



YOUTH
SPORT
TRUST

RESEARCH

PE and School Sport

The Annual Report 2023

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
Inspiring Changemakers,
Building Belonging strategy:
www.youthsporttrust.org/strategy

This report



In 2022, as part of the development of our new strategy, the Youth Sport Trust brought together in one place the latest research, evidence and insight on the importance and impact of Physical Education (PE), school sport and physical activity. The 'PE and School Sport Report' highlighted the issues facing children and young people today and reinforced the need to raise public awareness of these issues 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.

We made a commitment to publish this report on an annual basis in support of the three objectives of our 2022 – 2035 strategy: Urgent Action, Generational Shift and Societal Change. These annual reports will complement our 'Class of 2035' insight report which has been published every 5 years since the charity's 20th anniversary in 2015.

This report will track awareness and attitudes to PE, school sport and physical activity over the next ten 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 PE, school sport and physical activity.

Introduction from our CEO



I am delighted to share our latest PE and School Sport Annual Report with you. This provides a detailed insight into the current state of PE, school sport and physical activity.

We share this with you at an incredibly important time for the wellbeing and development of the nation's children. Too many are missing out on the life changing benefits of play and sport, and there is a crisis in young people's physical and mental health, worsened by the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis.

As a result, our charity's mission feels more important than ever, as does our commitment to challenging the status quo and striving for a brighter future. Rather than despondence, the scale of the challenges facing young people makes us more resolute and determined to improve their life chances.

This report brings together a huge amount of new research and data. You will read about the current state of PE, school sport and physical activity in schools, and in turn the lives of children and young people. It looks at the state of play from the perspective of teachers and parents, giving us a better understanding of the value and importance they put on children's physical activity. It expands to cover some broader themes including the value of wellbeing, the challenges of the digital age, and the impact of inequalities on activity levels. Finally, it looks at evidence and research from across the world to enable us to place domestic levels of activity within a global context.

I would like to thank the many organisations, institutions and academics whose evidence and insight has contributed enormously to the development of this report. Specific thanks should go to Sport England for their continued partnership including the support of funding from The National Lottery. With their help we are able to collaborate across the sector and beyond.

I am proud to introduce this report to you on behalf of the Youth Sport Trust. We hope it helps inform policy and practice and reinforces the value and importance of PE, physical activity and sport in schools in the education and development of young people.

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

Ali Oliver MBE

Chief Executive Officer, Youth Sport Trust

Key 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.

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

Physical activity is 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 or during leisure time, or when participating in sport, walking, cycling, active recreation, and active play¹.

Sedentary Behaviour

Sedentary behaviour is defined as any waking behaviour while in a sitting, reclining, or lying posture with low amount of energy used¹.

Methodology – report coverage and data notes

This report draws on the latest evidence from across the UK as well as insight from international sources. Whilst a large proportion of the discussion references data from England (using Sport England's Active Lives – Children and Young People Survey), we have incorporated available data from home countries and beyond wherever possible.

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

Evidence on teacher's attitudes refers to data collected from teachers in England by Teacher Tapp, also on behalf of Youth Sport Trust.

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

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

State of the Nation – at a glance

Our children are...



Unhappier

97% of teachers are concerned about the mental health of young people in their school³⁴.

The number of children in England needing treatment for mental health problems has risen by 39% in a year⁴⁸.

18% of children aged 7 to 16 have a probable mental disorder⁴⁹.

45% of parents are concerned about their child's mental health³².



Unhealthier

73% of teachers are concerned about the physical health of young people in their school³⁴.

Rates of obesity are higher than before the pandemic. In England, prevalence of reception children with obesity is 10.1% and 23.4% for year six children. These are both decreases from last year's data but are still higher than pre-pandemic³⁷.



More distracted

Most parents (78%) believe that children are spending too much time online and not enough time with each other in person³².

Over 3 in 5 (62%) of parents believe that digital distractions mean that their children are spending less time being active³².

Almost half (46%) of 7- 8 year olds and 38% of 9-11 year olds agree they spend more time online or watching TV than they do talking to their family⁸⁶.

PE, school sport and physical activity bring a wide range of benefits to address these challenges...



Physical health



Mental health



Social wellbeing



Brain function

Schools are uniquely placed to provide opportunities for physical activity for young people, shaping their attitudes to PE, school sport and activity and helping them to develop life-long habits.

However, we're not unlocking this potential...

Physical activity

Less than half (47%) of young people in England are meeting minimum physical activity levels⁶.

72% of parents are concerned that young people are not getting enough physical activity, however, only 43% of parents are aware that children should be active for 60 minutes or more a day³².

54% of children would like to do more exercise or sport than they are currently doing – an increase from 44% in 2014³³.

PE and school sport

In England, PE hours have fallen in the last decade – a reduction of 11.1% from 326,277 to 290,033 since 2011⁷⁸.

The number of PE teachers in England has also declined in the last 10 years, from 26,005 in 2011 to 23,708, a fall of 8.8%⁷⁸.

Whilst around half (52%) of practitioners feel that PE, school sport and physical activity are seen as priorities within their schools, a quarter (26%) disagree or strongly disagree that this is the case for their schools⁹⁸.

And the most disadvantaged in society face the highest barriers...

Children and young people from lower income families are less likely to be active, are twice as likely to be living with obesity, and have less positive attitudes towards physical activity.

The gender gap is re-emerging, with a 5% gap between girls and boys classed as active⁶.

Children with disabilities are twice as likely to be lonely compared to their non-disabled peers (72% compared to 36%). They are more likely to feel they have no one to talk to, to feel left out and to feel alone⁵⁴.

Children and young people with Black, Asian and Other ethnicities are the least likely to be active⁶.

Almost half of parents (47%) say that the cost of living crisis has had a negative impact on the number of opportunities their children have to be physically active and take part in sport³².

What we need is...

Urgent action

Build back healthier, happier and more resilient young people and level the playing field for those **most disadvantaged**

Generational shift
To balance the demands of the digital age through the human connection of physical play and sport

Societal change

Transform society's perceptions and attitudes towards the importance of physical literacy, play and sport in the **education and development** of young people

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



Why PE, school sport and physical activity matter

A young person who is physically active and plays sport on a regular basis will have better...



Physical health

- > Cardiovascular fitness
- > Healthy weight
- > Strength
- > Co-ordination
- > Energy levels



Mental health

- > Happiness
- > Resilience
- > Equipped to tackle anxiety and stress
- > Improved mood through release of 'feel good' endorphins



Social wellbeing

- > Less lonely
- > More trusting
- > Improved communication and teamwork skills



Brain function

Evidence shows **being physically active** impacts on progress and achievement. It **improves the brain** by stimulating growth in the part responsible for **learning and memory**. Young people's **ability to concentrate** also improves after physical activity

PE, school sport and physical activity helps...

