**Review of the research evidence on young people and sport**

**Nick Rowe, Sport England Research**

**March 2012**

**What does it tell us about their underlying attitudes and interest in sport and the ingredients for successful programme design?**

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**Nick Rowe, Strategic Lead Research and Evaluation, March 2012**

**Introduction**

This review focuses on the evidence we have about young people’s underlying attitudes and interest in sport drawing primarily but not exclusively from research commissioned by Sport England carried out over the last 10 years. The review is selective and not ‘systematic’ but it is likely that a wider trawl of research would in many cases replicate the general findings in this review rather than add new additional dimensions of insight.

The focus is on more qualitative aspects of participation rather than on the prevalence rates of participation. The review does, however, include reference to recent survey research carried out by Childwise to contextualise sports participation behaviours within broader leisure and lifestyle trends. It also makes reference to a report on young people’s interest in ‘lifestyle sports’ as this is an interesting additional dimension of participation that can often be overlooked – and in itself says something about what motivates many young people outside of the more traditional sporting offer.

The review includes reference to what we have learned from evaluation of ‘what works’ to get young people engaged and sustain that interest.

The final section summarises the key findings and puts forward a theoretical model that emerges from the qualitative research that provides the basis for a future research agenda.

**Summary including observations on programme design do’s and don’ts and research priorities**

**General themes**

There are some general themes that can be summarised from the research. They are outlined below not necessarily in any priority order.

* Sport is only one of many leisure and lifestyle choices available to young people in the early part of the 21st century. Evidence shows the competing demands on young people’s time and the pervasive influence of new technology. ‘Sport’ is finding it difficult to maintain let alone build its ‘market share’ of the total leisure time budget available to the young. To maintain its place as a dominant behavioural choice amongst young people sport will need to continue to adapt its offer and its image in ways that appeal to this increasingly discerning customer base. Perhaps most importantly it will need to find ways to take advantage of and work effectively with an increasingly connected ‘social media world’ where the traditional boundaries between passive interest, doing, playing, watching and engaging are increasingly blurred.
* For many young people sports participation is wrapped up in broader statements about their lifestyle and identity. Research shows an emerging trend toward more ‘lifestyle’ related sports which reflect individualisation and demand for opportunities outside of the traditional sport offer. The challenge for providers is to tune into this demand while still keeping the essential essence of ‘freedom’, self- expression and self-determination that characterises these types of activities. Once institutionalised these kinds of sports can lose their original appeal – so although they can benefit from a strengthened organisational structure a light touch is required.
* Psychological factors around self identity, self confidence, self efficacy, body image and perceived competence are fundamental to whether a young person takes part in sport, and perhaps more importantly whether they sustain that participation into adulthood. The evidence that these factors relate differently to young men and women with an early socialisation process that leads to gender stereotyping is repeatedly shown in a number of studies. Many who lack self confidence find sporting venues intimidating. This is a challenge for providers most of whom, being very sporty themselves, have little sense of what it feels like to enter a setting lacking self-confidence, unsure of how to behave, what to say, what to do and constantly worrying about what other people think of you and of ‘showing yourself up’.
* Extrinsic factors – such as access to facilities and cost - do play a part in the decision to participate but they are secondary to the underlying socio-psychological factors. It is likely that these external factors will affect the frequency of participation and can be catalysts for drop out but a reduction in these barriers will of itself not be sufficient as a stimulus for participation for those with negative psychological profiles in their relationship to sport.
* The evidence shows that an individual’s relationship to sport is determined at a young age – by the time young people leave secondary school for many their future prospects for taking part in sport as an adult have been shaped. At the end of compulsory schooling many more girls than boys have a negative attitude to sport although general awareness of the benefits of an active lifestyle are high for both genders. Girls are less likely to enjoy and respond to competitive sport than boys and generally respond better to intrinsic (self improvement) rather than extrinsic (comparative performance with others) motivation.
* Those young women who are more positively disposed towards sport find particular challenges to maintaining participation through their teenage years because of a lack of players, poor teaching or coaching opportunities, lack of support from schools and challenges related to moving from junior to senior leagues.
* Life transitions are important in influencing participation – for young people this relates particularly to moving from primary to secondary school and from compulsory schooling to further or higher education or to work. Some face particular challenges from becoming young parents and these are particularly increased for young single parent mothers. Life transitions are often a catalyst to drop out – and for many this can lead to extended periods of inactivity and for a significant minority a lifetime of sedentary behaviours.
* The impact of influential others plays an important part in the socialisation of young people into and out of sport. Parents play an important role – and, particularly for girls, having a sporty mother impacts on their likelihood of participating. In the teenage years peer group influence becomes more important than parental influence. The more sporty girls tend to mix with others who play sport – but there are increasing pressures from the non-sporty majority to become inactive and develop other interests. With the influence of peer pressure many of the more ‘sporty’ girls gravitate towards the social networks of the non-sporty majority. This peer pressure does not apply to young males where sport is seen as a socially desirable activity that boosts status and peer approval (across both genders).
* More variation in the types of sports offered has been shown to be a positive factor for engaging young people and increases the probability of participating later in adulthood. Diversity and choice in the sporting offer for the young can only be a good thing.
* There is no single silver bullet to what works best to engage and sustain young people in sport. Interventions need to be targeted; context specific and sensitive to the socio-psychological relationship young people have to sport. Offering the right sports, the right mix of opportunities at the right cost and in the places young people can get to, are comfortable and confident with is important. Involving families can work for pre-school and primary ages– although for teenagers the offer needs to be more socially sensitive and friendship based. Leaders and good coaches are important – and they need to be able to show empathy and understanding as well as good technical skills.
* There is overwhelming evidence that young women’s relationship to sport is very different to that of young men and that the socio-cultural context and pressures many young women face conspire towards high levels of drop out that is gender related. Again there is no easy ‘solution’ when the causes are pervasive and societal rather than specific to sport. But the evidence does show that there are ways in which sporting opportunities can be made available to young women that will maximise the chance that they will take part and equally there are ways that will very quickly turnoff a large majority. So for example many young women will respond positively to single gender sessions, to approaches that focus on improvement rather than competition and winning, to environments that stress sociability and friendship networks, to high quality facility design including appropriately designed changing rooms and to environments in which they have no concern for their safety.
* Finally, there is evidence that there are factors that operate at the strategic and organisational level that can make a difference. For providers of opportunities to be successful they need to work in effective partnerships, operate flexibly but with clear strategic intent, understand their market, and perhaps most importantly consult and involve young people in the design and delivery of services so that they can shape them rather than having things done to them.

**The context: some recent trends in young people’s interests and use of media**

Young people’s sporting behaviours take place and are shaped by the broader socio-cultural context in which they live. Research carried out by ChildWise[[1]](#footnote-1) shows the incredible pace and influence of new technology and social media on young people’s leisure and lifestyle choices. More than six in ten 5-16s now own their own PC or laptop; three in ten have a desktop PC, and more than four in ten have a laptop, and already around one in ten claim to have their own iPad. More than half of all 7-16 year olds can access the Internet in their own room, up from just a fifth in 2005. 7-16 year olds using the Internet do so on average for around two hours a day, and access it on more than five days a week.

Facebook and YouTube remain the top favourite websites across boys and girls, younger and older children. Two in five 5-16s are now able to access multi-channel TV in their own room and watch TV for an average of 2.7 hours a day. However the trend is towards a blurring of the edges of different technologies as they become integrated and overlap.

For children, the boundaries between different media are porous. Their favourites span the internet, television and press, plus they will download the app or play the console game. As a result of these trends it is likely that children and young people are becoming more sophisticated in their demands and expectations – and can find all the entertainment they need in their home. These developments pose challenges to physical activity generally and particularly for more traditional forms of sport. The statistics published by ChildWise[[2]](#footnote-2) in 2011 on participation in sport by young people lead them to conclude that “levels of involvement in sport at school are … falling, painting a worrying picture for children’s future fitness, and for the nation’s future sporting champions.”

**The types of sports that appeal to young people: interest in lifestyle sports**

There has been a proliferation of new sporting forms over the last three decades that have challenged traditional ways of conceptualising and practicing sport[[3]](#footnote-3). These new forms, variously labelled ‘action’, ‘new’, ‘wizz’, ‘extreme’ and ‘lifestyle’ sports, have commercial and competitive dimensions, but are essentially understood by participants as bodily experiences – about ‘doing it.’

In contrast to the regulation of conventional sports, alternative or lifestyle sports are characterised by a relative lack of regulation and a customary refusal by participants to follow regulatory codes.

In the twenty-first century there are claims that lifestyle sports are attracting an ever-increasing number of participants, representing a wide range of experiences and levels of involvement. Yet participation figures are hard to establish, precisely because of the informal and counter-cultural context of the sports. Claims about the popularity of lifestyle sports are thus supported by equipment sales figures which suggest, certainly for the USA, that lifestyle sports purchases are outpacing the growth of a number of ‘big league’ traditional sports including baseball.

Mintel and Key Note statistics indicate that around 10% of the adult population is interested in participating in lifestyle sports, but that the majority of this 10% is drawn from a narrow age and socio-demographic grouping (15-24 year olds, mainly men, from the higher socio-economic classifications)

**The barriers that stop young people from taking part in sport or lead to drop out**

The University of Oxford Study[[4]](#footnote-4) concluded from their review that the following factors are important barriers:

* challenges to identity such as having to show others an unfit body;
* participation was also hampered by difficulty in accessing, and the poor state of, facilities;
* a number of studies reported participant concerns with the cost of joining sporting clubs and fitness gyms.

The MORI survey of young people and sport commissioned by Sport England in 2002[[5]](#footnote-5) found the following:

* Seven in ten pupils describe themselves as ‘sporty’. However this figure varied significantly by gender and year group. Seventy-eight per cent of boys said they were sporty compared with just 61% of girls. Likewise, whereas 73% of primary school pupils described themselves as sporty, this fell to 65% among those in secondary years.
* Young people clearly recognise the importance of exercise, with 95% agreeing with the statement ‘I think it is important to keep fit’. Encouragingly, awareness was uniformly high among boys and girls, and among primary and secondary year groups.
* Girls, meanwhile tend to be slightly more self conscious than boys about competing – for example they are more likely to mind being in a competition where there are winners and losers (23% versus 17%) and to worry about not being as good as others (48% versus 44%). 17% of secondary aged girls said they get embarrassed when they have to do sport and exercise.
* Just over seven in ten secondary (72%) pupils agreed that they wanted to continue doing sport and exercise when they leave school while one in five (21%) disagreed. Reflecting their more positive attitudes towards sport generally, boys were more likely than girls to envisage doing sport in the future (79% versus 66%).
* Just over two in five (43%) pupils agree that they prefer to do things other than sport and exercise in their free time, with 16% agreeing strongly. A preference for ‘other’ activities was higher among girls than among boys (49% versus 36%). Indeed among girls aged 11 and above, interest in ‘other’ activities exceeded that for sport and exercise (51%). This result was consistent with older girls’ lower rates of participation in, and more negative attitudes towards sport.

The Trust for the Study of Adolescence[[6]](#footnote-6) asked young women aged 15 to 19 years who never did any sport their attitudes towards a range of factors and some of the underlying reasons why this is the case. They found that:

* This group generally had positive early memories of sport and physical activity. The move to secondary school was associated with sport becoming less fun and more competitive. There were very few reports of any negative experiences of mixing with the opposite sex.
* All young women in this group reported doing less sport as they got older. The main explanations were because sport was no longer compulsory, they had less time because of their education/employment commitments, they felt self-conscious, and they were part of social groups who did not participate in sport.
* The main things this group disliked about sport and physical activity were feeling intimidated and self-conscious, and the competition associated with doing sport.

