



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

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Research Summary

Among young people of secondary school age, boys are more likely to participate in sports and physical activity compared to girls. The gap between the genders becomes more pronounced with advanced age within the teenage years.

As part of a wider programme of research into understanding participation, Sport England recently completed research among 15-19 year old women to better understand the reasons for levels of participation. The findings of this research, undertaken by Louise Cox, Dr Lester Coleman and Dr Debi Roker at the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA), are based on in-depth interviews with 75 young women aged 15-19. The women were classified by their levels of participation: those who 'always,' 'sometimes,' and 'never' participate in sport and physical activity.

"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."

What does the research tell us?

- Young women didn't consider environmental factors, including facility provision as very important when explaining current participation.
- Transitions, including lifestyle changes had a negative impact upon sports participation, due to a decrease in levels of spare time, money and energy. This was consistent regardless of current level of participation.
- Psychological and social issues were very important when explaining participation. Family and friends were considered to be the most important factors influencing participation in sport, regardless of participation level. Those that 'never' participate commonly came from inactive families and had inactive friends.
- Complex psychological issues, such as self-confidence and perception of personal ability, played a significant role. The vast majority of those who 'always' participate had a positive perception of themselves in sport, and linked this to their level of sports participation.



How can we encourage participation among 15-19 year old women?

A number of recommendations for future practice are made from the research:

- Encourage sports participation at a family level and get families to be more supportive towards their children's sports participation.
- Encourage sports participation among friendship groups. Focusing on fun rather than competition is important.
- 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.
- Implement advertising and promotional campaigns to improve the image of sport – focusing that all young women can get involved and enjoy it, not just 'sporty types.'
- Provide support to young women during key transitions where levels of participation may be affected e.g. during transition from school to employment.
- Provide free or reduced rate 'taster sessions' to attract young women to new activities.
- Make it easier for young women to join clubs and sports centres, with clear membership information on how to 'pay and play'.

Want to find out more?

You can find the full report and the research summary on the Sport England website (www.sportengland.org) or the TSA website (www.tsa.uk.com), or contact the Sport England research team at research@sportengland.org.

Other Sport England research

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

Participation in sport in England:
Sports Equity Index 2002.

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.

“You get to sort of, socialise at the same time as you do exercise and have fun.”

“Lack of motivation – that there's nothing around me that's saying, you've got to go and do sport and get fit. You know – just don't bother.”

“I don't find sport particularly relaxing, or enjoyable – especially doing it on your own.”

“It gets me out of the house, rather than just sitting indoors watching telly. Keeps you active and fit. And I don't really think there are any disadvantages.”