Make young people healthier

Evidence shows that physical activity can help children's: cardiovascular fitness, muscular fitness, cardiometabolic health, bone and functional health, cognitive function and weight status^{2,3}. Maintaining physical activity through to adulthood significantly reduces the risk of cardiovascular disease and improves mental health, compared to those not maintaining recommended physical activity levels⁴. Evidence suggests that being active also aids sleep. A recent study conducted with Spanish children found better sleep efficiency among school children who regularly perform some kind of physical sports activity⁵.

Make young people happier

Evidence shows a positive association between activity levels, mental wellbeing and resilience. Children who are regularly active have higher levels of wellbeing compared to those who are not⁶. Physical activity interventions are associated with significant reductions in depressive symptoms in children and adolescents⁷. Notably, participation in team sport in particular is associated with fewer mental health difficulties for children and adolescents compared with both participation in individual sport and non-participation in sport⁸.

Why PE, school sport and physical activity matter

Reducing sedentary time in young people can also have benefits on their wellbeing. A recent observational study concluded that adolescents who spent less time being sedentary had reduced depressive symptoms, which may improve future health⁹.

Children who are more active are also less likely to often or always feel lonely compared with those who are less active⁶. School sport in particular positively influences young people's feelings of belonging to their school¹⁰. Extra-curricular activities have been shown to increase young people's confidence to interact with others¹¹, improving social wellbeing.

Develop young people's readiness to learn

91% of primary and 63% of secondary aged pupils say being active helps them learn¹². A review of academic literature completed in 2022 by the Youth Sport Trust Research and Insight team¹³ highlighted the important role that quality physical activity and PE can play in supporting children in school. There are positive links between physical activity levels and academic attainment¹⁴ and emotional regulation¹⁵. Specifically, PE or school-based physical activity is positively associated with academic performance in children¹⁶. Making lessons more physically active increases children's attention and engagement in other lessons and improves their overall academic achievement whilst also improving classroom behaviour^{17,18,19,20,21,22,23}. Physical activity can enhance cognitive function, brain structure and function^{24,25} as well as improving accuracy in visual working memory and inhibitory control²⁶.

The unique role of schools

Through universal provision, regardless of ability or affluence, schools are able to play a unique role in providing opportunities for physical activity for young people in shaping their attitudes to PE, school sport and physical activity and in helping develop life-long positive physical activity habits²⁷. At a time when children and young people are facing some of the biggest challenges in a generation, there has never been a greater opportunity for PE, school sport and physical activity to help to address some of these issues.



***Current activity
levels and attitudes
to sport and play***



Current activity levels and attitudes to sport and play

Widespread physical inactivity is a major economic burden to national health systems and to the economy worldwide¹. Obesity is estimated to cost the UK £58 billion a year²⁸ and mental health problems cost the UK economy at least £117.9 billion per year²⁹.

Childhood is the time to address this issue for future generations by nurturing a lifelong enjoyment and engagement in sport and physical activity.

47%

of young people in England are meeting minimum physical activity levels⁶, similar levels are found for Wales³⁰, but data suggests children and young people in Scotland are more active³¹

72%

of parents are concerned that young people are not getting enough physical activity, however, only 43% of parents are aware that children should be active for 60 minutes or more a day³²

54%

of children would like to do more exercise or sport than they are currently doing – an increase from 44% in 2014³³

73%

of teachers are concerned about the physical health of young people in their school³⁴

51%

Over half of parents would support a national campaign to promote the importance of 60 active minutes³²

83%

of parents say that sport and play are an important part of every young person's education and development³²

Current activity levels and attitudes to sport and play

Activity levels remain worryingly low and the physical health of children is a concern.

The Chief Medical Officers (CMO) of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland published the latest physical activity guidelines in 2019³⁵. Their report drew on global evidence and expertise to present guidelines for all age groups. They advised that children and young people aged 5 to 18 should engage in moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity (MVPA) for an average of at least 60 minutes per day across the week³⁵.

Since the launch of Sport England's Active Lives (Children and Young People) survey in 2018, consistently more than half of young people in England have failed to meet the CMO guidelines. In 2022, their report showed activity levels have generally returned to pre-pandemic levels having increased from 45% in 2019/20. However still only 47% of young people are meeting the CMO guidelines⁶. 30% of children are doing less than 30 minutes a day⁶. In Wales activity levels are similar with 36% of pupils reporting no frequent participation in organised sport outside the curriculum³⁰. Data suggests that young people in Scotland are more active, with 71% of children aged 5 to 16 doing at least 60 minutes of activity on average in the previous week and only 10% of young people reported less than 30 minutes of activity a day³¹. The latest Young Persons' Behaviours and Attitudes survey in Northern Ireland (2019) assessed children's activity against a previous version of the CMO guidelines which recommended that children were active for 60 minutes every day, not on average across a week. Using this definition, it found that just one in ten young people were involved in moderate to vigorous physical activity¹⁰⁹. The more recent North and South Ireland Physical Activity Report card shows that progress is being made with overall physical activity, school and physical education indicators increasing. It must be noted that across the home countries, surveys use different measures to establish activity levels.

In addition to low levels of physical activity, sedentary time amongst young people is increasing. Accelerometer data from a study in Bristol has found that although children's moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity levels have returned to similar levels to those pre-pandemic, weekday sedentary time still remains higher than pre-pandemic by an average of 13 minutes per day³⁶.

Rates of obesity are higher than before the pandemic³⁷. In England, prevalence of reception children with obesity is 10.1% and 23.4% for year six children. These are both decreases from last year's data but are still higher than pre-pandemic³⁷. Similar figures are found in Wales with 12.6% of children categorised as obese³⁸. The latest Scottish health survey found in 2021 the highest recorded proportion of children at risk of obesity at 18%³¹. In Northern Ireland over a quarter of children aged 2-15 years old are reported to be overweight (20%) or obese (6%)³⁹.