The study carried out by Freshminds[[7]](#footnote-7) on behalf of the Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation interviewed a cross section of 16-19 year old young women from eight different sports who were either currently participants or recently lapsed. Eight generic reasons were identified for 16-18 year old girls dropping out of sport:

* time for something new;
* competing social interests;
* conflicts with other commitments (time);
* lack of players ;
* lack of support from schools;
* poor coaching/teaching ;
* Transition from junior to senior leagues ;
* Not enough opportunity to play in matches;

It concluded that most often it is a combination of factors across a number of areas that result in girls dropping out of sport:

* Personal reasons - Psychological and physiological barriers directly related to the individual (either real or perceived) – could include ‘I’m unfit’ or ‘I’m not very good’.
* Lifestyle reasons - Social pressures and influences experienced by the individual associated with coming of age. Could include new relationships or conflicts.
* Sporting reasons - Reasons linked directly to the sport experience or

sport infrastructure. This could include a myriad of reasons – from relationship with other players or coaches, to the role of the club to the image of sport itself.

GfK NOP[[8]](#footnote-8) carried out a qualitative study of lone parents with young children. Amongst those who never took part in sport they found that:

* ‘Nevers’ tended not to have done a substantial amount of physical activity had a more general lack of motivation and a negative attitude towards participation and admitted to finding excuses as to why they could not fit it into their lifestyle.
* The main internal barriers were the low levels of confidence that some lone parents had. This included feeling out of place in a sporting environment and a number of respondents who felt they were “not the sporty type”, were too overweight or unfit to participate. A large barrier was a general lack of motivation and low level of enjoyment and interest in sport or physical activity.
* The key external barriers were the cost of participating, the cost and provision of suitable childcare and the availability of good quality facilities accessible by public transport if they did not have their own means of transport.
* A study commissioned by Sport Scotland[[9]](#footnote-9) focused on young girl’s participation in sport and physical activity concluded that:
* Lack of time and self-consciousness were identified as barriers to participation. Self-consciousness may arise due to gender stereotyping or peer group acceptance. ‘Alien’ sporting environments or the feeling that activities are inappropriate can also lead to feelings of low confidence for participation.

David Kirk in his paper published in ‘Driving up Participation the Challenge for Sport’[[10]](#footnote-10) reviewed research around early years’ experiences and its links to sustained later life participation. He concluded that:

* “The birth-date effect and maturational age have a profound influence on the possibility of continuing participation in sport for many children during the critical 11-16 age range when it is alleged drop-out rates rise steeply. It is during this early to mid-adolescence period that the most dramatic maturational differences appear between age peers. It is also during this period that it becomes increasingly difficult for young people to gain a regular place in a sports team if they lack competence, experience and physical maturity”

Kirk stresses the importance of early learning experiences (before the age of 14) and their impact on later drop out. He concludes that *“quality early learning experiences not only develop physical competencies but, crucially, develop perceptions of competence that underlie the motivation that is vital to continuing participation, and that between the ages of 11-14 (KS3) these perceptions are well established”*

Street Games in its research[[11]](#footnote-11) has identified common barriers faced by young disadvantaged women/girls identified to include:

* Cost
* A lack of interest/image of sport
* A lack of confidence/self esteem
* A lack of time
* A lack of transport
* Access to appropriate facilities
* A lack of childcare/timing of activities
* Cultural/religious reasons
* A lack of role models/mentoring
* A lack of coaches/leaders
* Not having the ‘right’ kit/equipment
* Safety concerns

**The factors that motivate young people to participate**

The University of Oxford Study concluded from their review that the following factors are important to motivating young people to participate in sport:

* more variation in the types of physical activity offered was seen as a way of increasing interest among school children. During adolescence, flexibility in PE uniform, privacy in changing rooms and greater variation in the activities offered was important. Girls PE kit was described as uncomfortable and embarrassing by most teenage girls.
* a better understanding of pressures to manage changing identity and new body images was particularly relevant for teenage girls.
* a number of authors concluded that an emphasis on the enjoyment and social benefits of physical activity was a good way to promote participation.
* a move away from authoritarian and prescriptive statements about the health benefits of exercise was another common recommendation.
* many studies showed that people could not identify with the models of perfection used to promote physical activity and that ‘real life’ role models would be more effective. This finding held true in studies of older people, those from diverse ethnic backgrounds and teenagers.

