

Facts about Girls and Sport

The WSF

Activity rates

Only 61 per cent of girls aged 2-15 are doing the recommended 1 hour of exercise seven times a week (boys= 70 per cent).

Activity rates for girls increase from age 2, to 70 per cent at age 9 and tended to decrease thereafter to 50 per cent at age 15. (For boys it rose to 71 per cent at age 8 and stayed around this rate).

For girls age 15, however, 50 per cent are not reaching the recommended level of exercise of one hour of moderate physical activity per day and 35 per cent are not achieving 30 minutes of activity a day.

Extra-curricular sports have done much to increase young people's participation in sport (see Table 1). Around 40 per cent of girls took part in extra-curricular sports in 2002. Boys still did more extra-curricular sports (44 per cent). Netball remains the most popular sport although increases have been seen particularly in football; athletics and rounders. Just 36 per cent of girls participated in some form of sport in 2002 as a member of a sports club (compared with 51 per cent of boys). As a result of girls being less likely to be a member of a sports club, they are significantly less likely to participate in a competition against other local clubs than boys. (15 per cent compared with 27 per cent of boys).

Girls' attitudes towards sport

Over half of girls' aged 11 to 16 would rather other things in their free time than sport or exercise. In answer to the statement 'when I leave school I want to carry on doing sport and exercise', 37 per cent of girls disagreed compared with 25 per cent of boys.

Health implications

Among girls aged 2-15 obesity is 18 per cent (from around 12 per cent in 1995). Among boys aged 2-15, the proportion who were obese was 19 per cent in 2004 (an increase from 11 per cent in 1995 and 2004). Around 12 per cent of girls aged 2-10 are obese (no significant change from 1995). Around 16 per cent of boys aged 2-10 are obese, (an increase from 10 per cent in 1995). Over a quarter (26 per cent) of girls aged 11-15 are obese (an increase from 15 per cent in 1995). Almost a quarter (24 per cent) of 11-15 year old boys are obese (an increase from 14 per cent in 1995).

General comments about culture and society

By the time they start school, children have learnt to distinguish between the type of behaviour that is expected and the type that is discouraged. Part of this distinction is the recognition that physically active play is appropriate for boys and

not girls and this is the basis on which school experiences of physical education build.

The family teaches roles and appropriate guidelines for behaviour. Although other social institutes such as school, peer group and the mass media, shape individual development. These institutes merely reinforced what has been initiated within the family. This is especially true when it comes to behaviour in sport'.

The role models who influence children's physical activity participation change over time. In early childhood, primary role models are parents, with friends and teachers becoming more significant as they enter school.

Boys and girls tend to attribute role models differently, with girls being more likely to name parents as models, while boys more often named public figures, such as sports stars. This difference may be due to the evident lack of female sporting role models available to girls.

Adolescent girls place greater emphasis on self-comparison and comments from adults than do adolescent boys, who rely more on competitive outcomes and ease of learning as their basis for personal judgement of physical competence. Adverse comments from coaches and teachers provide one of the main reasons for girls becoming discouraged from playing sport.

More boys than girls report that their mothers encourage them to be active or watch them do physical activity. Boys also report higher levels of support from their fathers than girls do. Those with parental support were more likely to participate in moderate and vigorous physical activity. Saying this, while encouragement comes from the family, young people are more likely to do activity with their friends and least likely to be active with their mother.

37 per cent of secondary girls don't play regular sport with a family member, compared to 26 per cent of boys the same age. Only 15 per cent of parents of secondary school girls regularly taking them to see live sporting events compared with 40 per cent who take their secondary school boys.

Research by the Institute of Youth Sport on behalf of the Youth Sports Trust, points out that 'girls are not the problem'. Girls' participation in physical education and sport is not limited by biological factors, the issue is to do with gender and how society defines behaviour. Too many discussions focus on girls and boys as if femininity and masculinity are stand alone rather than 'relational concepts'. Many girls enjoy sports and many boys lack self-esteem and dislike sports. Therefore it is the construction of gender that needs considering and efforts need to be concentrated on breaking stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity.