



Insight driving innovation and impact

PE, Sport and Physical Activity Survey

September 2021

Believing in every child's future

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Introduction

In the summer term of the 2020/21 academic year, the Youth Sport Trust (YST) in partnership with Limitless, delivered a research project to explore young people's attitudes to PE, school sport and physical activity in the independent school sector.

In total 1517 young people completed an online survey from across 17 different independent schools. 70% of the sample were girls¹, 26% of the sample were boys. The majority (67%) of respondents were white, followed by Asian (18%).

This report presents the findings of the research with a focus on the following:

1. Understanding the key motivations, barriers, and attitudes towards physical activity of young people in the independent sector
2. Exploring significant differences in the data between independent and state schools²
3. Consider how different demographic profiles impact on the data (e.g., gender)

About the Youth Sport Trust

The Youth Sport Trust (YST) is a national children's charity passionate about creating a future where every child enjoys the life-changing benefits that come from play and sport. We are on a mission to pioneer new ways of using sport to improve children's wellbeing and give them a brighter future.

Our [2018-2022 strategy](#) sets out how we will harness the power of sport, play and physical activity to tackle the challenges of a new generation. One of our 6 strategic goals is 'championing insight'. For more information about our organisation, please visit our website: www.youthsporttrust.org.

About Limitless

Limitless is committed to inspiring a healthy and active generation and enabling anyone to enjoy a life-long sporting confidence.

Limitless believe everyone should enjoy physical activity and interest in a healthy lifestyle starts early. They want young people to have the confidence to live their lives without limits and enjoy the improved health and wellbeing that comes with it.

For more information about Limitless, please visit: <https://www.limitlesskit.com>.

¹ The total sample was skewed towards girls due to a large response rate from a number of all girls schools.

² The survey was administered in 80 state secondary schools in the 20/21 academic year and received 12,414 completed responses from boys (3310) and girls (9140)

Why do we need this research?

Evidence shows a picture of declining overall levels of physical activity and wellbeing across all young people. Worryingly, COVID-19 has further impacted on young people's physical activity and wellbeing.

The results of this study will be shared with the schools which took part, and the wider sector, to help them inform and develop relevant offers for pupils, and to promote a physical activity culture across the school.

3.2million

children and young people do not meet the Chief Medical Officer guidelines of an average 60 active minutes a day



Sport England (2021)
Active Lives 19/20



Children who are regularly active have higher levels of wellbeing than those who are not

The Children's society: The Good Childhood Report 2020

Young people in the UK

have the lowest life satisfaction of the 24 countries in the OECD and have suffered the largest decline of any country since 2015



NHS Digital (2020) Statistics on obesity, physical activity and diet



Children's resilience has fallen dramatically during covid restrictions: **Only 26% agreed** that if they find something difficult they **will keep trying until they can do it** vs. 49% pre pandemic

Sport England (2021)
Active Lives 19/20

Key findings

Attitudes and motivations...

- This research shows that young people in the independent school sector have **positive attitudes** and experiences towards being active.
- Having **fun** and being **healthy** are the main drivers for young people to be active across independent and state schools.
- Older children are more motivated by team competitions than younger age groups.
- **Team sports** are popular, but girls would like more variety in the activities they take part in during PE.

Physical activity levels...

- Young people in the independent school sector are **more active** than state schools but they face the same the barriers and wellbeing challenges.
- Compared to state schools' children in independent schools spend an average of 50 minutes more being active a day. This is driven by being more active during the school day (outside of PE), but also outside of school.

Barriers...

- **Confidence** and **competence** are key barriers to taking part in physical activity in school.
- These barriers and challenges increase as young people progress through adolescence.
- Girls in particular report a greater number of barriers to participation than boys. **Periods** become an increasing barrier as girls get older.
- Not having time because of their **schoolwork** was a much bigger barrier to participation outside of school for young people in the independent school sector.

Wellbeing...

- Young people's overall happiness score was 6.3 out of a maximum 10. This was similar for white and ethnically diverse children and aligns to children in state schools.
- Girls' positivity towards their body image sees a gradual decline from age 11 through to 16+. However, boys start to have a more positive attitude towards their body as they reach age 16+.

Skills...

- Young people rate their **empathy** '*I am able to understand how other people are feeling*' highest followed by their **team working** skills '*I work well in a group of people to achieve a goal*'. They rate their **self-belief** the lowest '*I feel confident I my own abilities*' followed by their overall confidence.

Results

All results relate to the data collected in independent schools only unless it is stated otherwise.

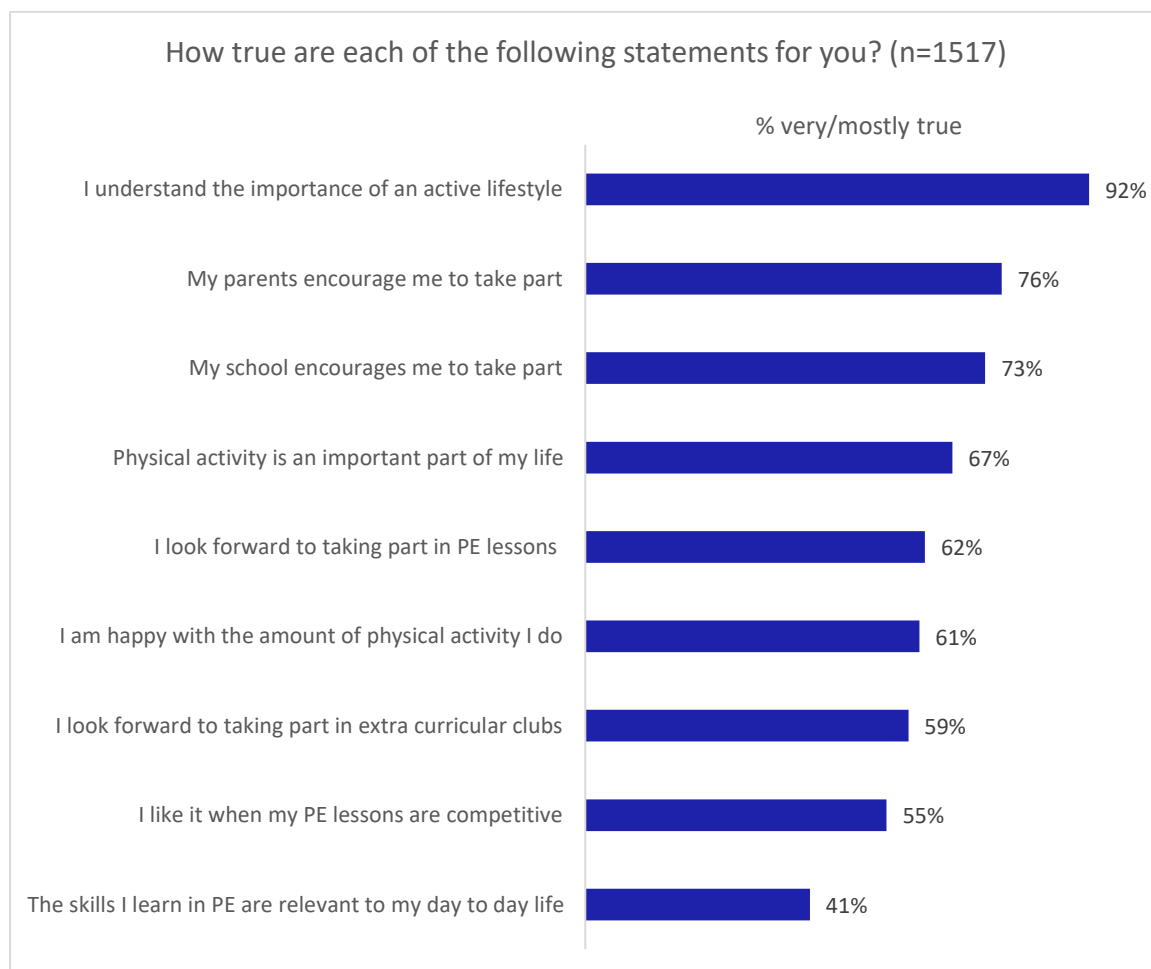
Attitudes towards being active

Overall attitudes towards being active are positive. Young people understand the importance of an active lifestyle and feel encouraged by their parents and school to take part in sport and physical activity. The vast majority of children like being active and taking part in PE.

87% of children like taking part in physical activity

76% of children like taking part in PE

For two thirds (67%) of young people physical activity is an important part of their life, and two in five (41%) young people believe the skills they learn in PE are relevant to their day to day lives.



Attitudes towards an active lifestyle are more positive for white children than those from ethnically diverse backgrounds.

- 71% of children from a white background agree physical activity is an important part of their life, compared to 56% of children from an ethnically diverse background.
- 94% of children from a white background understand the importance of an active life compared to 87% of children from an ethnically diverse background.
- However, a similar proportion of children across all ethnicities would like to have a say in the activities they do in PE and after school clubs.

Enjoyment of PE does decline slightly as children get older. However, the majority are still reporting they enjoy PE when they are age 16+.

- 88% of boys aged 12-13 like taking part in PE, compared to 76% of boys aged 16+.
- 78% of girls aged 12-13 like taking part in PE, compared to 72% of girls aged 16+

Physical activity levels

44% of children are more physically active since Covid-19

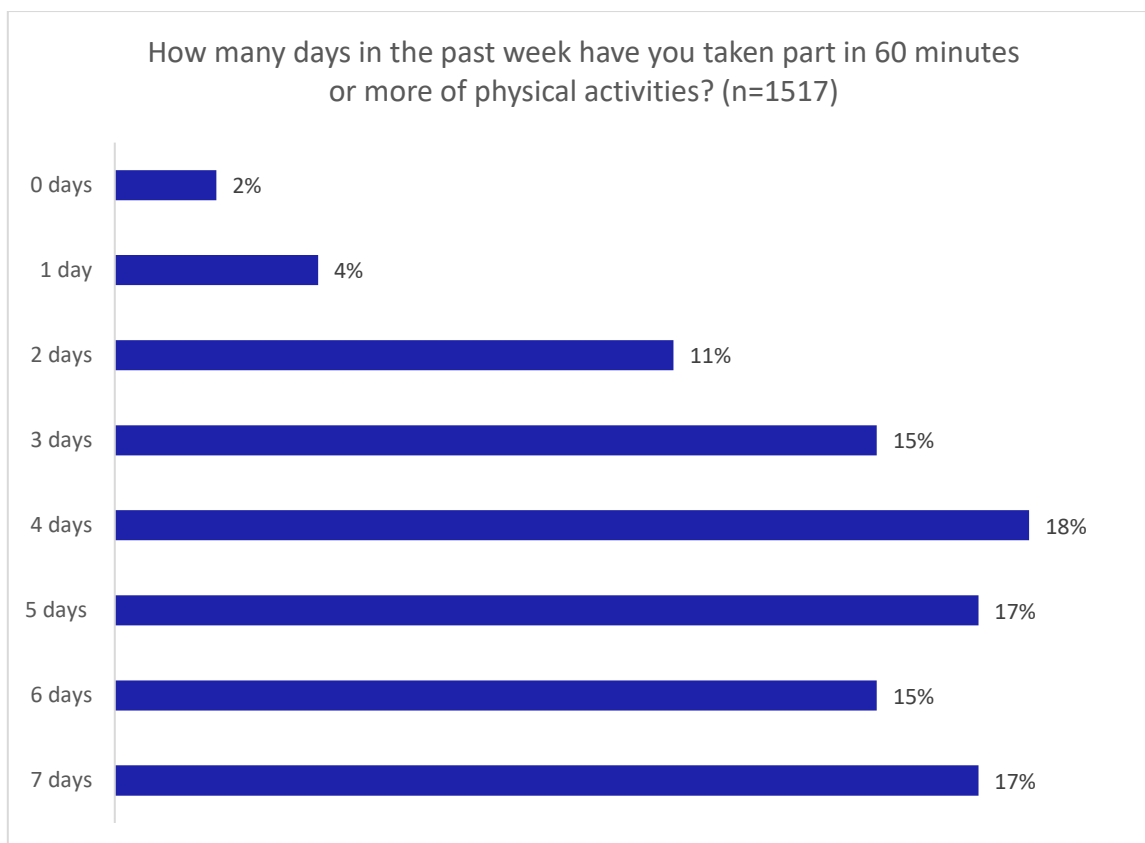
52% of children are more motivated to be physically active as a result of Covid-19

The CMO guidelines³ recommend that children and young people should engage in moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity for an average of at least 60 minutes per day across the week.

17% of respondents agreed they met this recommendation by taking part in 60 minutes or more physical activities on 7 days in the last week. Just 2% of the sample did no physical activity, with most respondents (50%) being active for 60 minutes on 3-5 days a week.

3

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/832868/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines.pdf



The average number of days active was 4.4, with boys averaging slightly higher (4.6) than girls (4.4). Children from a white background report being more active (4.6) than those from an ethnically diverse background (3.9).

