

PE and School Sport in England

The Annual Report 2022

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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

A future where every child enjoys the life-changing benefits of play and sport

Our mission

Equip educators and empower young people to build bright futures

Together

We create opportunities for everyone to belong and achieve

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



Introduction from our CEO



This report outlines the current state of PE, school sport and physical activity in England and the issues and challenges facing young people today.

There is a wealth of research and insight which informs our understanding of the importance of activity in children's lives and their engagement in PE and sport, with more being published every year. However, we need to do more to bring this evidence to public attention as a matter of urgency. The aim of this annual report is to 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 sport and play.

In our new 2022 to 2035 strategy, 'Inspiring Changemakers, Building Belonging', one of the big challenges we identify is to raise public awareness of a decline in physical activity levels and the status and provision of PE and sport in some schools, and why it is so important to tackle this. To live in a world where every child gets to enjoy the life-changing benefits of play and sport, we need to educate and transform society's attitudes and perceptions.

This report serves as a digest of the latest evidence, it presents key insight from partners generated by a range of organisations, and shares new research commissioned by our charity to benchmark public sentiment. This research has uncovered that only two in five parents are aware that their children should be physically active for 60 minutes every day – the minimum amount recommended by the Chief Medical Officer.

This remarkable finding illustrates the scale of the challenge we face and may go some way to explaining the persistently high levels of inactivity among young people in recent years.

We would like to express our thanks to those organisations, partners, and stakeholders whose research and insight contributes to this report, and to those schools and educators who work so hard day in and day out to help children be healthy, happy and achieve their potential in life.

We are committed to updating this report on an annual basis. I hope you find it helpful and it provides a useful indicator of the progress being made at a national level to better prioritise PE, school sport and physical activity in young people's lives.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ali Oliver'. The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a white background.

Ali Oliver MBE

Chief Executive Officer, Youth Sport Trust

Why PE, physical activity and school sport are so important

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



PHYSICAL HEALTH

- > Cardio-vascular 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 of the brain responsible for **learning** and **memory**. Young people's **ability to concentrate** also improves after physical activity.

Given the myriad benefits that come from sport and physical activity, it is vital that young people are given opportunities to build and develop skills and active habits throughout their childhood. Only through play and movement throughout childhood will they develop 'physical literacy' (the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding of individuals and how this influences the way they value and take responsibility for engaging in physical activities for life.)¹ Schools are in a unique position to provide opportunities to participate and to help build these essential physical literacy skills that lead to lifelong engagement and participation.

In addition to the health and wellbeing benefits, there is a growing body of research, both in the UK and internationally, to suggest a positive association between participation in physical activity and academic performance in young people. A review of academic literature completed in 2022 by the Youth Sport Trust Research and Insight team² highlighted the important role that quality physical activity and PE can play in supporting a child at school. Evidence shows that physical activity involving decision making, like team games for example, can be particularly beneficial. Incorporating activity into lessons can support cognition and learning. Physical activity can also enhance cognitive function, brain structure and function³ as well as improving accuracy in visual working memory and inhibitory control.⁴

Research demonstrates that children who are fitter outperform young people with lower fitness on tests of cognitive function.⁵ Data from Sport England's Active Lives (Children & Young People) survey also found that there is a positive association between children who participate in more sport and physical activity and their levels of mental wellbeing, resilience, and attitudes towards their community.

Young people's health and wellbeing

- A record one-in-four Year 6 pupils are obese. 2020/21 saw the largest ever increase in childhood obesity.⁶
- Almost three quarters (**73%**) of school leaders reported children returning to school with poor levels of physical fitness following Covid-19 restrictions.⁷
- The proportion of children unhappy with their school lives has leapt from **1 in 11** ten years ago to 1 in 8.⁸
- Children from poorer backgrounds are the least confident being active. **51%** of 11-to-16-year-olds in the D and E socio-economic groups rate themselves as confident taking part in physical activity, compared to **75%** of 11-to-16-year-olds in the A and B socio-economic groups.⁹
- Research conducted during 2021 found that wellbeing is the top factor that parents look for when choosing their child's secondary school, demonstrating the value parents place on wellbeing.¹⁰

Now, more than ever, children need the physical, emotional, and social wellbeing benefits that come from sport and physical activity.

