacking confidence, having their period, being watched by others and worrying about how they look. Top barriers across all girls (2023) are:

- Not being confident (30%)
- Not liking others watching them (28%)
- Not liking getting hot and sweaty (27%)
- Worrying about how they look (26%)

Girls are also likely to feel influenced by negative stereotypes, with 71% of girls agreeing that gender stereotypes hold them back at school. (Girl Guiding, 2022.) This reiterates the need for further work to tackle gender stereotypes within and around schools

Periods

For secondary aged girls only, having their period is the most prominent barrier at 38%. During their period, the top concerns for girls in PE are:

- Being in pain/uncomfortable (68%)
- Worrying about leaking (60%)
- Low mood (57%)

This affects participation. 88% of teachers experience pupils not participating in PE if they are menstruating, and 48% of secondary girls said that in their PE lesson they were 'not at all comfortable' talking to their teacher about periods.

Girls seek both emotional and practical support to help with participation when having their period:

- 40% said they wanted greater understanding/empathy shown by teachers
- 39% said greater flexibility to participate to their ability at the time
- 35% said better options for PE kit to help make them feel more comfortable
- 32% said access to sanitary products in PE

Confidence and body image

Over half of all girls (57%) said they feel self-conscious and judged when exercising outdoors (Women in Sport, 2022.) The proportion of girls who are happy with the way their body looks decreases with age:

Happy with the way their body looks (YST 2023)	Girls
KS2	65%

KS3	37%
KS4	32%

Research from Girl Guiding (2023) found that:

- 59% of girls and young women aged 7-21 said they were happy with the way they looked, down from 72% in 2009
- 68% of girls and young women aged 11-21 said they'd like to lose weight and half have been on a diet (53%) or skipped a meal to lose weight (48%)
- 62% of girls and young women aged 7-21 report being criticised or having mean things said about how they look, compared to 49% in 2016
- 59% of girls say they see or experience sexism when taking part in physical activity and sport

In an evaluation of a PE kit intervention for young girls, wearing PE kit negatively influenced body image related to self-esteem whereas providing pupils with a choice of what they wear positively influenced their body image related self-esteem. (McIntosh-Dalmedo et al, 2023). Schools should provide opportunities for girls and young women to influence the design of PE kit so that it does not negatively impact body image, with the ambition that this may facilitate greater participation in and enjoyment of PE.

Improvements to PE kit

When asked about what would improve their PE kit, girls offer the following ideas (YST,2023):

- Would like more options to choose from (56%)
- Extra-curricular kit to be flexible/own choice (30%)
- Not liking the look of PE/sports kit (29%)

During the pandemic many schools moved to students wearing PE kit on days for PE. Some unexpected benefits of this were experienced. This included students being more likely to participate (when previously they did not want to change at school), and more time for the lesson as changing time was minimised. Some schools have retained this policy (and its associated benefits), whilst others report that returning to previous policy has been met with resistance by students and has negatively impacted engagement in PE.

Positively, there has been a rise of more inclusive approaches to sports kit, such as The Lionesses and WSL teams changing colour of shorts, and Wimbledon relaxing its white clothing rule for female players to wear dark under-shorts. Changemakers such as Tessa Howard, England Hockey player, has been at the forefront of driving inclusive sportswear choices both for the national team and domestic league. YST is currently working with Tessa Howard, through her CIC Inclusive Sportswear and we are developing guidance for schools to help them consider policy and practice to ensure their PE and sports kit enables participation and performance, is inclusive and driven by the needs of students.

Motivation

The extent to which girls are motivated to take part decreases as they move through key stages 2, 3 and 4. Only 48% of girls agree they have the same opportunities as boys in school to do the sports and activities they want. This is 73% in KS2, 44% for KS3 falling to just 28% for KS4.

Boys are much more likely to believe that 'some sports are for girls and some sports are for boys.

Agree some sports are for girls and some sports are for boys (YST, 2023)	Girls	Boys
KS2	24%	38%
KS3	18%	41%
KS4	18%	49%

Having fun and being with friends are the strongest two motivations for all girls to take part in sport, physical activity and PE at school.

Both PE and school sport should be used to provide access to a range of different options so that all girls and young women are able to find an activity they enjoy. Taking part in a broader range of activities within school settings can also help provide an entry into community participation, providing a school-to-club pathway.

For many girls, their view of PE is heavily influenced by their perception of whether they are good at sport (and this is reinforced from early experiences and early decisions whether they are 'sporty'.) Sadly, for many (girls and boys), this means PE lacks relevance, does not provide the right environment that builds confidence or develops a sense of belonging, and results in low confidence, anxiety and behaviours associated with being disengaged. In particular, many girls would like more say in sport and PE at school and large proportions of girls do not like it when PE lessons are competitive or do not believe the skills learned in PE are helpful for them:

- 54% of secondary age girls said 'I would like to have a say in the activities we do in PE and after school clubs'
- 49% of secondary age girls said 'I like it when my PE lessons are competitive'
- 41% of secondary age girls believe 'the skills I learn in PE help me in and outside of school'

3. Gender gap in sports and exercise science and research

Women and girls are significantly under-represented as participants in sport and exercise science research. As a result, conclusions made from sport and exercise science research may only be applicable to one sex (Cowley et al, 2021.) To remedy this, there needs to be a concerted effort to encourage more women and girls to be involved in exercise science and research, both as participants and as researchers. Making progress includes providing opportunities for women and girls to be involved in the co-production of studies, to ensure opportunities for participation are accessible and generate interest. In addition, where possible studies should be delivered in community-orientated settings that allow for greater opportunities, especially for people from under-served or under-engaged communities.

4. Coach education and qualifications

There is a need to ensure schools feel adequately equipped and supported to deliver high-quality opportunities so that girls and young women have positive experiences of PE and school sport. This should include training support for both teaching and non-specialist staff so that there is greater support for both PE and co-curricular activity targeted at girls. At present, teachers do not receive the training they need to deliver PE with confidence and competence. The danger is that if girls and young women have poor quality PE, this lessens the likelihood of them developing positive associations with being physically active and can then restrict participation throughout life.

Access to initial and in-service, ongoing teacher training would help improve the effectiveness, and potentially enjoyability of PE lessons. Increasing teachers' confidence in delivering PE could also help improve awareness of the benefits of physical activity across the board, and increase the likelihood of teachers embracing active learning to put physical activity at the heart of the school day.

5. Pregnancy and maternity

We have no specific evidence to contribute here.

Youth Sport Trust headline asks

- A national campaign to promote participation for young girls akin to #ThisGirlCan, building on the proposal in the recent 'Get Active' Sport Strategy
- Improved teacher training, including a particular focus on primary school teachers (who are disproportionately female) as a way of giving teachers confidence and girls early exposure to women's participation and involvement in sport
- Protected 2 hours of PE for everyone, by elevating the status of PE within the curriculum in response to the fall in PE hours, as part of a wider ambition to use the unique position of schools to provide opportunities to contribute towards all children and young people being physically active for 60 minutes each day
- Increased focus on youth voice within schools so all children and young people can find a passion that inspires them to be physically active
- Increased use of data to target intervention and support, including by all schools surveying participation levels and using the results to shape provision
- Action to improve access to school sport facilities, particularly in areas where participation or opportunities to participate are reduced

- Equal access to facilities, so that progress around equal access in sport is matched by progress within community settings
- Long-term funding and investment in infrastructure to create capacity needed to provide opportunities to all children and young people