



# Understanding participation in sport: What determines sports participation among 15-19 year old women?

Sport England Research January 2006  
Research Summary

"If you don't have a supportive family, then obviously, it's a lot harder – especially in stuff like getting there and to clubs and stuff."

"I just don't have confidence around boys. 'Cos I just don't feel comfortable at all and 'cos it all depends on popularity and if you're not as good as them, then they take the mick out of you and everything."

"If your friends are, like – go out and do things with you, then you're gonna be more active. And if they do encourage you to do anything, you're gonna be more active."

"I think clubs don't really motivate you any more. I don't feel there are a lot of clubs any more. I mean, especially for women. It's all right for lads – they can do football. But there's no - no clubs for women, I don't think."

## Background

Historically, research into determinants of sport and physical activity has tended to focus on quantitative methods. Sport England commissioned the University of Oxford to undertake a review of existing qualitative research to help identify priority groups for a potential qualitative research programme. Oxford's review confirmed that more qualitative research needs to be undertaken to understand sports participation.

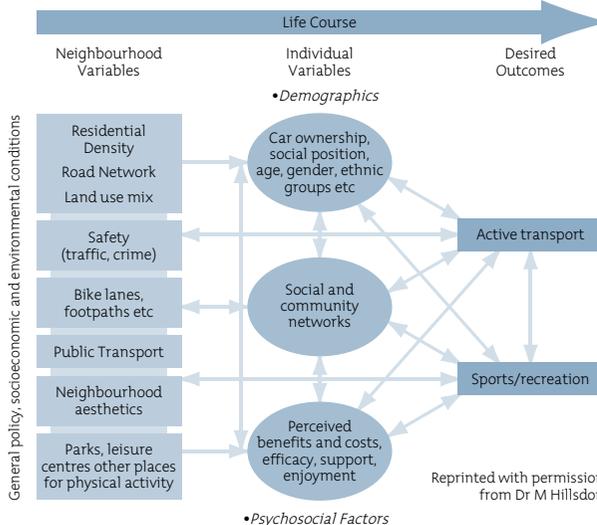
Based on the evidence available, Oxford devised a framework which links together the factors (potential determinants) that are likely to influence an individual's participation in sport and physical activity. In undertaking research the framework can be used as a checklist to ensure all factors that influence participation or non-participation are explored and that the interrelationship between those factors is evaluated. It also helps to establish what interventions might best deal with the barriers associated with each of the determinants (see framework below).

The Oxford framework has informed this piece of research in terms of the 'life course' element helping to identify several 'transitional' lifestages that require qualitative investigation.

Given the absence of previous research in understanding participation amongst girls and young women identified in the Oxford review, combined with Sport England's policy imperative of driving up participation, the need to undertake qualitative research amongst 15-19 year old women was identified as one of the priorities.

There are increasing concerns to drive up young people's participation in sport and physical activity. The concern about levels of physical activity or inactivity among young people is noted in a recent review of adolescence (Coleman and Schofield 2005). Two key findings are reported. Firstly, among young people of secondary school age, boys are more likely to participate in sports and physical activity compared to girls. Secondly, the gap between the genders becomes more pronounced with advanced age within the teenage years.

In order to drive up participation in sport and physical activity, we must be aware of the factors that influence if, why, and when young women both commence and maintain their participation. Equally, we must be aware of the factors that discourage or prevent their participation in sport.



Framework of the determinants of sports participation

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## Research Objectives

The main aim of the research was to improve understanding of the determinants of sports and physical activity participation, among young women aged 15-19.

In meeting this aim, the three key objectives of the research were to explore:

- The influence of key transitions in young women's lives upon levels of sport and physical activity, such as leaving school etc.
- The influence of the environment upon participation in sport and physical activity.
- The influence of social and psychological (referred to as psychosocial) factors upon levels of sport and physical activity, such as attitudes and perceived pros and cons of participation.

## Methodology

The research was undertaken by Louise Cox, Dr Lester Coleman and Dr Debi Roker at the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA). In line with the Oxford recommendations, a qualitative approach, as opposed to a quantitative survey was chosen as this would provide a greater understanding of the meaning of sport and physical activity in young women's lives.

A short screening questionnaire was devised to identify 15-19 year-old young women who 'always,' 'sometimes,' or 'never' participated in sport and physical activity. The main interview schedule was devised after some exploratory focus group work.

75 women aged 15-19 were individually interviewed in the South East and West Midlands of England. The interviews explored participants' history of involvement in sports and physical activity, and their current level of involvement and focussed in particular on environmental, life-stage, and psychosocial factors, and their role in influencing attitudes and behaviours.





## Summary of findings

The research was based on those who 'always,' 'sometimes' and 'never' participate. The findings are therefore structured around the different levels of participation ('always,' 'sometimes' and 'never') and the possible determinants of participation (the environment, key transitions and psychosocial).

### Always

#### The impact of life history

Early positive experiences of sport, and reported regular participation from an early age.

Had participated in more sport as they have got older.

#### The impact of the environment

Many of this group did not view their local environment as particularly crucial and were generally positive about the area in which they lived.

#### The impact of life transitions

Although this group felt that life transitions within education or from education to employment had a negative impact on their participation, many said that 'growing up' had a positive impact and meant that people needed self-motivation to get involved in sport.

## Sometimes

Mixed views about whether these early experiences impacted on how they currently felt about sport.

Reduction in their levels of sports participation due to lack of facilities and opportunities and recent changes in their lifestyle.

Mixed views regarding their local environment. They were generally positive about transport locally but reported limited facilities and opportunities to get involved.

Life transitions had a negative impact on their level of sports participation. Other life circumstances had a detrimental impact on sport, such as moving house and personal or relationship problems.