Children who are regularly active (play sports or active games) have higher levels of wellbeing compared to children who are not. Children who are not regularly active have been found to be around twice as likely to have low wellbeing as those who do so at least once a week.¹¹

Even before the pandemic, there had been significant declines in young people's wellbeing over the last decade with children reporting falls in overall life satisfaction and happiness with their friends, appearance, and school.⁸ Declines were further impacted by Covid-19 lockdowns.

An estimated 306,000 10–15-year-olds are unhappy with their lives. Whilst many young people have been incredibly resilient, still around a quarter of a million children are not coping well with changes they experienced during the pandemic and roughly 3 in 10 are not optimistic or are indifferent about the future.⁸ Over a third (36%) of parents believe that their child's physical wellbeing has been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, while 43% believe that their child's mental wellbeing has been negatively impacted and 53% believe social wellbeing has suffered.¹² Youth Sport Trust's Active Recovery Curriculum research found schools reported a notable loss of fitness for many pupils and in some cases weight gain when they returned to school.¹³

Growing inequality

Deep-rooted and growing inequality as a result of lived experience, geography or characteristics is leading to poorer health and educational outcomes for many young people. Children from poorer backgrounds face more barriers to accessing opportunities to be active, missing out on the associated benefits as a result. They are less confident in taking part in physical activity and less likely to see the benefits of PE and being active.⁹

Young people's activity levels

- Fewer than half of all children and young people in England (**44.6%**) are meeting the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines which advise that children aged between 5 and 18 do an average of at least 60 minutes of sport and physical activity a day.¹⁴
- Children's activity levels have fallen by **13%** compared to pre-pandemic levels. There has also been an increase in sedentary time with young people spending 25 minutes longer a day being inactive.¹⁵
- Existing inequalities widened since the start of the pandemic:
 - Young people from the least affluent families remain the least active and are falling further behind.
 - Children from Black and South Asian communities are less active than the overall average.¹⁴
- **54%** of children would like to do more exercise or sport than they are currently doing – up from **44%** in 2014.⁹

Since the launch of Sport England's Active Lives (Children & Young People) survey in 2018, consistently more than half of young people have failed to meet the Chief Medical Officer's target of averaging 60 minutes per day of moderate to vigorous physical activity. The 2021 report found that activity levels had declined.

Additionally, the latest report shows that fewer young people are enjoying taking part in sport and physical activity, and fewer are finding it easy. More than 9 out of 10 children report that the way they play has changed since the pandemic. Children are spending less time playing outside and with friends than before.

Prior to Covid-19, one in four children were unable to swim 25 metres by the end of primary school. As a result of the pandemic, lockdowns and restrictions, this is expected to increase to three in five children by the 2025–26 academic year.¹⁶ Since the pandemic, 206 swimming pools have closed either permanently or temporarily. Current trends suggest that the number of available swimming pools and facilities could decrease by more than 40% by the end of the decade¹⁷, reducing the available opportunities for all to engage in swimming. Covid-19 restrictions have meant that 1.88 million children across all year groups will have missed out on swimming participation during the 2020/21 academic year, according to research from Swim England. It predicts that almost 1.2 million children leaving primary school between 2021 and 2026 will be unable to swim.¹⁶

Young people's activity levels

Inequality and disability

Pre-determined factors continue to negatively influence young people's activity levels, with those from a disadvantaged or black ethnic background, being less active than their peers.¹⁴ This mirrors evidence from the National Childhood Measurement Programme, with obesity prevalence highest for Black children both in reception and year 6.⁶ Covid-19 has had a bigger impact on the activity levels of those from the least affluent families, with a decrease in activity levels by 3.4% compared to no change in activity levels for those from the most affluent families. The division is particularly stark in activities such as swimming: Swim England reports that by 2026, 34% of children from lower socio-economic backgrounds will be able to swim 25 metres, compared to 77% of those from more affluent families.¹⁴ For some children, school may offer them their only opportunity to take part in sport during their week, so it's vital that access to PE and school sport is maintained to try to address some of these inequalities.