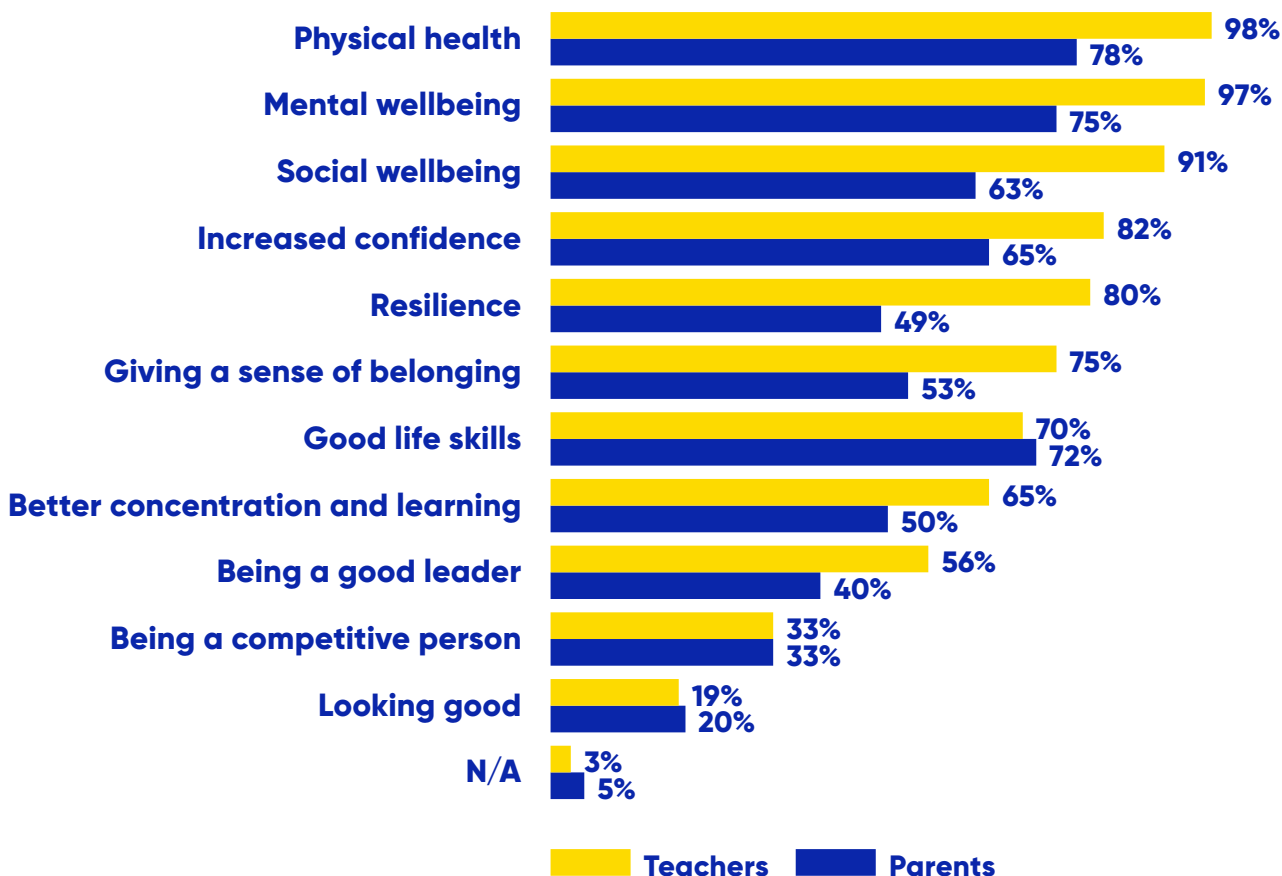
Over a quarter (27%) of teachers are 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about the physical health of young people in their school with a further half (47%) being 'slightly concerned'³⁴. Teachers working in less affluent areas have higher concerns than those teaching in schools in more affluent catchments.

Current activity levels and attitudes to sport and play

Teachers and parents value PE, school sport and physical activity and recognise the benefits for young people.

Recent research conducted by the Youth Sport Trust surveying parents³² and teachers³⁴ in Great Britain shows that they are clear and positive about the benefits that sport and play can give to young people. Teachers are seeing first-hand the difference that it can make to many key educational outcomes. Parents too recognise the benefits of sport and play to young people and awareness seems to be increasing. Compared to last year⁴⁰, there are significant increases in the number of parents who say that sport and play gives a sense of belonging (46% last year to 53% this year), that it helps them be good leaders (33% last year to 40% this year) and that it helps them be competitive (25% last year to 33% this year).

How does sport and play help young people?



Parents see the value of play and sport, with 83% of parents agreeing that it is an important part of every young person’s education and development and two thirds (66%) believing that physical activity is important to them as a family³². The majority (92%) of parents believe that sport and play should be fun. Nearly two thirds (63%) encourage their children to be active and play sport³².

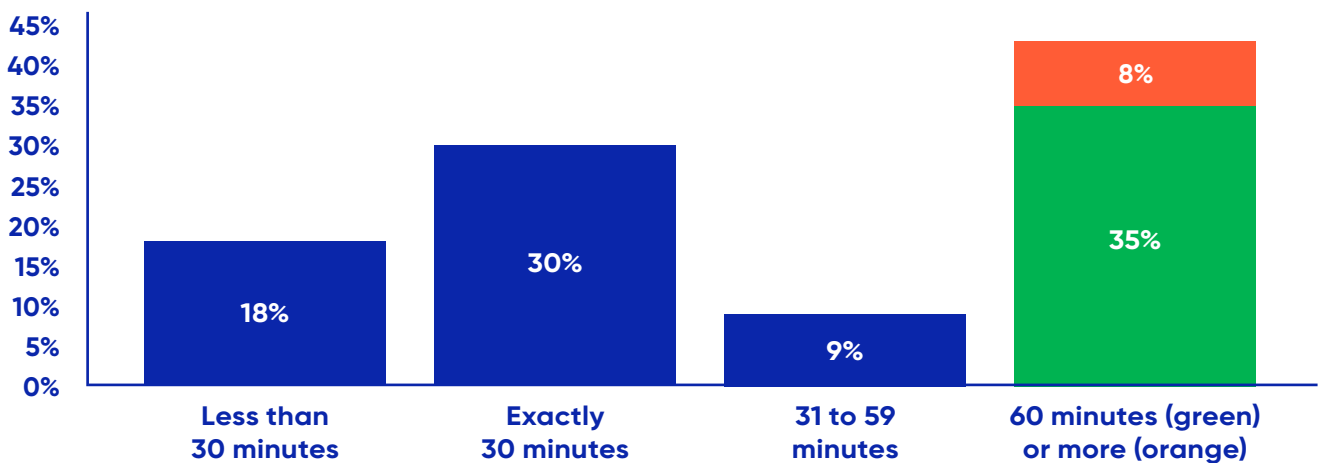
Current activity levels and attitudes to sport and play



Teachers and parents' awareness of the CMO guidelines remains low.

72% of parents say they are concerned young people are not getting enough physical activity, but this is against a backdrop of almost half of parents (48%) believing that children should only be active for 30 minutes a day or less³². Parental awareness of the CMO activity guidelines has stagnated with only 43% of parents of children under 18 thinking children should be being active for at least 60 minutes, which is a similar level to last year⁴⁰, and below the levels seen in 2021 (48%)⁴¹. Despite the value parents place on wellbeing and physical activity, more work still therefore needs to be done to increase parental awareness of the CMO guidelines.

The amount of daily physical activity parents think that 5 to 18 year old children should be doing per day

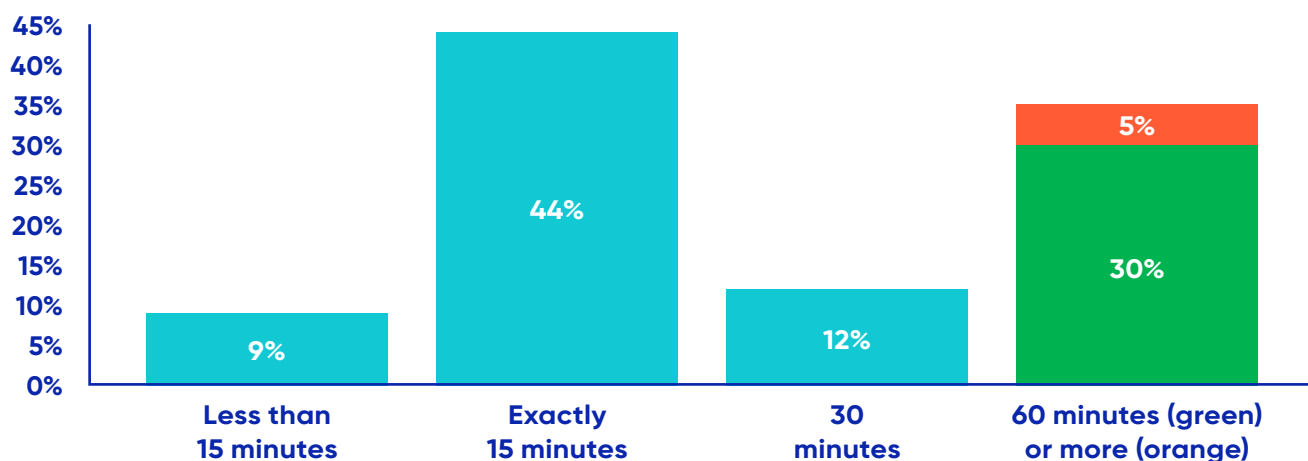


Interesting, awareness is low for educators too with only 35% of teachers believing that children should be active for 60 or more minutes a day and over half of teachers (52%) saying that children should be active for 30 minutes a day or less³⁴.

Current activity levels and attitudes to sport and play



The amount of daily physical activity teachers think that children should be doing per day



Parents are increasingly calling for a national campaign to promote the importance of 60 active minutes a day for children with over half (51%) saying they would support one³². Almost a third (31%) would like to see their child's school making a pledge to get children more active in school³².

Young people's perceptions, attitudes and experiences

54% of children would like to do more exercise or sport than they are currently doing – up from 44% in 2014³³. In Wales this is even higher with 93% of pupils having a demand to do more sport³⁰. Qualitative interviews conducted with children as part of the State of Child Health in the UK report⁴² asked young people what made them feel happy, healthy, and well. The top theme that emerged was exercise, hobbies and extra-curricular activities. This was the top theme across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

However, in England, fewer children are reporting positive attitudes towards sport and physical activity than pre-pandemic⁶. This is a concern as there is unsurprisingly an association between those who show more positive attitudes towards being active and activity levels⁶. Young people's awareness of the benefits they can get from PE and physical activity are also in decline. Compared with six years ago, fewer children agree that PE and physical activity helps them to be healthy or to be fit and less than half of children recognise other associated benefits such as confidence (46%) or good social and team building skills (34%)³³.

Current activity levels and attitudes to sport and play

Young people's experience of PE

PE lessons are valued by young people, with 86% agreeing that they are important³³. Youth Sport Trust Girls Active data shows that 83% of boys and 63% of girls report that they like PE⁴³. Unfortunately, for girls this has dropped from 70% in the previous academic year⁴⁴.

Youth voice is important, as we know that it can increase engagement, but young people do not feel that they are being listened to, especially at school⁴⁵. Many young people want a greater say in the activities they do in PE and after school clubs. The School Sport Survey in Wales found that pupil preference influences only half of PE and extra-curricular sport offers³⁰. Recent data from children and young people in England demonstrates that 56% of boys and 47% of girls feel they would like to have a say in the activities they do in PE and in after school clubs⁴³.

Evidence shows that young people enjoy PE when they feel competent, in control and supported by others⁴⁶. It is suggested that young people would enjoy PE more if teachers provide choice of activities and allow young people to make their own decisions based on their personal needs^{46,47}. In addition, relationships within pupil groups as well as relationships between pupils and the teachers were also found to be instrumental in the extent to which young people enjoy PE⁴⁶.

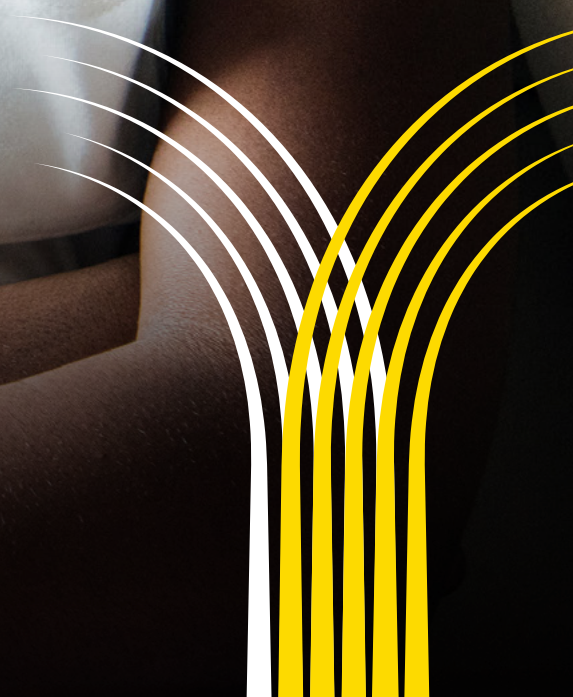
What's needed

The Youth Sport Trust has young people's voice at its heart. We passionately believe if we are to tackle the barriers to PE, school sport and physical activity, and maximise its positive impact on their lives we must put their voice at the centre of our insight, programme development and decision making.

Children and young people get enormous benefits from being active, but levels of activity are too low. This is having a detrimental impact on their health and happiness and demands urgent action. We need to build a system that provides young people with opportunities to be active each and every day, from early years right through to adulthood. A new approach must be underpinned by a commitment to empowering young people. We should work with them to identify how we can interweave physical activity into their lifestyles, including how we can make PE, sport and informal play in schools fun for everyone. Young people are best placed to tell us what works and we should provide them with the confidence to shape provision for this and future generations.



**Young
people's
wellbeing**



Young people's wellbeing

We are facing a national youth wellbeing crisis. While PE, school sport and physical activity are not a silver bullet, by increasing movement and human connection through play and sport it is possible to balance the negative impact of a changing world and make children's wellbeing a matter of public concern and action.

97%

of teachers are concerned about the mental health of young people in their school³⁴

39%

The number of children in England needing treatment for mental health problems has risen 39% in a year⁴⁸

1 in 7 young people in Wales report clinically significant emotional difficulties⁴⁹

18%

of children aged 7 to 16 have a probable mental disorder⁵⁰

45%

of parents are concerned about their child's mental health³²

Not only is there an inconsistent recovery to pre-pandemic levels of children and young people's physical health but also their mental health⁵¹. This is alarming given that, even before the pandemic, there had been significant declines in young people's wellbeing over the last decade⁴⁵. 11% of children aged 10 to 17 are reported to have low wellbeing⁴⁵ and anxiousness amongst primary and secondary aged pupils has increased. More young people are reporting lower happiness levels with their overall health and their happiness with their friends and family⁴⁵. Young people today are also lonelier, with 5.2% of children aged 11-16 saying they often or always felt lonely⁵⁰. This rate doubles for those young people aged 17-22 years⁵⁰.

We are also seeing higher rates of diagnosed mental disorders. 18% of children aged 7 to 16 have a probable mental disorder⁵⁰. This increases to 20% for those aged 11-16⁵⁰. The number of children in England needing treatment for mental health problems has risen 39% in the last year⁴⁸. In Wales, the School Health and Wellbeing survey found that 1 in 7 children reported clinically significant emotional difficulties⁴⁹.

Understandably, parents are worried about young people's mental wellbeing, with 45% of parents saying that they are concerned about their child's mental health³². Their children's wellbeing is one of the most important factors that parents mention when asked what they would look for in choosing a school – it is the top factor for secondary school choice and second only to location for primary school choice⁴¹. Almost, two thirds of parents believe that the wellbeing of pupils is more important than their academic attainment⁴¹.

This concern is echoed within schools, where almost two thirds (65%) of teachers are 'concerned' or 'very concerned' about the mental health of young people in their school, with a further third (32%) being 'slightly concerned'³⁴. The picture is particularly stark in less affluent areas with three quarters (75%) in less affluent areas concerned compared to 61% in more affluent catchments. Teachers in secondary schools are also more concerned, with a quarter of secondary teachers (24%) saying that they are very concerned compared to a fifth (19%) of primary teachers³⁴.

What's needed

Today's generation of young people are struggling with declining physical and mental wellbeing. We are vocal about the important role increased access to physical activity has to play in tackling this decline. However, improved wellbeing demands a much broader approach. Young people deserve to see a fundamental shift in policymaking that reflects the importance of wellbeing. A holistic approach is needed across both government and wider society to understand the drivers behind declining wellbeing, and to put solutions at the very heart of policy making. Conversations need to reflect the vast array of issues affecting young people's wellbeing – including physical activity levels, extending to areas such as diet, sleep and loneliness – and explore how we can develop an approach fit for the modern world which empowers young people to grow up happier and healthier.



***Deepening
inequalities***

Deepening inequalities

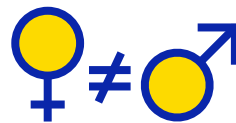
For many young people, their lived experience, geography, characteristics and family affluence result in deep rooted inequalities and can lead to poorer health and educational outcomes. Alarming, some inequalities are still growing, exacerbated by the pandemic and emerging cost of living crisis.

It is important to be aware of the intersectionality between multiple forms of inequality and how this can amplify barriers and challenges for young people who fall into this category, for example, Black young women or children with a disability from an ethnically diverse community.

For some children, school may offer them their only opportunity to take part in sport during their week. It is vital therefore that access to PE and school sport is maintained to address some of these inequalities and prevent poorer health and educational outcomes.



Young people from **low affluence families** are the **least likely to be active**⁶



The gender gap is re-emerging, with a 5% gap between girls and boys classed as active⁶

40%

of young women say that inequality between different groups of people has become worse in the last year⁵²

51%

of alternative provision settings do not have access to a dedicated indoor space for PE⁵³



Children with disabilities are twice as likely to be lonely compared to their non-disabled peers (72% compared to 36%)⁵⁴



Children and young people with Black, Asian and Other ethnicities are the least likely to be active⁶

The influence of the cost of living crisis

- 85% of parents and carers indicated that they were either very or quite concerned about the cost of living increases impacting on their family and household⁴⁵.
- Over a fifth of young people from poorer backgrounds (21%) think their life will amount to nothing, no matter how hard they try⁵⁵.

The UK continues to face a cost of living crisis. Rising living costs are widening existing inequalities. When it comes to accessing physical activity, people from the lowest socio-economic groups are the most negatively affected⁵⁶. Currently, 4.2 million children (29% of children) are living in relative poverty in the UK⁵⁷. Nearly a quarter (22.5%) of school pupils are entitled to Free School Meals, an increase of 9% from 2021⁵⁸. Family concerns about the cost of living are impacting on daily life⁵⁹.

A Crisis on Our Doorstep⁶⁰ is the latest report released by Barnardo's exploring the impacts of the cost of living crisis on children and young people in the UK. Their research found that, 1 in 3 parents said their child's mental health has worsened as a result of the cost of living crisis, an increase from 1 in 4 in October 2022. It also found that half of parents (49%) say they worry their children are missing out on experiencing a normal childhood due to cutbacks while 50% of parents have cut back spending on leisure and social activities to save money.

Children and young people are not immune from these concerns with 73% of young people saying they are worried about their family having less money for things they need⁶¹.

The cost of living crisis is having an impact on young people's activity

- Half (51%) of parents say that challenges associated with the cost-of-living increases have made it more difficult to be active as a family³².
- Almost half of parents (47%) say that it has had a negative impact on the number of opportunities their children have to be physically active and take part in sport³².
- Almost 4 in 10 parents (39%) say that cost of living increases have had a long-term negative impact on their child's wellbeing³².
- 27% of parents said they had struggled with the cost of PE or sports kit over the last year⁴⁵.

Deepening inequalities

Evidence shows that children and young people from lower income families are less likely to be active⁶, are twice as likely to be living with obesity³⁸, and have less positive attitudes towards physical activity⁶. Children going to school in the most deprived places in England have the lowest activity levels and this has not recovered to pre-pandemic levels⁶. Additionally, the gap in activity levels between those going to school in the least and most deprived locations has widened. Those from less affluent backgrounds are less confident to take part in physical activity and less likely to see the benefits of PE and being active³³. They are also twice as likely than their more advantaged peers to feel that they do not belong⁶².

Children from lower income families face more barriers to accessing opportunities to be active, missing out on the associated benefits as a result. They are less likely to participate in sport due to financial barriers⁶³ and are much less likely to take part in all types of extra-curricular activities, but especially music classes and sport¹¹.

Those living in more deprived areas are also less likely to have access to appropriate facilities to be active and are less likely to have access to safe outdoor play spaces⁶⁴. Young people in affluent areas are more than twice as likely to have buildings that are purpose built for or aimed towards young people in their locality than those in deprived areas, where facilities are more likely to be shared⁶⁵.

Schools should be a place to 'level the playing field', offering universal access and opportunities for all. A recent case study research project in Canada, exploring the funding of a school sport programme, highlighted the importance of the school community in supporting low-income students to participate in school sport and the need to reframe school sport to better support low income families⁶⁶. Where schools are unable to offer the provision children need, children feel the effects. For example, schools are offering fewer swimming lessons, with 30% of state primary schools offering fewer than 10 lessons per pupil in the academic year 21-22⁶. In England, a child's ability to be able to swim 25 metres unaided now differs greatly depending on family affluence, with only 35% of those from a low affluence background being able to swim 25 metres unaided vs 76% from a high affluence family⁶. Overall in England, just 72% of children are able to swim 25 meters by the time they leave primary school, the length of most swimming pools. This is a drop of 4% compared to last year⁶.

