

Katie Allen, Professor Eric Anderson and Stacy Hart – Written evidence (NPS0020)

Response to Question Two - How can children and young people be encouraged to participate in sport and recreation both at school and outside school, and lead an active lifestyle?

1. The single best thing we can do to encourage young people's physical activity is to encourage a love for it, and we can do this by showing them from the earliest age that sports – all sports – are meant for them. If PE is something kids struggle with and suffer through, they'll give it up at the earliest possible opportunity; witness the huge drop in sports participation at age 16. If they fall in love with a certain sport or activity, they're far more likely to keep it up. And to ensure every child has the opportunity to find an activity they love we must ensure that all children have access to as many types of activity as possible.
2. Current legislation mandates only that schools "allow boys and girls equal opportunities to participate in comparable sporting activities." The word 'comparable' is open to interpretation. In practice it means that – either because of outdated gender stereotypes or because it is easier and less work to do the same thing than to change – schools have largely continued with gender-segregated sporting options: boys tend to play sports such as football, rugby and cricket; girls netball, hockey and rounders.
3. This gender segregation at a young age starts kids putting each other and themselves in boxes. Their potential is limited by what they think they're allowed to do or what society approves of; by ridiculous stereotypical notions like 'girls can't kick' or 'real boys want to play rugby, not dance'. The idea that the sport they happen to love is not appropriate for them discourages participation; it gives the impression that physical activities in general are not for everyone.
4. Katie Allen is a brilliant Basingstoke schoolgirl who loves football and spends her spare time playing and refereeing up and down the country. Unfortunately, at Katie's school football was only offered to boys which is, she discovered, a common situation in schools throughout the UK. Katie has petitioned Government to **Require schools to offer all sports to all children:** <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/331930>. This petition has over 10,500 signatures. Government has responded but that response was deemed inadequate by the Petitions Committee and they've been instructed to respond again.
5. As Katie says, "Many students are made to feel out of place in school sport just because of their gender. It causes inequality from day one. Students can feel awkward in PE lessons as the sport they want to play is only played by the other gender. This makes people feel like it's not okay that they play that sport, which is not right!".
6. When Katie's school relented and allowed her to play with the boys' football team, she was bullied because those boys had learned that football isn't for

girls. In the responses to her petition, she has been overwhelmed by positive feedback for its aim and similar stories of disappointed girls not being allowed to play the "boy" sports, excuses made about girls' breasts being an insurance issue, boys not being allowed to play netball despite having a passion for it, and sadly even inappropriate comments from teachers and coaches about girls' unfitness for certain sports that have led to body confidence issues and dysmorphia.

7. It is not enough to assume that schools will provide opportunities for those few students that dare to brave stepping outside prescribed norms by asking to play other sports. The world is already too segregated along pink and blue lines for this to be easy for kids to do and, of course, schools are currently free to say no. In addition, gender segregation is often the basis for other forms of discrimination. If "girls don't play footie and boys don't dance", then those who break the mould can often be labelled with homophobic slurs such as "dyke" or "poof".
8. It's also worth noting that the typical school sport offering for girls tends to comprise less popular games, whereas the boys tend to play those sports society considers worthy and important like football or rugby. No-one is watching netball or rounders in the pub or showing it on TV and if there's no interest, nor should they. But by funnelling the different genders automatically into worthy sports versus children's games we give a powerful implicit message not only about girls' suitability for so-called boy sports but about their suitability for sport in general.
9. We ask that there be a requirement that sports offerings in school are made universally to all children, to give children the best chance of finding something to play that they love, thereby increasing their chances of lifelong sports participation and good health. Please note that we do not ask for boys and girls to play sports together in all instances; there are common sense reasons why this will not always be appropriate. But wherever girls are offered a sport or physical activity, it should be offered equally to boys, and vice versa.

Submission made by:

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