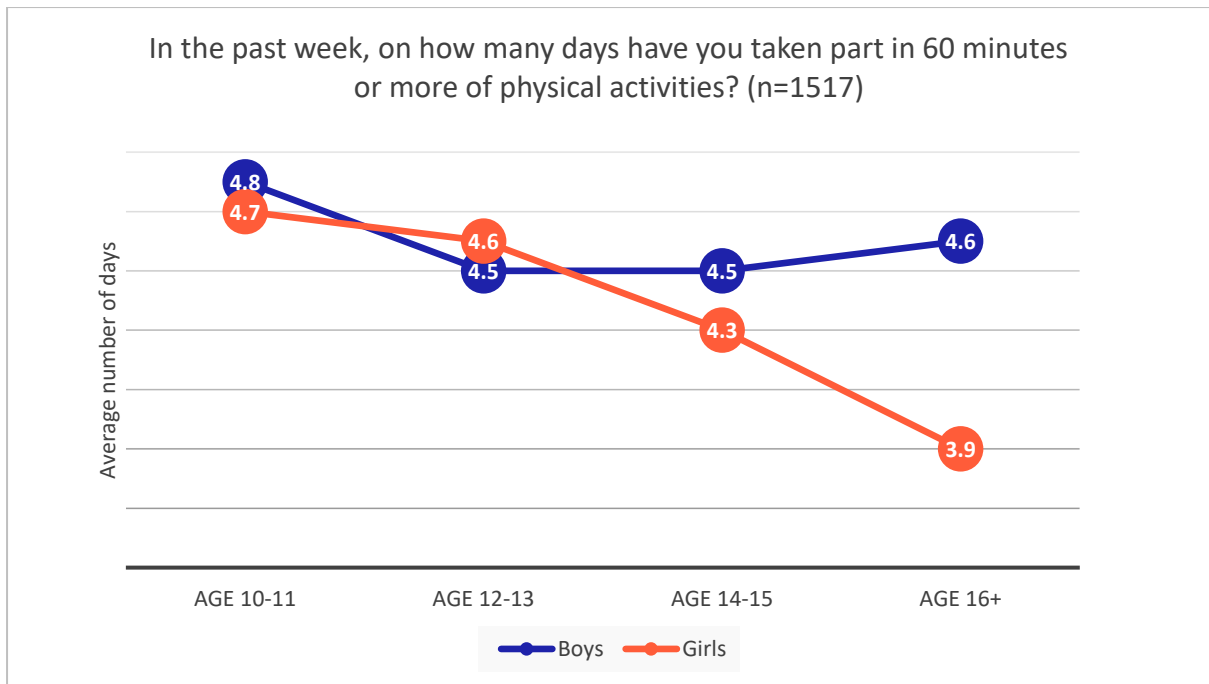
On average boys spend 128 minutes a day being active, 13 minutes more than girls (115 minutes). Compared to state schools, children in independent schools spend an average of 50 minutes more being active a day. This is driven by being more active during the school day (outside of PE), but also outside of school as shown in the table below.

How often do you take part in physical activity?	Girls		Boys	
	Ave days		Ave days	
	Ind.	State	Ind.	State
Outside of PE lessons	2.0	1.0	2.8	1.7
Outside of School	2.7	2.1	3.0	2.6

Boys in particular enjoy taking part in extra-curricular sport, with 71% of boys in independent schools looking forward to this (compared to 56% of girls, and 51% of boys in state schools).

Age plays a significant factor in how active children are, with older children reporting being less active than their younger peers.

For boys, overall activity levels remain consistent from ages 12-16, whereas girls see a decline in activity across ages 12-16, as shown by the graph below.



However, taking part in sport at school (outside of PE lessons) drops for boys from 4.0 days at age 11 to 2.6 days at age 16+, suggesting that boys are continuing to be active outside of the school environment more so than in school.

In an opposite trend, girls' activity levels are more likely to drop outside of school, where there is a drop from an average 3.4 days at age 11 to 2.4 days at age 16+.

Within the school setting girls maintain their average activity levels across ages 12-15, supporting the fact that schools play a vital role in encouraging girls to maintain an active life throughout the difficult adolescent years.

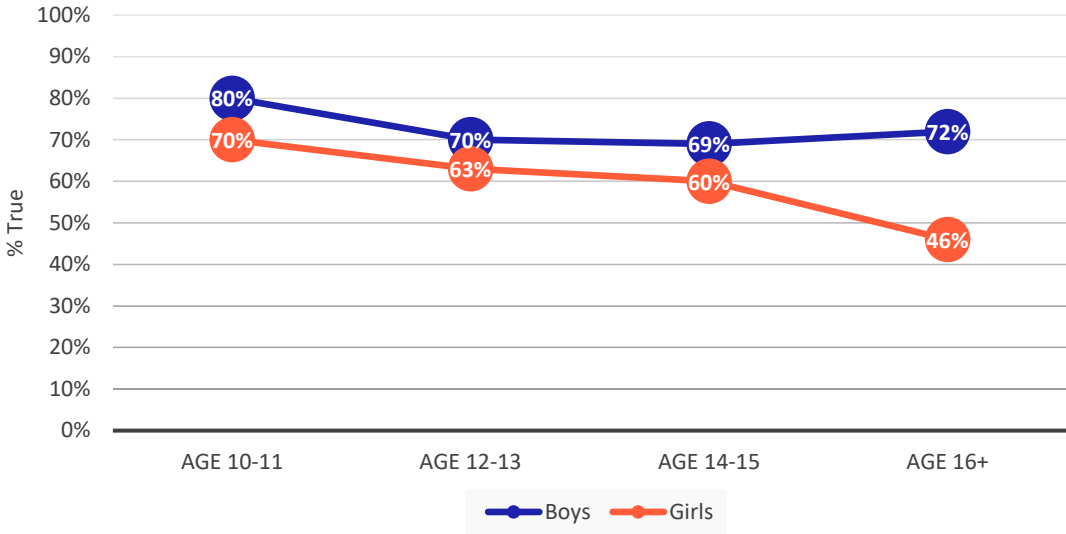
Physical activity becomes less important and relevant for boys and girls the older they get, but girls in particular want to be more active.

93% of boys aged 10-11 agree physical activity is an important part of their lives, by age 16+ this drops to 77%

75% of girls aged 10-11 agree physical activity is an important part of their lives, by age 16+ this drops to 65%

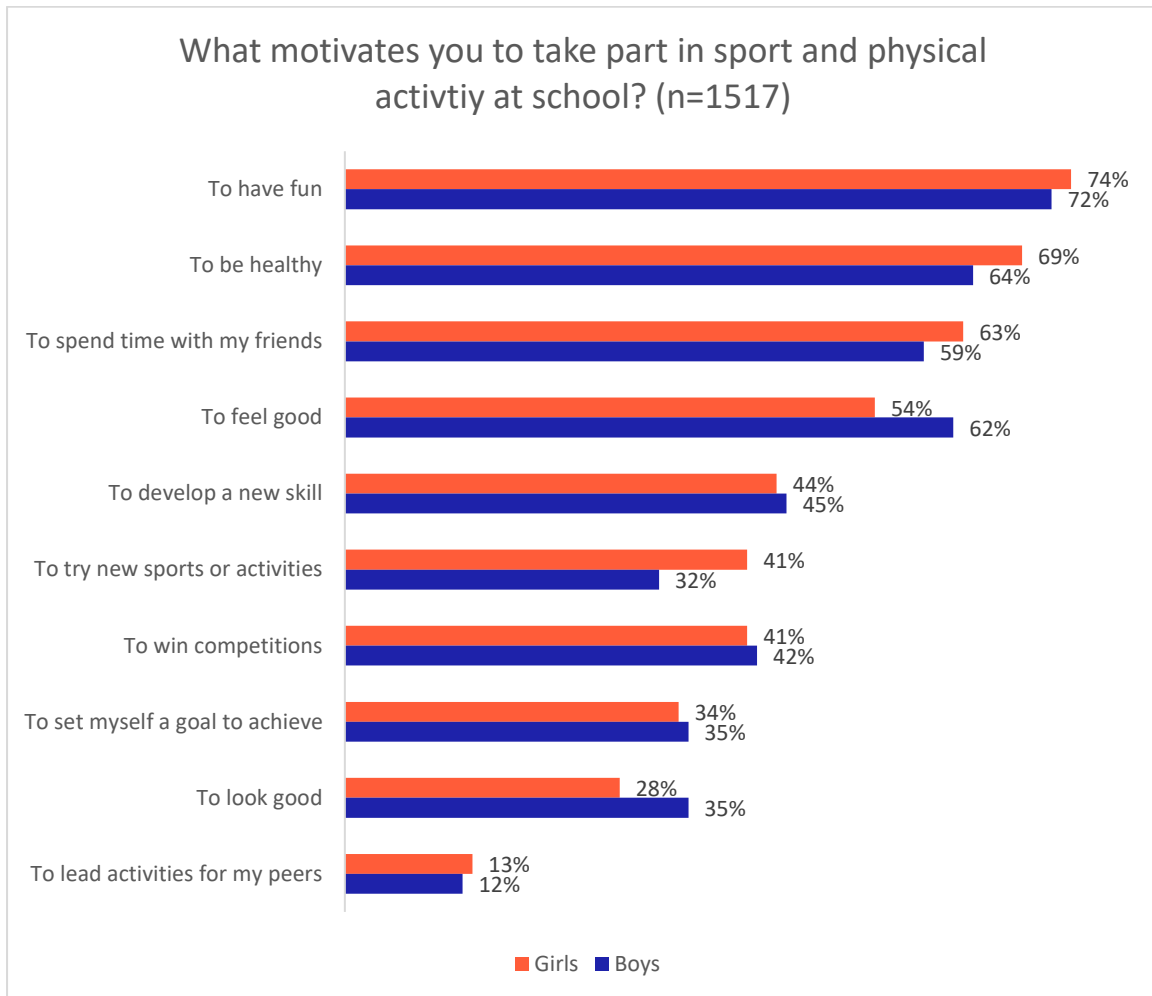
Overall, 71% of boys are happy with the amount of physical activity they do compared to 58% of girls. The below chart shows how this trend declines across the ages 11-16.

I am happy with the amount of physical activity I do? (n=1517)



Motivators for being active

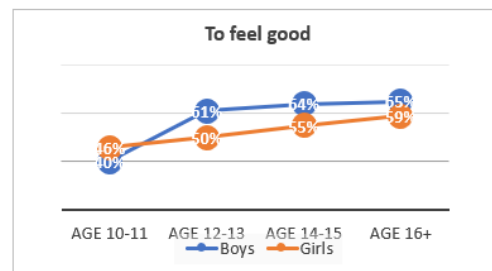
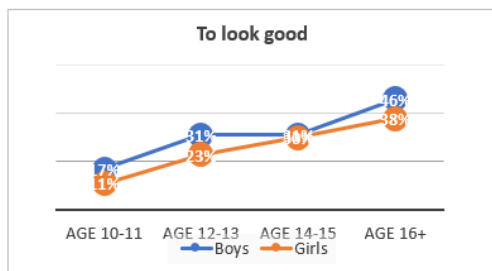
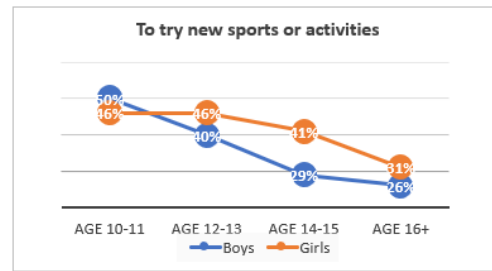
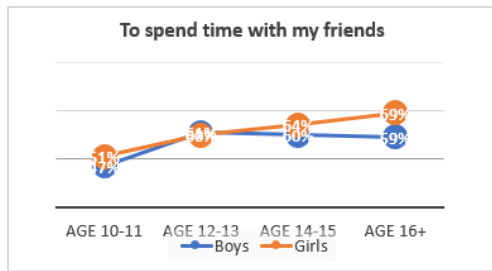
Having fun and being healthy are consistently the biggest motivators for young people to take part in sport and physical activity. The top 3 motivators are the same across state and independent schools.



As children progress through adolescence some of the motivators change and become more important. Spending time with friends becomes more important, as does looking and feeling good.

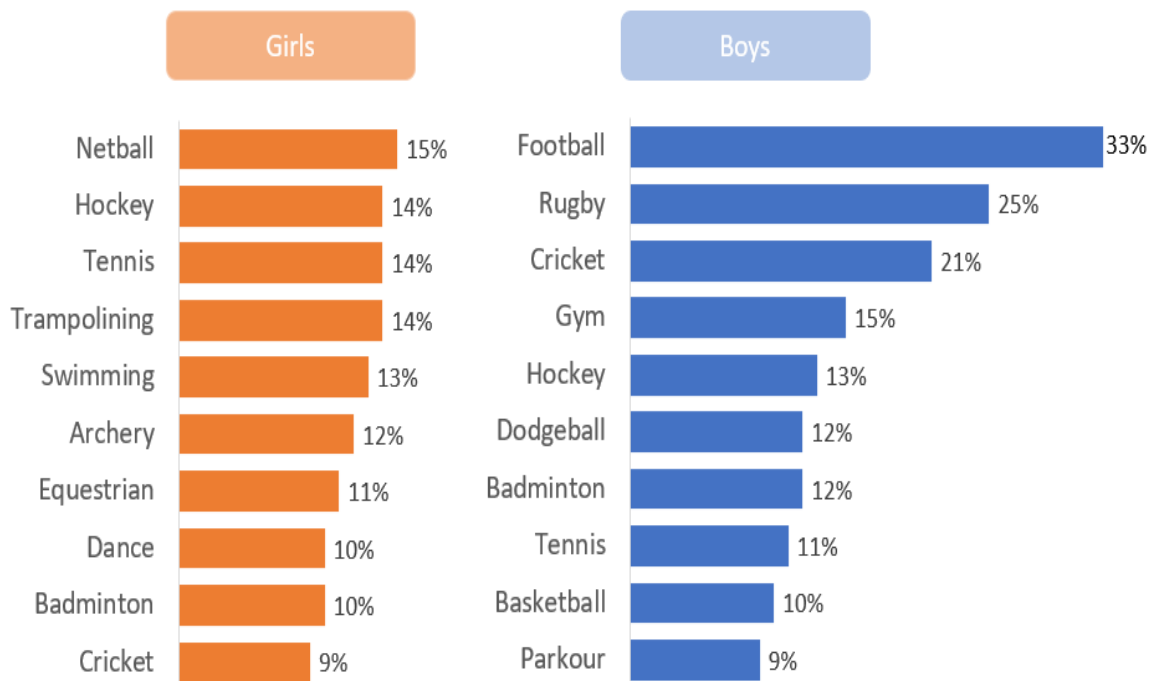
Motivation to try new sports and activities declines as children get older.

What motivates you to take part in sport and physical activity? (% true for me n=1517)



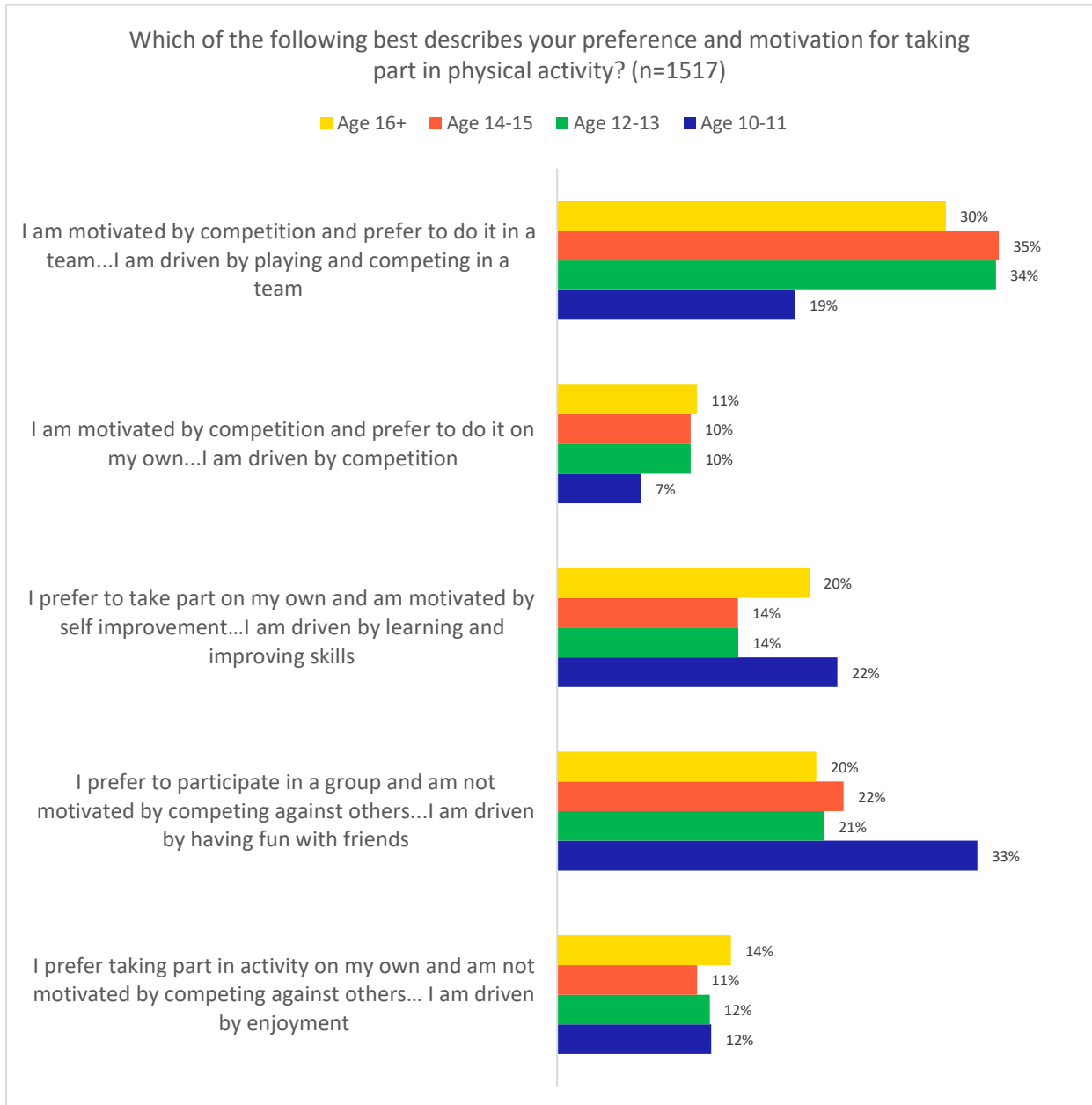
Team sports are the most popular activities, with boys preferring to take part in football, rugby, and cricket. Girls want to take part in netball, hockey, and tennis, but they also want variety with the top 10 most popular activities all receiving a similar proportion of girls select them.

Which three activities would you most like to do in PE? (n=1517)



As children get older, they are more motivated by competition and are driven by playing and competing in a team.

Younger children are more motivated by improving skills and having fun with their friends, and would prefer the environment to be less competitive:



Barriers to being active

Confidence and **competence** are key barriers to participation in activity in school. 1 in 4 young people (26%) think they are not good at it, with the same proportion (24%) stating they are not confident.

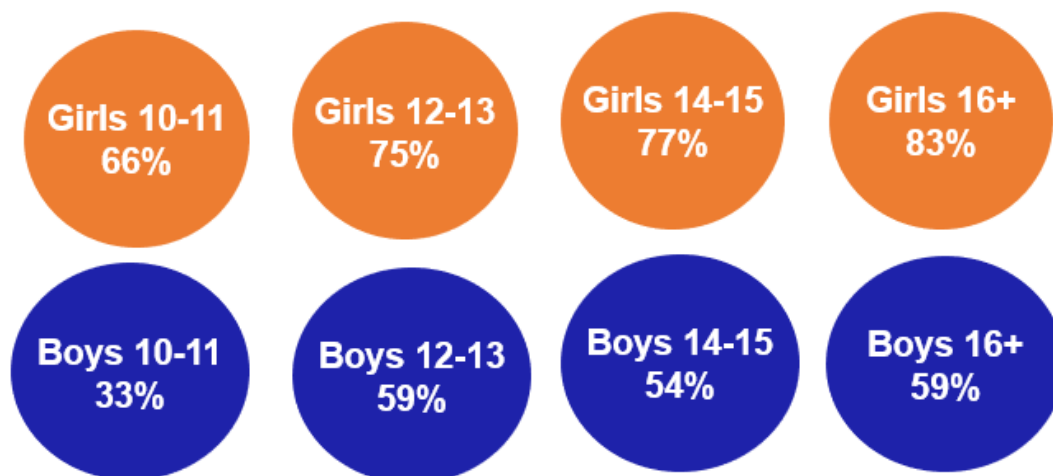
Girls are more likely to report barriers to participation than boys.

