

Getting girls active: Reducing gender inequality in physical activity

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Most girls are less active than boys from childhood to adolescence. Creative and concerted efforts are needed to directly address this gender gap. Our research shows that peers, parents, active travel to school and after-school clubs hold promise to help girls become and stay active.

About the research

Girls are less active than boys at all ages. [English girls](#) are among some of the least active in the world, with only [16%](#) of girls meeting [UK physical activity guidelines](#) of 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous intensity activity each day. This means that most girls miss out on the important social and health benefits of regular physical activity. [Research](#) suggests that the changes girls experience during the transition from primary to secondary school (in perceived competence, friendship groups and peer support) may contribute to this decline.

A recent [review](#) suggests that previous attempts to help girls to be more active have had little effect and more novel approaches are needed. This evidence, alongside the Government's recent [Childhood Obesity Strategy](#), means that it is crucial that physical activity (in particular girls' activity) is [pushed up the policy agenda](#).

This report presents new research evidence from the University of Bristol's [Centre for Exercise, Nutrition & Health Sciences](#) that can be used to support work on a local and national level to ensure that girls can be and stay active throughout childhood and adolescence. The evidence supporting this policy briefing draws on projects that used quantitative cohort and intervention studies as well as qualitative interviews and focus groups.

How the evidence informs policy and practice

Physical activity programmes tend to be [more successful in boys](#) than girls at increasing activity. This trend is likely to continue if programmes are not designed with girls' preferences and needs in mind. Programmes should involve girls' views from the beginning and consider not only the types of activity promoted but also how messages around physical activity are communicated so that girls feel motivated, supported and confident to take up and sustain activities. Our evidence highlights multiple ways to more effectively target girls in physical activity programmes.

1. Peer power and girls' activity

Evidence: A child's friends can help to promote or discourage physical activity. [Our research](#) has shown that children report being part of friendship groups that have similar activity levels. Social networks have also been found to influence higher-intensity physical activity. Interventions like our current [PLAN-A study](#) have demonstrated that it is possible to successfully identify and train girls to informally promote physical activity among their peers. This approach may have more traction than more common adult-led health promotion.

Policy implications

- When planning physical activity provisions for adolescent girls, schools and health promoters should recognise the importance of peer-influence and identify girls who are "opinion leaders" (not necessarily sports leaders/athletes) who have the potential to informally support their peers and create new norms for physical activity amongst girls their age.
- Physical activity provisions/clubs could be accepting of girls enrolling in pairs or small peer-groups and/or use current members to encourage and support their friends to join.



2. Parents can help motivate their daughters

Evidence: [Mums and Dads](#) can provide important sources of support for their daughter's physical activity. We have found that logistic support (e.g., providing transport to and from physical activity provisions, helping with enrolment in new activities, watching and showing interest) and parents' own activity behaviours and being active with their daughter inspires their confidence to be active. Our [interviews with parents](#) have also shown that they identify with different ways of motivating their children to be active, depending on the gender of their child. For example, fathers reported more involvement in their children's active pursuits at weekends.

Policy implications

- Where possible, interventions should involve parents, for example by sending parent-focused materials home with advice on how to support their daughter's activity, and acknowledge that fathers and mothers can provide important (perhaps different) support for girls' physical activity.
- Practical guidance on ways that parents can support their daughters' motivation to be active is needed. It is important to help parents maximise the positive impact they can have during usual family life (e.g., who can provide support in the week and who at weekends).

'[...] I think it's so important to keep them [girls] active at that age. Because if they stop at that age then it sort of stops for a long, long time, you know, forever really, because it's harder for girls I think [...]

Parent of Year 8 girl

3. Active travel is a promising way to increase girls' activity

Evidence: [National policy](#) acknowledges that active travel should be promoted to increase physical activity in young people. Our research shows that girls are less likely to travel to school in active ways (walking, cycling or scooting) than boys, however, [active travel](#) to school makes a bigger contribution to girls' activity (35.6%) compared to boys (31.3%). In addition, for both girls and boys, changing from car travel to walking provided an extra [16%](#) of daily physical activity. Switching the way girls travel to school from passive to active travel could make an important difference to their activity levels. Compared to girls who passively travelled to school (by car, bus, train), girls who walked or cycled obtained six more minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (when measured by minute-by-minute activity trackers).

Policy implications

- Active travel should be endorsed as an important strategy to help reduce the age-related decline in physical activity in young people, especially girls.
- School travel plans should equally promote active travel in girls and boys and consider monitoring travel mode by gender.
- Schools should improve the walking and cycling environment for example by identifying safe routes that children can take, providing sufficient secure bike/scooter storage and embracing policies that support pupils to travel to school in active ways (e.g. Bikeability).

4. Active after-school clubs are promising but need to be designed to appeal to girls and boys

Evidence: The after-school period is endorsed in the obesity strategy as one of the most important times to promote physical activity. Our research shows that after-school clubs are an important setting to increase physical activity but current provision is largely focused on team sports which are often less appealing to girls. Feedback from those that deliver after-school activities suggests that they should focus less on direct competition and more on individual achievement to appeal to both boys and girls. In our [Action 3:30 study](#), we show that it is possible to provide after-school programmes that focus on skill development, fun and playing with friends.

'She doesn't like the competitive side of it [after school clubs] actually with the sports [...] So she won't do those.'

Parent of Year 4 girl

'I really don't play [football] because all the boys just pass to each other and not to the girls [...] They just play with each other. It's not really fun because all the girls just stand around, waiting for the ball come to them.'

Year 5 girl

Policy implications

- After-school clubs should be promoted to increase physical activity but provision should broaden beyond those that focus on single traditional sports.
- After-school provision should include a range of activities and delivery modes which support the enjoyment and competence of girls and boys.
- Schools should actively engage girls in identifying the types of active after-school clubs that they would like, especially girls who may not already be engaged in sports clubs.



Summary of findings

- It is possible to identify and train influential adolescent girls to become peer-supporters and encourage or promote a more active lifestyle among their friendship groups.
- By encouraging girls to sign up to new activities, showing support for their daughter's physical activity interests and providing transport to such activities, parents can nurture their daughter's confidence to be active.
- If schools and parents can support the switch from passive (car/bus) to active (walk/cycle) travel, girls can get a significant amount of their daily physical activity whilst commuting to and from school.
- The after-school period is a critical opportunity to encourage girls' physical activity, but to appeal to both boys and girls, such provisions should focus on enjoyment of a broader range of activities beyond traditional sports.

Further information

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Contact the researchers

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/research/centres/enhs/>

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/plan-a/>

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/action330/>

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