The Trust for the Study for Adolescence[[12]](#footnote-12) carried out qualitative research with young women aged 15 to 19 years. They divided the women into three groups: those who ‘always participate’; those who ‘sometimes participate’; and those who ‘never’ participate’. The factors that motivated those who always and sometimes participate were:

* young women who ‘always participate’ had early positive experiences of sport, and reported regular participation from an early age. They did not report any negative experiences of mixing with the opposite sex in sport. Those who sometimes participate also had early positive experiences of sport, although some gave negative reports of mixing with the opposite sex and feeling self-conscious;
* for those who ‘sometimes participate’ the need to feel healthy and compensate for poor eating habits featured prominently as did having something worthwhile to do in their spare time. Those young women who ‘always participate’ felt they had participated in more sport as they have got older. This was as a result of ‘growing up’ and taking responsibility for their health, encouragement from family and teachers, and being in social groups that participate in sport;
* feeling good about themselves, socialising and having fun, health benefits, the development of new skills, and meeting new people. Those young women who always participate also talked about sport as a way of participating in competition and performances.
* many of the young women who always participate did not view environment as particularly crucial, with many being involved in sports outside of their local area
* both those women who sometimes and always participate had generally positive perceptions of themselves in sport; self-perceptions were not seen to have a particularly negative impact on their level of participation Those who always participate described many sporting role models. The vast majority of these women also had a positive perception of themselves in sport, and linked this perception to their level of sport participation.
* the issue of appearance and weight was important to young women who ‘sometimes participate’, with several suggesting that they participate in sport in order to lose weight or gain a desirable figure. Although aware of the link, few of those who ‘always participate’ cited weight and appearance as a motivation for doing sport
* being influenced by others was an important issue for young women who sometimes participate’. These women reported a mixture of both active and inactive friends, and perceived the role of friends to be an important one in influencing their decision to participate in sport. Those who ‘always participate’ were part of social groups who also regularly participated in sport. This was considered to influence their ongoing high level of sports involvement
* the majority of young women who ‘sometimes’ participate in sport lived with at least some active family members, and there were reports of whole family involvement in sport. Although the role of the family was recognised as important in determining their participation, it was not deemed as influential as their peers. The majority of those who ‘always participate’ lived in ‘active’ households, where family members were sporting role models, and sport was often undertaken together. Family members encouraged each other to participate.

GfK’s research[[13]](#footnote-13) on lone parents with young dependant children found that the ‘always participants’ tended to have been brought up with sport and exercise as a main part of their lives. They looked upon the attributes of doing a regular form of activity as being beneficial to their own physical and mental health and well being as well as benefiting their children. They had a positive attitude towards physical activity, are very motivated to overcome the barriers they could face in participating and manage to incorporate sport and activity into their routine as a priority.

A study commissioned by Sport Scotland[[14]](#footnote-14) on ‘increasing demand for sport and physical activity by girls found that:

* enjoyment, the girls’ perceptions of their own competence in sport and the related issue of confidence in their ability to be physically active all related positively to participation in sport and physical activity. In addition, those girls who focused on improvement rather than beating others were more likely to take part in physical activity. Physical activity was consistently associated with more positive perceptions of one’s body attractiveness, overall physical self-worth and self-esteem.
* girls whose main motivation to participate was enjoyment, rather than to change their body image, were far less likely to feel self-conscious about taking part. Furthermore, girls were less self-conscious when their friends took part. Focus group interviews revealed that for those girls perceiving that they were ‘forced’ to participate, this impacted negatively on their overall participation in sport and physical activity.
* the mother’s participation in physical activity and the father’s more generic involvement and assistance were important in sustaining activity levels of adolescent girls. In addition, the physical activity of siblings was linked, possibly reflecting a familial ‘culture’ of support for sport.