77% of girls report one or more barrier to taking part
56% of boys report one or more barrier to taking part

In state schools the trend is very similar, with boys reporting fewer barriers to participation (57% vs. 83% for girls).

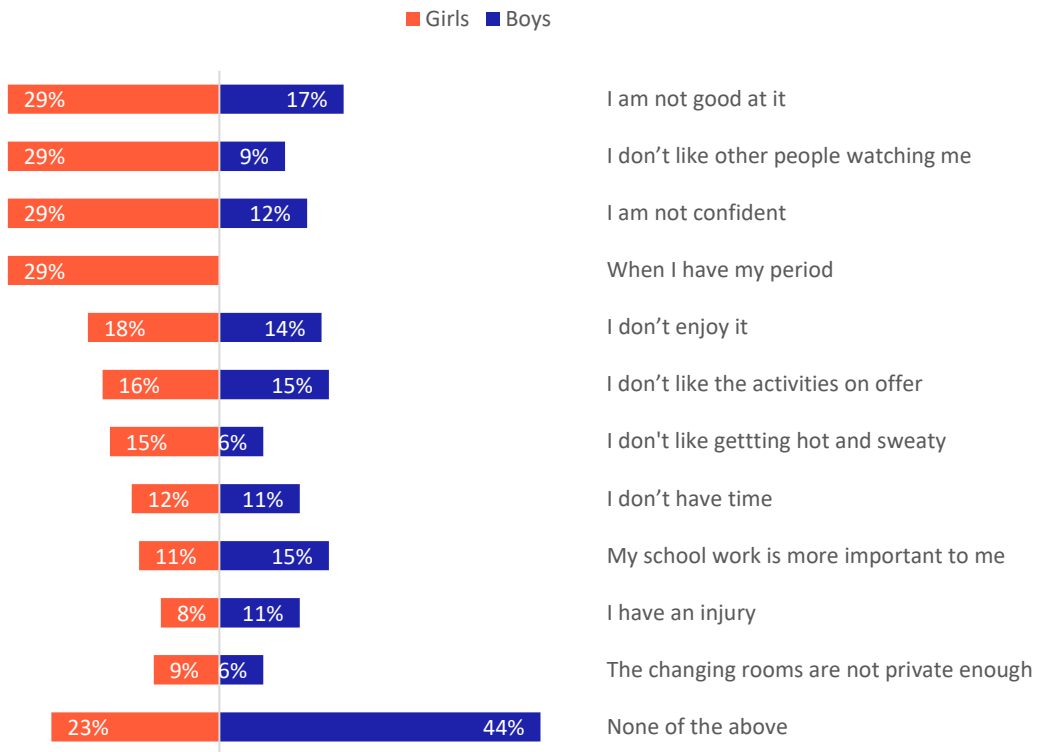
In addition, older children tend to report having more barriers than their younger peers, suggesting as children move through adolescence, they have increasing barriers to participation.

% of young people reporting one or more barriers to taking part in physical activity and PE at school (n=1517)

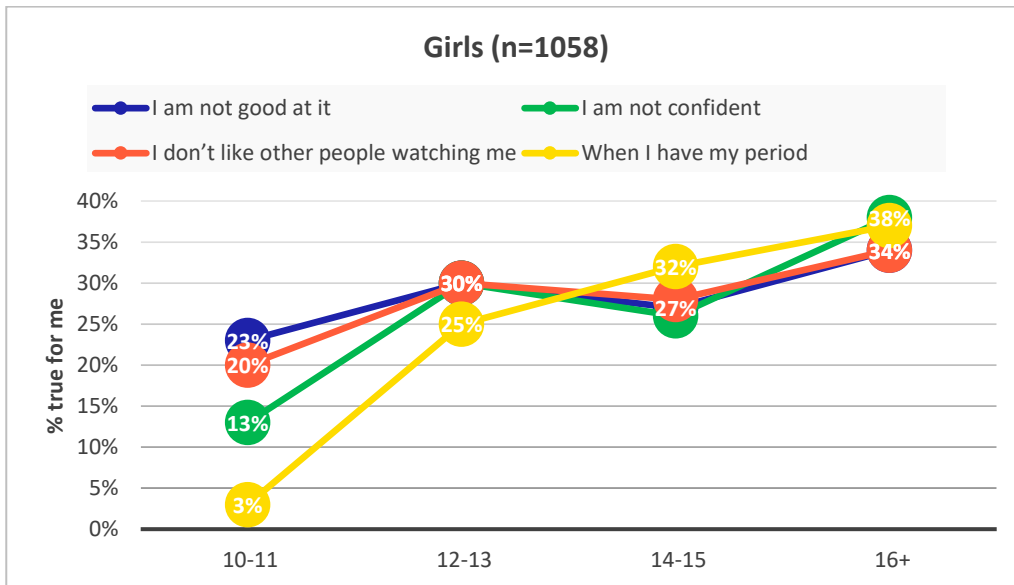


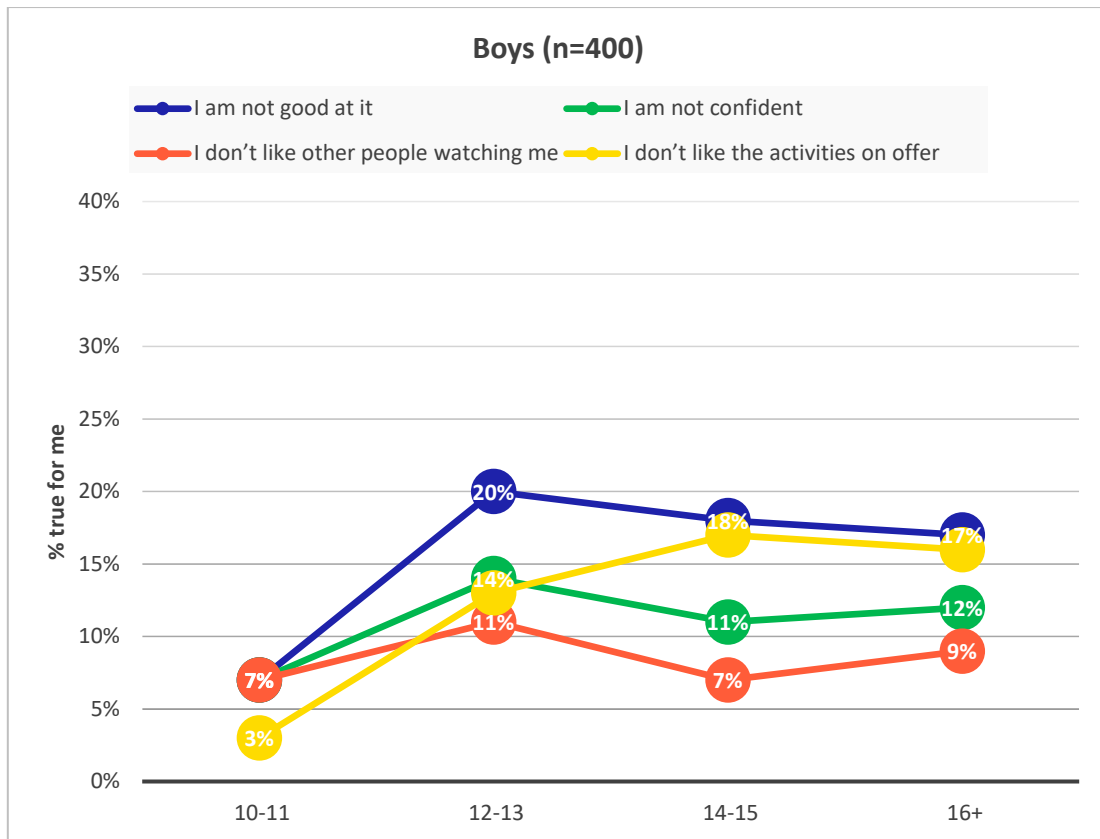
As well as a lack of confidence and competence, girls also do not like being watched and have the additional barrier of their periods.

What currently stops you taking part in sport, physical activity and PE in school? (n=1517)



For girls, confidence levels decrease as they progress through adolescence, whereas boys' confidence levels remain stable through ages 12 to 16.





The overall barriers to participation at school are the same across different ethnicities, with lack of confidence being the biggest barrier. However, young people from ethnically diverse backgrounds are more likely to report having barriers than their white peers.

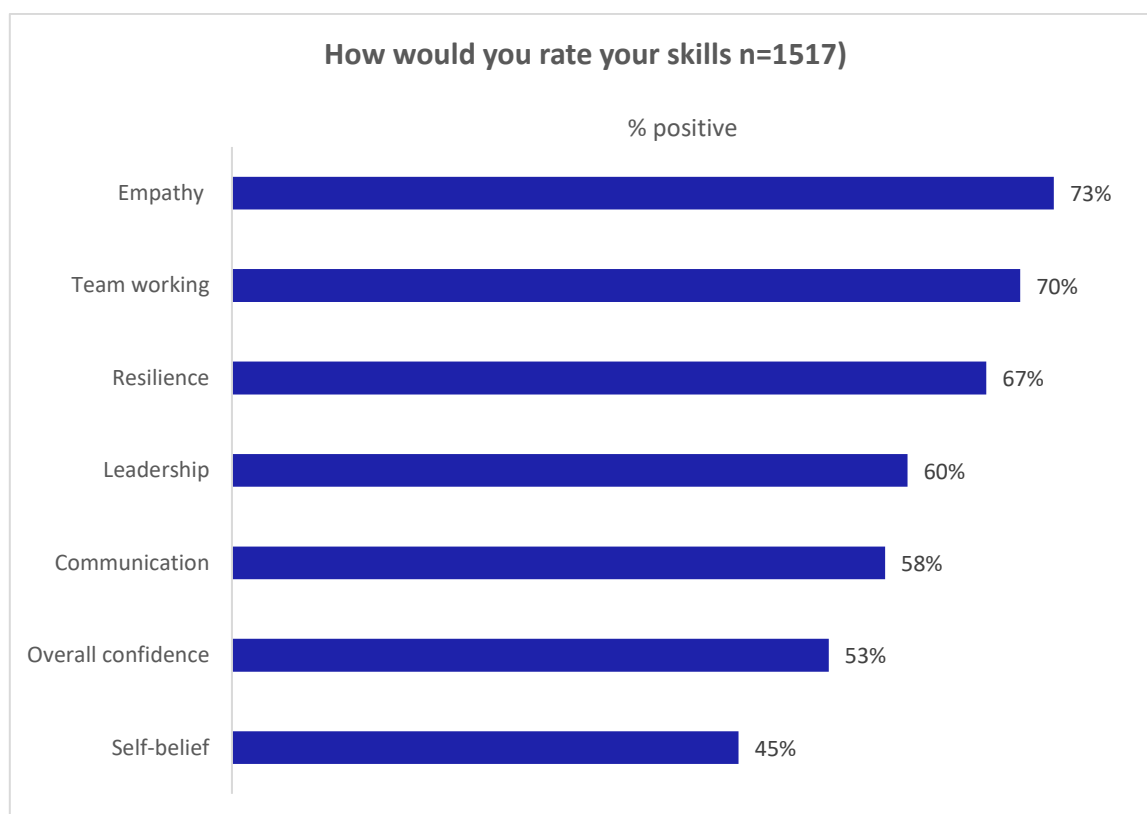
80% of young people from ethnically diverse backgrounds report one or more barrier to taking part (versus 68% of white students)

- 35% of ethnically diverse children feel they 'are not good at it' compared to 22% of children from a white background.
- 21% of ethnically diverse children 'don't like getting hot and sweaty' compared to 10% of children from a white background.
- Having their period is more of a barrier for girls from ethnically diverse backgrounds than for girls from white backgrounds (42% vs 23%)

Skills

Young people rate their empathy *'I am able to understand how other people are feeling'* highest followed by their team working skills *'I work well in a group of people to achieve a goal'*.

They rate their self-belief the lowest *'I feel confident I my own abilities'* followed by their overall confidence. These are also the main barriers that young people face when being active, suggesting that focussing on developing these physical literacy skills would ensure continued participation beyond school.



Overall boys tend to rate their skills higher than girls in particular their self-belief, resilience, and overall confidence. Girls rate their empathy slightly higher than boys (74% vs. 72%), with both rating their communication and team working skills at a similar level.