The cost of living crisis is having an adverse impact on schools and local infrastructure, with secondary schools facing extra costs of up to £500,000⁶⁷ and over 50% of school trusts potentially falling into deficit by 2024/25⁶⁸. Between 2010-11 and 2020-21 the total spending on children and young people services fell by £241 million in the most deprived fifth of local authorities, whilst it rose by £228 million in the least deprived local authorities⁶⁹.

To support the delivery of high quality PE and sport provision, primary schools receive the Primary PE and Sport Premium Funding from the government. Evidence shows that it has had positive effects on physical activity provision by increasing the profile of PE and sport as well as the confidence, knowledge and skills of teaching staff⁷⁰. A recent survey conducted by the Youth Sport Trust highlighted schools' reliance on this funding⁷¹. Overall, nearly three quarters of schools (73%) that completed the survey felt that their school would not be able to maintain their current physical activity and after school offer without the funding. Schools with higher free school meals eligibility were identified as being the worst affected if the Primary PE and Sport Primary premium was not renewed, showing the reliance placed on the additional funding to support their children to be active, and in particular helping young people to learn to swim. This funding is currently only available for primary schools.

The gender gap between girls' and boys' activity levels has returned.

The gender gap between girls' and boys' activity levels has returned with 45% of girls achieving 60 minutes of activity a day compared to 50% of boys⁶. The proportion of girls who like PE falls with age⁷². Five in ten girls say they used to be 'sporty' compared to three in ten boys – girls are more likely to stop feeling sporty after primary school than boys and this influences how active they are in the future⁷³.

Girls have seen no recovery in physical activity enjoyment, a key indicator of longer term engagement, and levels remain below pre-pandemic⁶. Girls in year 7-11 have also seen a further drop in the proportion strongly agreeing that they understand why exercise and sports are good for them. In contrast, boys have seen this recover to pre-pandemic levels. Girls are also more likely to report lower levels of wellbeing, with secondary aged boys reporting better wellbeing than girls on all measures.

Girls report that they experience more barriers to participating in sport and physical activity⁷⁵. Youth Sport Trust Girls Active data shows boys report greater confidence to take part in sport and physical activity compared to girls, regardless of activity levels. 30% of girls cite lack of confidence as a barrier to taking part in PE, school sport and physical activity at school⁴³. Data collected in Wales also found that girls reported lower activity levels and lower confidence to try new sports³⁰.

Girls are likely to feel influenced by negative gender stereotypes, with 71% of girls agreeing that gender stereotypes hold them back at school⁵².

Recent research exploring the impact of periods on girls conducted by Swansea University found that teachers felt the menstrual cycle affected participation in PE, confidence, school attendance, attitudes and behaviour⁷⁶. 'When I have my period' was also the biggest barrier to PE, school sport and physical activity at school cited by secondary school aged girls⁴³.

Outside of school, girls also face barriers to informal physical activity and play. Twice as many girls as boys feel unsafe exercising in their local park, with many being worried about harassment and anti-social behaviour⁷³. Girls are also less likely to know what types of exercise to do in parks compared to boys⁷³.

Young people in Alternative Provision Settings experience even more barriers to PE, school sport and physical activity.

Permanent exclusions from schools primarily happen as a result of continued disruptive behaviour⁷⁷. Young people within alternative provision environments such as Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), are more likely to be male, eligible for free school meals and have special educational needs⁷⁸. The highest rate of permanent exclusions is among those pupils who have special educational needs but no education health plan (EHC)⁷⁷ suggesting that there is insufficient support for these pupils at present.

There is a general gap in the research evidence looking at PE within alternative provision settings⁵³ and therefore there is limited evidence on the impact of PE on young people in these settings. However, recent research was commissioned by the Youth Sport Trust aimed to develop an understanding of what PE looks like in an alternative provision setting⁵³. This research found that although 90% of settings had some form of PE, only 78% said PE was compulsory and only 57% had a specialist PE teacher. The biggest barrier to was found to be space, with only 57% of settings reporting having access to an outdoor playground. A further 51% did not have access to a dedicated indoor space for PE. Additional barriers identified included lack of teacher confidence and competence, and challenging pupil needs and abilities.

Those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities are less active.

Just under 1.5 million pupils in England have special educational needs (SEND), an increase of 77,000 from 2021⁷⁹. The numbers of pupils with an Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan and the numbers of pupils with SEND support have also increased⁷⁸. The CMO guidelines for disabled children and young people state that for good health benefits, young people should do 20 minutes of physical activity per day⁸⁰.

Research from Activity Alliance shows that disabled children's activity levels decrease significantly as they get older⁵⁴. Activity levels for disabled and non-disabled children are similar when they first start school. However, by age 11, disabled children are less likely to be 'active' or 'fairly active'. The gap widens more notably by the time they are 16 years old.

Deepening inequalities

Young people living with a disability or long term health condition are less likely to have positive attitudes towards physical activity (attitudes which lead to valuing and taking responsibility for engagement in physical activity for life) than those without⁶. The decline in positive attitudes with age is greater for those with a disability or long term health condition⁶. Disabled girls and young women are more likely to feel insecure and experience a lack of confidence as a barrier to taking part in sport and physical activity compared to those who are not disabled⁵².

Children with disabilities are less likely to enjoy PE and feel less confident to take part⁵⁴. Research from Youth Sport Trust found that there is a lack of confidence and competence of mainstream secondary teachers to deliver inclusive PE to children with special educational needs and disabilities⁸¹. Children with disabilities are also twice as likely to be lonely compared to their non-disabled peers and are more likely to feel they have no one to talk to, to feel left out and to feel alone⁸². Parents of children with disabilities were more likely to report that their child has mental health and wellbeing challenges at school⁸³.

Young people from certain ethnic backgrounds are less active

Children and young people with Black, Asian and Other ethnicities are the least likely to be active⁶. The proportion of Black boys being active remains 7.7% lower than pre-pandemic⁶. The National Childhood Measurement Programme continues to see Black children having the highest obesity prevalence at both reception and year 6³⁷. Children from Black and Minority Ethnic groups are also more likely to be living in poverty⁵⁷.

Research from both the UK and USA finds that those from Ethnically Diverse communities, including Black and Asian ethnicities, experience more barriers to participation in regular physical activity^{84,85}. Both studies found that barriers included cultural norms, environmental challenges, and lack of access to appropriate opportunities.

What's needed

There is a real danger that unequal access of opportunity – and consequently participation – exacerbates inequalities across society. There must be a relentless focus on removing barriers that prevent young people from being active. Key to this is understanding which groups are particularly affected by unequal access of opportunity, and acting in response to the challenges they identify, with resources and expertise used to level the playing field. We need to develop active environments and communities, providing spaces and places for all young people to play and be active both inside and outside formal education settings. We must also celebrate and build on the power of sport to bring people from different backgrounds together. We should strive to develop the confidence, teamwork and leadership skills that participation instils within young people and channel this potential to be a driver of social change.