## Never

Generally had positive early memories of sport and physical activity.

Did less sport as they got older, mainly because sport was no longer compulsory, they had less time, they felt self-conscious and they were part of social groups who didn't participate in sport.

This group were generally positive about the area in which they lived, but less positive about the facilities and opportunities to get involved in sport. However, they believed that even where sporting facilities were available, they were more influenced by other factors such as lack of time or having friends who do not participate in sport.

Transitions in life had a negative impact on their level of sports participation. This was due to having less time, less energy and social groups changing. Some also described feeling more self-conscious.

**The impact of Psychosocial issues**  
(psychological and social)

**Always**

**Image of sport and role models**

The 'always' group had a positive image of sport and described many sporting role models.

**Awareness of sporting opportunities**

Awareness of opportunities available to them to get involved was high and there were reports of positive advertising such as leaflets about local facilities.

**Role of friends**

This group were part of social groups who regularly participated in sport and this was considered to influence their ongoing high level of involvement in sport.

**Role of family**

The majority lived in 'active' households where family members were sporting role models and encouraged each other to participate.

**Self perceptions and sporting ability**

There was awareness of the link between exercise and weight and appearance, but few cited this as a motivation for doing sport. These women rarely felt self-conscious when participating in sport.

**Personal choice**

Getting involved in sport is not a lot of hassle. Their genuine enjoyment of sport, social advantages and health benefits associated with sport result in them making a lot of personal effort to participate.

Sometimes	Never
<p>The 'sometimes' group held a positive image of sport but very few had sporting role models.</p>	<p>Although the 'never' group had a positive image of sport and were aware of the benefits, few highlighted role models. Several highlighted the divide between the image of sport and that of other hobbies, for example, alternative music.</p>
<p>This group had limited awareness of the opportunities for them to get involved in sport.</p>	<p>Generally unaware of opportunities available for them to get involved in sport. This was due to a lack of self-motivation to seek this information and a perceived lack of advertising targeted at young women.</p>
<p>Few considered their social life to hinder or encourage participation in sport as they had both active and inactive friends. However they did consider that having sporty friends encouraged them to participate.</p>	<p>Their friends and social groups were inactive which gave a feeling that their social life hindered involvement in physical activity. Many felt that if their friends participated, this might have a positive impact on their own level of participation.</p>
<p>Most lived with some active family members and although family had an important role to play in influencing their sports participation, friends were deemed to be more important.</p>	<p>These women often lived in an inactive household and few described family members as sporting role models. Family influences on sports participation were seen as less important than friends.</p>
<p>The issue of weight and appearance was important, with several suggesting they take part in sport in order to lose weight or gain a desirable figure. They rarely reported feeling self-conscious when participating in sport.</p>	<p>Many of those who never participate were anxious about their appearance and said this was a major reason for their non-participation in sport.</p>
<p>Personal choice is very important in explaining their current level of participation. They felt they did not make enough effort to get involved and described the 'hassles' associated with sports – filling in forms, paying fees.</p>	<p>This group recognised that they made very little effort to get involved in sport and often found it too much hassle due to prioritising other commitments.</p>

## Conclusions

- Young women did not consider environmental issues, including the provision of facilities, as very important when explaining their current level of sports participation.
- Life transitions, including lifestyle changes for example from school to college or from education to employment, generally had a negative impact upon sports participation, due to a decrease in levels of spare time, money, and energy. This finding was consistent regardless of current level of participation.
- Psychosocial issues were very important when explaining levels of sports participation. In particular, family and friends were considered to be the most important factors influencing participation in sport, regardless of participation level. Furthermore, complex psychological issues such as self-confidence, and perception of personal ability, were also found to play a significant role in the decision to participate in sport.



## Recommendations

A number of recommendations for future practice have been made as a result of the research:

- Sporting programmes could be trialled that:
  - encourage sports participation at a family level – particularly effective for the 'never' and 'sometimes' group.
  - encourage families to be more supportive towards their children's sports participation.
  - encourage sports participation among friendship groups. Focussing on fun rather than competition would be important. Research suggests that this could attract the 'nevers' in particular.
  - provide 'women only' sessions or facilities – this would particularly help those women who feel uncomfortable doing sport in mixed groups and those who are self-conscious about their appearance.
  - provide free and reduced rate 'taster' sessions more extensively to improve young women's accessibility.
- Further advertising and promotional campaigns could be undertaken to change and improve the image of sport – this could focus on the fact that all young women can get involved and enjoy it, not just 'sporty types'.
- Provide positive support to young women during key transitions in their lives where levels of participation may be affected e.g. during transition from school to employment.
- Promote sports facilities to be more appealing and less complicated for young women, i.e. improve clarity over costs, membership issues.



## Want to find out more?

You can find the full report on the Sport England website ([www.sportengland.org](http://www.sportengland.org)) or the TSA website ([www.tsa.uk.com](http://www.tsa.uk.com)), or contact the Sport England research team at [research@sportengland.org](mailto:research@sportengland.org).

## Related research topics

'Driving up Participation in sport and physical activity: understanding the reasons for inactivity and non-participation amongst older people who have recently retired' (September 2005).

Understanding participation in sport:  
A systematic review (September 2005).

Participation in sport in England:  
Sports Equity Index 2002.

To find out more about making women and girls active, go to The Women's Sports Foundation website ([www.wsf.org.uk](http://www.wsf.org.uk)) and [www.whatworksforwomen.org.uk](http://www.whatworksforwomen.org.uk).

## The secret diaries of 15-19 year old women!

Look out for Part Two of this research in Spring 2006 – extra analysis will give us more nuggets, including the day-to-day diary entries of the young women who took part in the research.