Coalter in his review ‘Future sports or future challenges to sport?’ in ‘Driving up participation in Sport’[[15]](#footnote-15) concluded that: Many researchers now argue that, in order to encourage current non participants (especially young women), there is a need to place greater emphasis on task-orientation, intrinsic-orientation and encourage the development of perceived competence and self-efficacy. More generally, there is a perceived need to increase choice and lessen compulsion (one retrospective study has identified that the perception of choice in adolescence is an important factor underpinning adult participation).

**Life transitions - impacts on sports participation behaviours and levels of drop out**

Changes in stage of life such as leaving school, having children, children leaving home, retirement and losing a spouse were all identified as crucial points in the maintenance of physical activity. At each stage a shift in social network occurs along with a shift in identity. These stages are recognised in a number of studies as time where drop-out is most likely.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Transitions, within education or from education to employment, had a negative impact upon the level of sport participation for those who ‘sometimes participate’. Those who always participate recognise these hassles but made an effort to overcome them. Other life circumstances had a detrimental impact upon sport, including moving house and personal / relationship problems.[[17]](#footnote-17)

The Henley Centres’[[18]](#footnote-18) qualitative research on reasons for lapses in participation in sport concluded that:

* Overwhelmingly, the ultimate cues for lapsing come from macro shifts in participants’ lives: life-stage-driven lack of time and energy and the sense of having different priorities. Experience alone rarely cues lapsing – rather than being a proxy.
* Poor access and organisation do however accelerate lapsing. Lapsing is also self-perpetuating. Return to organised sport, particularly at past levels quickly feels unattainable without increments or a gear change.

**Sport as a lifetime habit – early experience and sustained involvement in sport**

The outcome of a literature review carried out by Bocarro et al in 2008[[19]](#footnote-19) concluded that it is not the volume of sporting activity which leads to adult participation but the number of different sports that young people experience.  In this regard they argue that the inclusive multiple sports orientation of intramural sports, which emphasises choice and not compulsion, is best suited to providing these experiences. The time spent in youth sport is identified as a crucial variable in explaining adult participation, with late adolescent years playing a crucial linking role between youth and adulthood. Similarly research in Belgium[[20]](#footnote-20) identified the time spent in youth sport as a crucial variable in explaining adult participation, with late adolescent years playing a crucial linking role between youth and adulthood.

However, research in Canada[[21]](#footnote-21) found that high school sport involvement, for competitive inter-school activities, is a comparatively strong predictor of adult sport involvement while, participation in intra-school activity was not a predictor, having little impact compared to no school sport involvement. The effects of high-school involvement were found to persist after controlling for correlated social background factors and the effects of school sport experiences applied across age and gender subgroups. Another study inCanada[[22]](#footnote-22) carried out in 2000 suggests the lessons from research point towards importance of such factors as the absence of competition, consistent involvement of the entire class and exposure to a wide variety of adapted activities with the potential to carry-over into later life.

Research carried out in Finland in 2006[[23]](#footnote-23) could not find any definitive explanations for why sports participation in youth correlates with physical activity in adulthood.  But their hypothesis is that regular, persistent physical activity and sport participation increases psychological, social and physical readiness for physical activity in later life as well as the probability of re-engaging in physical activity after a break (a concept similar to the one of ‘sporting capital’ discussed in the final section of this report). The key recommendation they make from their research is that all young people should be offered more opportunities to participate in some kind of competitive sport without screening on the basis of talent and ability.

**Driving up participation – what works….**

In their study of 15 to 19 year old young women the Trust for the Study of Adolescence[[24]](#footnote-24) asked young women what factors would be likely to increase their participation in sport and physical activity and identified the following as important potential motivators:

* Freeing up more of their spare time to do sport
* Getting support from friends and family
* Having sports clubs and classes for beginners or existing friendship groups, to reduce feelings of embarrassment and intimidation
* The provision of a wider choice of facilities, and better advertising of the existing facilities
* Making sport more fun, with less emphasis upon competition
* Making facilities cheaper
* Making facilities easier to access
* Motivating families to participate in sport
* Changing the image of sport
* Providing women only facilities
* Improving information and knowledge about physical activity and health.