***Digital
distractions***



Digital distractions

We are living in a digital age where technology and online connectivity is the norm. This is not only leading to a general increase in screen time and resulting sedentary behaviour, but can sometimes contribute to the social and emotional issues faced by young people. Balance in the digital age is essential to maintaining a healthy and happy childhood – balance of time on and off line, balance of activities inside and outside, and balance of digital interaction and face to face interaction.

78%

of parents believe that children are spending too much time online and not enough time with each other in person³²

**OVER
3 in 5**

parents believe that digital distractions mean that their children are spending less time being active³²

45%

of young people would like to see more use of new technology in PE lessons³³

46%

of 7-8 year olds and **38% of 9-11 year olds** agree they spend more time online or watching TV than they do talking to their family⁸⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated changes to our screen habits. Data from both the UK⁸⁷ and USA⁸⁸ shows that screen time increased for children during the pandemic. Whilst the high peaks reported during lockdowns were not sustained, current levels are still elevated.

Evidence suggests there may be negative associations between excessive screen time and a number of detrimental health outcomes⁸⁹. These include associations with poor sleep, increased sedentary behaviour^{90,91}, as well as feeling unsafe online⁹².

Most parents (78%) believe that children are spending too much time online and not enough time with each other in person³² and 4 in 10 parents say that they struggle to control their children's screen time⁹³.

Parents find it hard to balance their children's screen time with activity levels. The majority (77%) of parents believe that young people are spending too much time sitting and not enough time being active and over three in five (62%) believe that digital distractions mean that their children are spending less time being active³².

Balancing the demands of a digital age

Technology is part of our everyday lives. Whilst it brings some challenges, there are potential positive impacts too. Both parents and children identify positive benefits of being online, especially in relation to learning and to building and maintaining friendships⁹³. Despite their concerns about online activity, 80% of parents feel being online has been important for their child to learn new skills⁹⁴.

Children see playing video games as a way to socially connect with their friends – the latest media use and attitudes report from Ofcom found 55% of children aged 8-17 used video games as a way of playing with people they knew and 47% used them as a way to chat with people they knew, boosting their social wellbeing⁹⁵.

Almost half (45%) of young people would like to see greater use of new technology in PE lessons³³. A recent systematic review⁹⁶ exploring the influence of online physical activity interventions found that there is rationale for online interventions to support children and young people's engagement with physical activity, in particular through gamification and personalised learning. The studies reported positive impacts on physical activity levels, emotions, attitudes and motivations towards physical activity.

What's needed

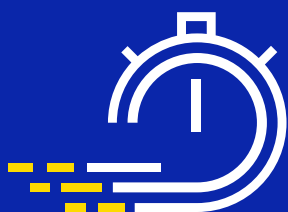
Digital technology has transformed modern society and the digital age is here to stay. For young people – as with society more broadly – it comes with both challenges and opportunities. Concerns parents have about the impact of digital lifestyles are valid, and action needs to be taken to provide young people with information about how they can be both digitally active and healthy, as well as safe online. Keeping pace with technological developments is challenging but we must prioritise wellbeing in the digital domain. However, we need to challenge the mindset that sees being online or offline as diametrically opposed, and understand many people are both simultaneously. Digital can inform and connect in truly transformative ways, and for some young people being online and being active will go hand-in-hand. We should aspire to use technology to build more active lifestyles, harnessing the potential of the digital age to help increase physical activity for young people and embedding it within their lifestyles.



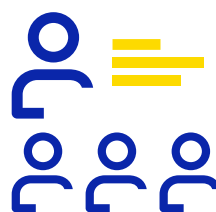
***PE, school sport and
physical activity –
the role of schools***



PE, school sport and physical activity – the role of schools



In England, PE hours have fallen in the last decade – a reduction of 11.1% from 326,277 to 290,033 since 2011⁹⁷



The number of PE teachers in England has declined in the last 10 years from 26,005 in 2011 to 23,708, a fall of 8.8%⁹⁷

52%

Whilst around half of practitioners feel that PE, school sport and physical activity are seen as priorities within their schools, a quarter (26%) disagree or strongly disagree that this is the case for their schools⁹⁸

AROUND 3 in 5

teachers (61%) said that they thought schools are recommended to provide at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day³⁴

Through the delivery of high quality PE, ensuring a varied offer and by providing positive experiences of movement and physical activity, schools can influence a child's enjoyment and physical literacy, which in turn can influence their future engagement and participation.

PE has been shown to deliver a range of positive outcomes beyond overt physical benefits. These include improved social benefits (cooperation, problem-solving, leadership, behaviour), improvements to attitude (enjoyment, motivation, autonomy, and self esteem) and cognitive outcomes (attention, concentration, academic outcomes, creativity, decision making, learning and memory). Effects are enhanced when PE is given sufficient dedicated time, delivered by well-trained teachers and structured to teach beyond activities which expend energy⁹⁹.

PE, school sport and physical activity – the role of schools

The English National Curriculum states that every young person is entitled to experience high quality PE. Ofsted goes further, arguing that ‘High quality PE is a physical and cultural entitlement’¹⁰⁰. The Department for Education recommends that schools should be providing 2 hours of PE a week.

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 guidelines²⁷. However, among teachers and parents, awareness of this varies which may be curtailing its implementation in schools:

- **Around three quarters of all parents** think schools are recommended to provide at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day, 73% think this for primary schools and 74% for secondary schools³².
- **Around 3 in 5 teachers** (61%) said that they think schools are recommended to provide at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day³⁴.
 - There is variation between primary and secondary school teachers with three quarters (75%) of primary school teachers thinking it was 30+ minutes compared to under half (47%) of secondary school teachers.
- **Around a fifth of all teachers** (18%) think that there is no minimum recommendation (11% primary and 25% secondary)³⁴.

While PE is a foundation subject in the English National Curriculum and included at all 4 key stages, the quality and quantity of provision varies greatly.

High quality PE starts with teacher training. Current primary teacher initial training does not sufficiently prepare primary school teachers to teach PE¹⁰¹, with teacher training courses having only limited time allocated to learning how to deliver PE. As a result, primary class teachers often lack the confidence and understanding of the subject. This likely will contribute to sub-optimal experiences for pupils.

In secondary schools PE teachers are increasingly redeployed elsewhere in the curriculum. Despite the existence of GCSE PE and BTEC Sports Studies and Sports Science, not all students will have the opportunity to take these subjects or will chose to study them. Currently, the assessment, benchmarking and tracking of pupil progress within PE is inconsistent. This means a child can experience PE every year of their school life without having any tangible evidence of their learning and development which in turn undermines the value and importance of the subject within a crowded curriculum. It is possible that this can reinforce views that PE is a less important subject.

PE, school sport and physical activity – the role of schools

In terms of physical activity and school sport there are some good news stories with the reach and impact of the Daily Mile²⁶ and School Games¹⁰², however shorter lunchtimes, a lack of outdoor space and sports facilities and an increasing trend towards paid-for after school clubs can all have a negative impact on overall provision.