Whilst the latest Active Lives (Children & Young People) survey from Sport England shows little difference in activity levels between those with and without a disability or long-term health condition, evidence does show that disabled children are less likely than non-disabled children to take part in sport and activity all the time at school and in informal settings such as at the park.¹⁸ Research from Activity Alliance shows that disabled children's activity levels decrease significantly as they get older. Activity levels for disabled and non-disabled children are similar when they first start school (Key Stage 1 - 83% during term-time compared to 84%). However, by age 11, disabled children are less likely to be 'active or fairly active' (Key Stage 2 - 77% vs 85%). The gap widens more significantly by the time they are 16 (Key Stage 4 - 52% vs 72%).¹⁸

Gender continues to be a factor that influences activity levels. Historically, girls have consistently reported lower activity levels and more barriers to participation than boys. This year, we have seen activity levels even out across the genders but unfortunately only because boys' levels of physical activity have fallen. This is particularly evident for boys of secondary school age.¹⁴

Gender influences participation and engagement in physical activity. Girls are more likely to report barriers to participation than boys, with lack of confidence and peer pressure being some of the biggest barriers. Increasingly, girls are also more likely to see their periods as a barrier to participation, with 37% of girls saying that their periods stopped them being active this year, which is an increase from 27% in 2018/19.¹⁹ By their teenage years, 78% of girls understand the importance of an active lifestyle but only 28% really enjoy taking part in physical activity.²⁰ Work by Women in Sport found that 43% of girls who considered themselves "sporty" at primary school no longer felt that way by their teenage years. This led to them dropping out of regular exercise, with the concern that this continues into adulthood.²¹

PE, physical activity, and sport in school

- **86%** of young people believe PE lessons are important and **77%** say they enjoy them.⁹
- **39%** of parents believe that young people should get more time for play and sport during the school day.²²
- State secondary schools in England taught 284,000 hours of PE in 2021 – down **13%** from **326,000** hours in 2011.²³
- There are **23,513** PE teachers in England – down from **26,005** in 2011.²³
- Children who attend special schools are more likely to be inactive – **39%** are inactive, compared to **24%** in non-SEN schools.¹⁸
- Evidence shows that Government funding for the primary PE and Sport Premium has had positive effects on physical activity provision in primary schools.²⁴ The research among schools showed that:
 - almost **9/10** respondents thought the profile of PE / Sport in supporting whole school improvement had increased
 - almost **9/10** respondents thought that the confidence, knowledge and or skills of all staff in teaching PE had increased

Schools play a unique role in being able to shape young people's attitudes to sport and physical activity. The National Curriculum states that every young person is entitled to experience high quality PE. Ofsted go further, arguing that 'High quality PE is a physical and cultural entitlement'²⁵ and the Government recommends that schools should be providing 2 hours of PE a week.

However, with pressure to deliver exam results, PE has often been deprioritised in favour of other subjects, resulting in a reduction in PE hours taught over the past decade. PE time also reduces as a child progresses through secondary school.²⁶ Even for those offering 2 hours, valuable time can be lost in changing and setting up, which can mean that less time is available for learning or activity.^{27,28} Evidence suggests around 40.5% of a PE lesson is spent doing moderate to vigorous physical activity.²⁹ During the pandemic, some schools found that encouraging children to arrive at school in PE kit allowed them to spend more time on activity.¹³

PE, physical activity, and sport in school

On returning to school after lockdown, more than half of primary schools and almost two-fifths of secondary schools said that they had reduced hours for some subjects, particularly music and PE in their school while they helped children catch-up.³⁰ This is despite evidence to show that “Active Recovery” strategies were able to reap benefits when implemented. Research commissioned by the Youth Sport Trust¹³ found that schools which implemented an Active Recovery Curriculum as pupils returned to school saw improved social, academic, emotional, and physical wellbeing for young people. A number of academic reviews also suggest that an active learning approach may be beneficial for cognitive performance and academic achievement.³¹