They put forward some recommendations for interventions that would appeal to this demographic as follows:

* a programme could be trialled that encourages sports participation at a family level – this might be particularly effective for the ‘never’ and ‘sometimes’ groups
* a programme could be trialled to get families to be more supportive towards their children’s sports participation (even if they are infrequently participating in sports or physical activity themselves)
* a programme could be initiated to encourage sports participation among friendship groups. Again, increasing accessibility (cost and provision) and focusing on ‘fun’ rather than competition would be important
* the provision of free and reduced rate ‘taster’ sessions could be trialled more extensively, to improve young women’s accessibility to sporting facilities and opportunities
* promoting sports facilities to be more appealing and less complicated for young women. To improve clarity over costs, ‘membership’ issues, ‘on-the-spot’ access, etc.
* 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, and that it is not just for ‘sporty’ types
* run more sessions that focus on ‘fun’ sports and activities, that do not have a competitive element – the research suggests that this could attract the ‘nevers’ in particular
* the results suggest that it might be valuable to provide a greater number of women only sessions or facilities – this would particularly help those women who feel uncomfortable doing sport in mixed sex groups
* provide support to young women during key transitions in their lives where levels of sports participation may be affected e.g. during the transition from primary to secondary school, or leaving school for employment.

The evaluation of Sport England’s ‘Sport Unlimited Programme’[[25]](#footnote-25) (a programme of Sport England funded projects to encourage semi-sporty young people to engage, retain and sustain more sports participation) concluded that:

*The most important impact of Sport Unlimited …… was the higher participation in sport activities by semi-sporty young people. The gender balance in this impact was also a notable achievement.*

A variety of reasons were given for these successes, including:

* effective partnerships,
* comprehensive strategic planning,
* a wide range of activities, funding, and a student demand-led approach to provision.
* the importance of consultation in the design of any programme - not only with young people, to see what they want, but also with potential partners, to identify the degree of fit between different organisations and how sport can contribute to a variety of organisational objectives. The evaluators concluded that: “Only after consultation is completed can the design of a programme be genuinely demand led”

A national summit on young women’s participation in sport and physical activity held in Scotland in 2010[[26]](#footnote-26) concluded that:

* teenage girls are deeply concerned with how they look, so should be shown how physical activity can make them feel and look better;
* when girls feel watched in PE, physical activity is encumbered with negative associations;
* the importance a school places on sport is crucial - if girls are not asked to do PE in fourth year, they will not value physical activity as highly;
* girls are often uncomfortable with the PE environment rather than an activity itself;
* ownership is to set up a physical activity programme for failure.

The response was the design of a programme called ‘Fit for Girls’ developed jointly by SportScotland and the Youth Sports Trust. The programme grew out of a desire to put in place ideas stemming from a wealth of research and experience of issues influencing girls’ participation in sport and physical activity. The Fit for Girls initiative has been providing a national response to girls’ concerns since 2008, helping 91 per cent of Scottish secondary schools to produce three-year plans and giving them each £700. An interim evaluation report found that 69 per cent of teachers and 73 per cent of Active Schools staff who attended Fit for Girls training reported increased participation of girls in PE, sport and physical activity. Key aspects of the programme were:

* providing alternative classes for girls during core PE, like yoga or fitness training
* the importance of asking girls what stops them enjoying PE and asking them what they want from PE - “Without buy-in, you’re really just giving them information.”
* responding what the girls wanted including - better changing rooms; some single-sex PE, especially for swimming; a better choice of activities, with many turned off by the competitive nature of sport. “They tend to prefer the social aspects of physical activity - having fun and making friends,”
* providing opportunities for girls to enjoy the activity with friends with no judgment on skills and abilities, and where they can spend time refining the sport to the best of their ability