The importance of physical literacy in relation to PE, school sport and physical activity

Parental attitudes towards PE and their understanding of physical literacy are important as they will impact on the importance parents place on the subject, their interest in their child's progress in PE and their child's involvement in physical activity and sport in the extra-curricular programme. Following work in Wales and Ireland, Sport England is looking to establish a consensus which aims to develop a shared understanding of physical literacy in order to ensure all children and young people have positive experiences of being active. This work is key in developing a shared understanding to help build stronger efforts to adopt, support and promote physical literacy in practice within schools, the community and home. Previous research conducted by the Youth Sport Trust found that 61% of parents do not understand what is meant by the term physical literacy, although once they had it explained, 70% said that they thought it was as important to their children as their language literacy or numeracy skills⁴⁰. This reinforces the need for the work being led by Sport England.

The value of PE in schools

Although PE is valued by many it is not always prioritised in schools, despite awareness of the benefits. A recent study exploring the concept of PE as a core subject within a large academy trust found timetabling was identified as the biggest challenge, with 24% of respondents noting that PE had already lost time to make space for other subjects¹⁰³. Research by the Youth Sport Trust found that only 52% of practitioners feel that PE, school sport and physical activity are seen as priorities within their schools with 26% of survey respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that this is the case for their schools⁹⁸. Other factors that influence the amount of core PE in secondary schools include prioritisation and competition with core subjects as well as senior leader perceptions and value of PE⁹⁸.

Deprioritisation over time has resulted in a reduction in PE hours taught over the past decade. A desk research approach by researchers from China and Shanghai concluded that PE has been 'side lined since the end of the twentieth century'¹⁰⁴. Overall, PE hours are still significantly lower than 10 years ago – a reduction of 11.1% from 326,277 to 290,033 since 2011. This overall reduction is mainly driven by a reduction in PE hours for KS4 – down 20% in the last 10 years⁹⁷. In this same time period the number of PE teachers has reduced in England by 8.8%⁹⁷.

PE, school sport and physical activity – the role of schools

Positively though in England, we have seen a small increase in PE hours since 2019/20, by a total of 9,308 hours. However, in this same time period, hours of English and Maths have increased at considerably higher rates, with 27,277 hours of English and 26,409 hours of Maths this year⁹⁷. Schools in Wales have also seen a slight decrease on the average minutes of curriculum PE a week from 99 minutes in 2018 to 93 minutes in 2022 for primary schools. For secondary schools it has decreased from 95 minutes to 93 minutes³⁰.

Even for those schools offering 2 hours of PE a week, valuable time can be lost in changing and setting up, which can mean that less time is available for learning or activity a week^{105,106}. Evidence suggests only around 40.5% of a PE lesson is spent doing moderate to vigorous physical activity¹⁰⁷.

Outside of curriculum PE, schools provide opportunities for extra-curricular sports activities but a survey conducted with practitioners in the UK in 2022 by the Youth Sport Trust found that the amount of extra-curricular PE decreases as pupils get older⁹⁸.

Nonetheless, despite such challenges, some progress has been made and there are positive signs of change. Nearly three quarters of state-funded secondary schools in England have benefitted from the Secondary Teacher Training programme which is a National Lottery funded programme working with the Association for Physical Education, the Youth Sport Trust, Activity Alliance, and the Teaching Schools Council. The overarching aim of the programme is to address concerns around young people's attitudes towards sport and physical activity by upskilling PE teachers. A recent evaluation found that 45% of students reported enjoying PE more this year than compared to the previous year¹⁰⁸. Confidence and competence of staff to deliver better quality inclusive physical activity has also increased as a result of the programme.

In March 2023, the UK Government announced over £600 million of funding to support primary school physical activity and sport alongside an additional £22 million of funding for the national network of 450 School Games Organisers.

Parents' attitudes towards PE and school sport

65% of parents feel that pupil's wellbeing is likely to be better in schools which prioritise sport, PE and physical activity, a significant rise from 2022 (55%)³². There is a corresponding increase in the number of parents that would look to choose a school with a strong focus on PE and school sport (from 13% in 2022 to 18% this year)³².

PE, school sport and physical activity – the role of schools

Parents see schools as playing a key role in helping their children be active, with 82% of parents agreeing that schools should be ensuring that every child is active for at least 30 minutes a day³². Over a third of parents (34%) believe that children should get more time for sport and play during the school day with 29% calling for more time for sport and play in extracurricular time³². A large proportion (69%) of parents feel that PE should be a core subject on the National Curriculum, and 78% of parents believe that schools should provide at least 2 hours of PE a week to every child³².

What's needed

There is an urgent need to elevate the status of PE, physical activity and sport within schools. Teachers, parents and government are all agreed that schools have a key role to play in supporting young people to be active, but PE can often lose out when up against other competing priorities. Lessons could be learned from the new curriculums in Scotland and Wales which position PE within a more holistic context, with physical and mental wellbeing at the heart. Schools provide a means to support children to develop habits to keep them active throughout their lives and we cannot let this vital opportunity slip by. To capitalise on this potential, both schools and teachers must be given the skills, resources and confidence needed to make young people's physical activities fun and inspiring. Our approach to the education system should reflect the value of active lifestyles, ensuring that rather than a 'nice-to-have,' we put taking part in physical activity and learning about why being active is so important at the very heart of young people's learning.



What next?

What next?



As this report demonstrates, young people's physical and mental wellbeing is in crisis, struggling to recover to pre-pandemic levels and exacerbated by ongoing cost of living concerns. The response to this crisis needs to be bold and transformative; a return to business as usual will not suffice.

Throughout this report, we have touched upon the scale and scope of the action needed. It isn't enough for us to merely state that young people should be more active. Instead, we need to reflect on the current situation and embrace the need for a broader response which acknowledges physical activity is one component of a healthy and happy childhood.

On that single area, however, we must continue to be vocal. As shown throughout this report, young people gain enormously from being active, and the benefits are not limited to physical health alone. We will continue to make the case that all children should be supported to be active, and that action should be taken to ensure that opportunities should be embedded across daily life and tailored to meet different interests so that there is something for everyone.

But increasing levels of activity in isolation will not go far enough, without a broader assessment of the way that we support young people to manage their wellbeing at every stage. No organisation alone has a single approach that will fix the challenges that we have identified. It is incumbent on those striving to improve the lives of young people to work together, to pool our knowledge and determine how we can generate the transformational change we need to see.

As we move towards the next general election there is a desire across the board for practical policy ideas that will make an impact. We intend to use our insights and experience to work in tandem with young people and other organisations to contribute to the policy debate and call for change over the months ahead. We are ambitious about young people's future, and determined to build a system that is supportive and empowering, enabling this and future generations to live happier and healthier lives, and reach their full potential. We hope that you will join us in our mission.

Further reading



The Youth Sport Trust Knowledge Bank contains key statistics and evidence about young people and physical activity, play and sport.

www.youthsporttrust.org/news-insight/knowledge-bank

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