High quality PE starts with teacher training. Current primary teacher initial training does not sufficiently prepare primary school teachers to teach PE³² with teachers often lacking confidence and understanding of the subject. This leads to sub-optimal experiences for pupils. Research from the 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 disabilities, despite a willingness to do so.³³

70% of secondary schools in England are currently benefitting from the secondary teacher training programme which is a Sport England National Lottery funded programme working with the Association for Physical Education, the Youth Sport Trust, Activity Alliance, and the Teaching Schools Council. Research conducted as part of this programme showed how staff could positively influence their pupils. For instance, where members of staff are more physically active, they are more likely to encourage inactive students to be active and have positive perceptions of sport and physical activity to support young people's wellbeing.³⁴

Young people's experience of PE

PE lessons are valued by young people in the UK, with 86% agreeing that they are important⁹ and 77% enjoying them, however, more could be done to increase overall enjoyment. There is a disparity in enjoyment of PE between girls (72%) and boys (82%). Women in Sport report that almost two thirds of girls quit sport by the time they reach puberty.³⁵ Research shows that offering a range of activities and actively tackling some of the common barriers to activity can help maintain activity levels.³⁶

More than half of children say that they would like to do more exercise or sport than they are currently doing, with many wanting a greater say in the activities they do in PE and after-school clubs. Being taught by peers can be motivational, particularly for girls and disabled young people. Over a third of children and almost half of those with a disability would prefer to be taught by someone their own age, highlighting the need for relatable role-models to encourage participation.⁹

Young people's levels of confidence and competence to participate in sport and physical activity has been negatively impacted by the Covid-19 restrictions. This is concerning given we know these factors are key to building longer-term engagement and participation in activity and that children who frequently play sports or exercise tend to have higher levels of wellbeing.¹⁴

Daily physical activity, PE, play and sport – a matter of national concern

More work needs to be done to elevate the importance of PE and school sport, ensuring that everyone is aware of its importance and relevance in ensuring that children achieve their potential in life. Whilst young people recognise that PE and physical activity can help them to be fit and healthy, they are less likely to recognise the other benefits which come from high quality PE such as improvements in wellbeing, cognition or the development of life skills including leadership and team building.

UK parents are supportive of school sport with 81% believing that schools should be ensuring that every pupil is physically active for at least 30 minutes a day whilst in school and with similar numbers (78%) calling for schools to provide at least 2 hours a week of PE to every pupil. More than two thirds of parents (68%) believe that PE should be a core subject on the national curriculum¹⁰ and over a third (39%) believe that children should get more time for sport and play during the school day. Parents who say that they had a positive experience of PE when they were at school are more likely to recognise the benefits of PE for their children, again demonstrating the long-term benefits that come from high-quality school PE.²²

Currently, the assessment, benchmarking and tracking of pupil progress within PE is inconsistent and as a result, young people can leave school without anything tangible to demonstrate their achievements. This can lead to PE being seen as a less important subject when put alongside subjects with more demonstrable outcomes.

In 2021 the Association for Physical Education's Taskforce on the Future of Physical Education published a report³⁷ with recommendations to put Physical Education at the heart of school life. Headline recommendations included:

- The need for an urgent review by Government of the status of PE as a foundation subject.
- For PE to be classified a core subject with clear goals and priorities and assessment, monitoring, and reporting around the holistic development of the child.
- To have clarity and transparency around what schools can affect and not through high quality PE, to make them responsible for the whole life experience of young people.

In March 2022 the Youth Sport Trust commissioned YouGov to carry out research into the attitudes and perceptions of UK adults and parents towards sport, play, physical activity and PE. We intend to repeat the exercise annually throughout the period of our 2022 to 2035 strategy.²²

Findings from the initial survey showed the majority of parents (66%) say that the wellbeing of their children was more important than their academic achievement. Additionally, 76% of parents agree that the teaching of interpersonal skills is now even more important for young people growing up in today's digital age than it was for previous generations.

Over three quarters of UK adults are concerned that children are not getting enough physical activity (76%) and spending too much time online and not enough time with each other (77%). Parents are even more likely to be concerned about both physical activity (81%) and time online (83%).

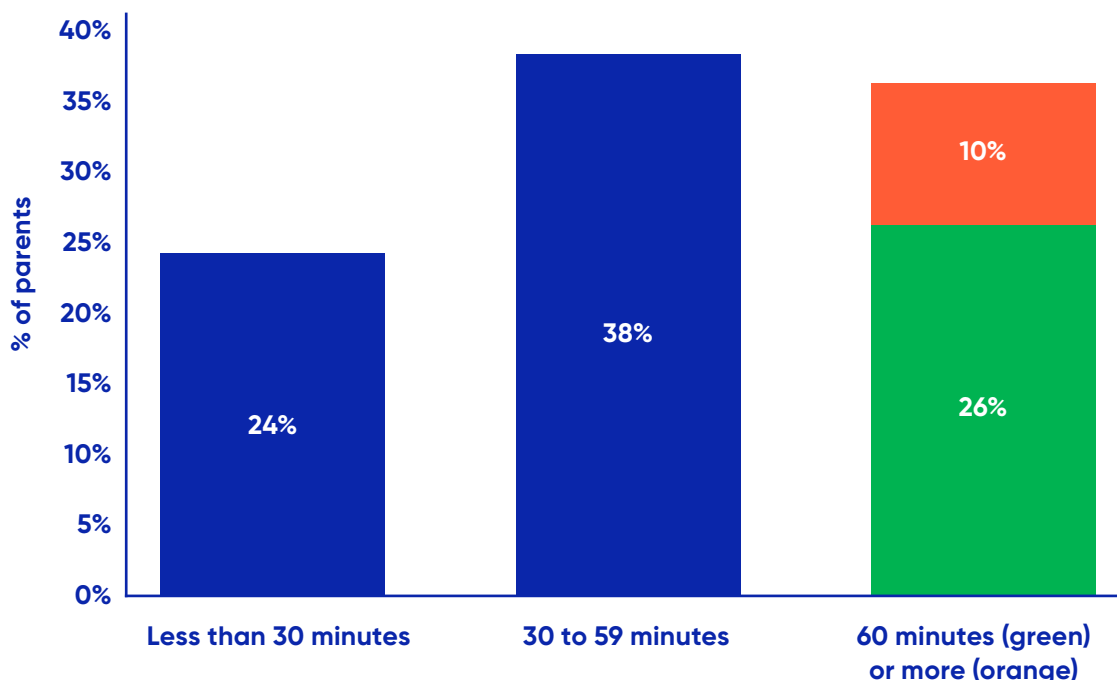
Daily physical activity, PE, play and sport – a matter of national concern

Given this, it is no surprise that 89% of parents believe that sport and play are important parts of every young person's education and development: 74% of parents agree that sport and play help young people's mental wellbeing, 66% agree that sport and play help young people's social wellbeing and 70% believe that it helps with children's life skills.

However, there's still some way to go to build understanding of the importance of physical literacy and in ensuring children are sufficiently active throughout their day: 61% of parents do not understand what is meant by physical literacy, although when the concept of physical literacy was explained to them, seven in ten parents (70%) said that they thought that their child's physical literacy was as important as their language literacy and numeracy.

Similarly, whilst most parents believe that sport and play are beneficial, many are unaware of the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines that young people should be active for an average of 60 minutes every day. In fact, parental awareness of the 60 active minute guidance has fallen over time. In 2021 48% of parents thought children should be doing 60 daily active minutes or more compared to 36% in 2022.

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



To transform society's perceptions and attitudes towards the importance of physical literacy, play and sport, it's good to know that some parents are keen to become more actively involved in making the change. A quarter (23%) would be prepared to speak to their child's school to encourage them to provide more PE or school sport and 16% would be prepared to speak to local leaders on the issue. early half (45%) of parents would support a national campaign to get young people more active.²²

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Recommended further reading

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We are happy to make this report available in alternative accessible formats on request.

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