**Where do we go from here – ‘sporting capital’ a new theoretical model of sport participation determinants**

The evidence reviewed above suggests that the underlying factors that determine the likelihood of young people participating in sport can be classified into three domains: social, psychological and physiological. Young people’s position in relation to these domains may be seen in terms of the ‘sporting capital’ they have acquired. Sporting capital is a concept analogous to ‘human capital’ which is defined as ‘the stock of competencies, knowledge and personality attributes embodied in the ability to perform labour so as to produce economic value. It is the attributes gained by a worker through education and experience’. So ‘sporting capital’ may be thought of as ‘**the stock of physical, sociological and psychological attributes and competencies that support and motivate an individual to participate in sport and sustain that participation over time.**’

Sporting capital is acquired by education and experience. It is influence by prevailing socio-cultural norms set by the family, peers, teachers, coaches, leaders (influential others) the media, marketing and promotion and through consumption.

Positive scores against all three domains results in high levels of sporting capital. As demonstrated in the above review, the evidence suggests that significant aspects of sporting capital (such as physical competency and self-efficacy) are developed at a very young age, involve a socialisation process (with boys much more likely to build sporting capital than girls) and can depreciate (or less likely build) over time and with age. It is proposed that higher levels of sporting capital will predict both current and future participation probabilities. **Put another way, these domains not only determine the likelihood of current participation but will also impact on the probability that it will be sustained into later life.**

Profiling these factors is likely to provide a much better predictor of sustained participation than measuring current prevalence of behaviour alone. The model (see Figure 1) suggests a dynamic interaction between physiological, psychological and social factors, all of which play a significant role in determining current and likely future sports participation.

**Figure 1: theoretical model of ‘Sporting Capital’**



**Psychological factors** that contribute to prolonged participation in sport, throughout an individual’s life span include variables such as physical self worth/ self esteem (there is increasing recognition of the important role played by the individual’s perception of, and confidence in, his or her own skill) and perceived competence (self efficacy). Self-efficacy relates to an individual’s perception of her or his ability to achieve a task, to solve a problem and is usually rooted in practical experience. Self-esteem relates to an individual’s assessment of her or his own self-worth. Personal identity also features as an important construct in the psychological domain affecting self image, roles and social/group relationships (which connect with social factors below)

**Social factors** that can affect participation in sport include the effect of family participation and of friends (there is considerable evidence that parents (in particular) have a significant effect upon their child’s participation and development in sport). Someone with high levels of ‘sporting capital’ will have a wide network of family and friends who are themselves sporty and will be well connected to the ‘social locations’ in which sport takes place including for example sport clubs, gyms and community sport centres. Sports participation for these people is reinforced by who they know and interact with – it becomes a social norm that facilitates rather than works against sustained involvement.

**Physiological factors** that include physical strength, condition and ability (including fundamental aspects of physical literacy) and physical health. Ideally these attributes would be measured objectively – but may in practice have to be measured as ‘perceived attributes’ which then interact closely with psychological attributes.’

Operationalising the three domains with a set of question constructs will help us to explore the relationship between current participation levels and levels of sporting capital, how this varies for different demographic groups and changes over time. As a first stage we would be able to test the theory underpinning the design of the profile and the internal validity of the question design. The results will inform policy by identifying people’s readiness to change (distance from participating), their likely resilience to sustain participation and the domains in which public policy interventions are likely to make the biggest impact on participation by increasing sporting capital. For young people we will be able to explore how sporting capital is first developed and maintained, where significant influences come from and the extent to which it is maintained through external life transition threats. We will also be able to identify how the different domains interact and relate to each other and which are dominant.

Sport England has been conducting research on sporting capital amongst adults (16 plus). Copies of the questions that have been included in Sport England’s Active People Survey (household face-to-face sample) are available on request. These have been designed to measure sporting capital across the three domains. The research is exploratory – and will be looking at the extent to which levels of sporting capital can predict variations in participation behaviours consistent with the theory. If successful the questions may be adapted to be included in surveys of young people and as an evaluation tool to measure the impact of interventions.

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