Less than half (47%) of girls rate their overall confidence as 'good' compared to 71% of boys

40% of girls rate their self-belief as 'good' compared to 63% of boys

65% of girls rate their resilience skills as ‘good’ compared to 79% of boys

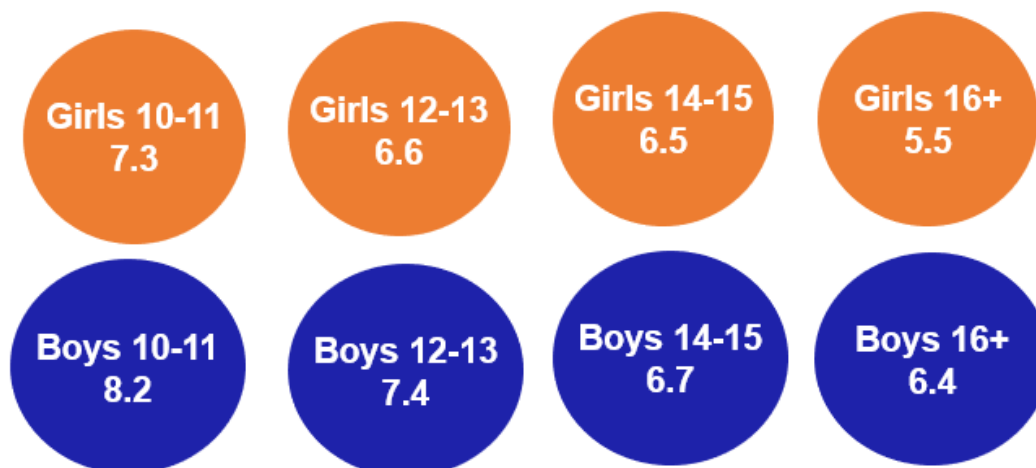
1 in 2 young people (51%) feel confident leading or influencing their peers or other young people. Boys are slightly more confident leading their peers than girls (59% vs 50%).

Wellbeing

When asked how happy they were yesterday on a scale of 0 to 10 (0 = not at all, 10 = completely) the average score was 6.3. This was similar for white and ethnically diverse children and aligns to children in state schools.

Happiness levels decline as young people progress through adolescence, and older girls in particular see a sharp drop in their overall happiness when they reach age 16+:

Average happiness score (scale 0 not at all, 10 completely)

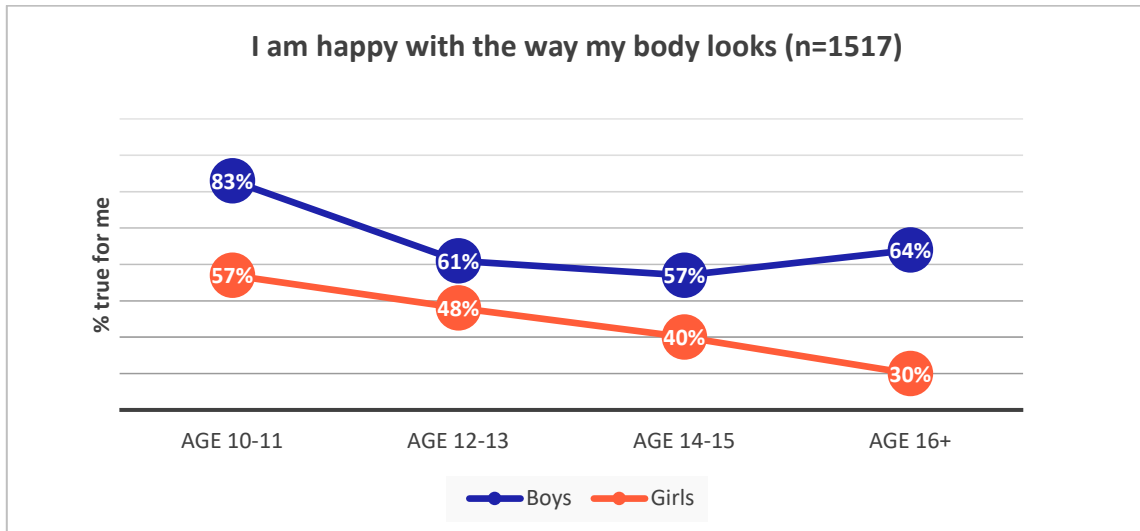


	Independent	State		Independent	State
All Girls	6.2	6.0	All boys	6.8	6.8

Body image is also a worry for young people with a large proportion of children unhappy with their body image.

41% of girls rate are happy with the way their body looks, compared to 63% of boys

Girls' positivity towards their body image sees a gradual decline across from age 11 through to 16+. However, boys start to have a more positive attitude towards their body as they reach age 16+.



Conclusions

This research study has explored young people's attitudes to PE, school sport and physical activity in the independent sector. It has shown that young people in the independent school sector are more active than those in state schools, but they face the same barriers and wellbeing challenges, and these barriers increase through adolescence.

- It is important to understand and address the barriers. Listen to young people and involve them in decisions about PE delivery/activities - empower and motivate them to participate.

Results of this Limitless research are in line with other research studies which consistently show girls in particular report a number of barriers to participation and are most at risk at not enjoying or leading an active life.

- Take a long-term approach to engaging girls. Continue to offer a wide range of activities to help them find one that is right for them. Consider ways to address girl-specific barriers.

Improving the confidence and competence of young people are important to maintain long term engagement in an active lifestyle. There is a low understanding of the life skills that PE can offer. An overall focus on achieving good 'physical literacy' will help drive and maintain engagement. The five areas of physical literacy⁴ are outlined below:



- Confidence and perceived competence fall as children get older – focusing on these could ensure continued participation beyond school. Make PE relevant to young people's lives and aspirations.

Finally, the research suggests it is important for schools in the independent sector to build on strong foundations. Almost all young people understood the importance of an

⁴ International Physical Literacy Association <https://www.physical-literacy.org.uk/?v=79cba1185463>
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active lifestyle, and two thirds of those surveyed said that they would like to have a say in the activities they do in PE and after school clubs

- Regular physical activity can enhance social, emotional, and physical wellbeing which can improve long term quality of life. Schools have a vital role to play in forming life-long attitudes to sport and activity. Negative school experiences are a key contributor in future disengagement.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the young people and schools who took part in this research study.

Thank you also to Limitless for sponsoring the research.

YST RESEARCH

The Youth Sport Trust (YST) is a national children's charity passionate about creating a future where every child enjoys the life-changing benefits that come from play and sport. YST Research offers research, analysis, insight and evaluation services to organisations with an interest in the wider children and young people's sector. Our research expertise is focussed on improving the wellbeing of children and young people through sport and physical activity.

Our specialisms include:

- Education, PE and school sport
- Community sport / clubs
- Early years settings
- Life skills and employability
- Activism and volunteering
- Health (physical, social and emotional)

For our latest research findings, visit <https://www.youthsporttrust.org/news-insight/research>

By working with us, you are supporting us to achieve our mission to improve children's lives and their future.



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