

# Attitudes to School Sport

- The majority of primary school pupils enjoy sport and take part in extracurricular and club activity.
- Pupils start to drop out from sport in Years 7 and 8 when they get to secondary school.
- Girls are less likely to take part in sport and around half of Year 10 girls say they don't enjoy sport at school at all.
- The culture of sport within the school can be a major enabler or a barrier to pupils' lifelong enjoyment and involvement in sport.
- Sport can fall by the wayside as studies and work become part of life and social habits and priorities change.

## Introduction

We know that there is a tendency for pupils to drop out of sport during secondary school. Sport Wales' surveys consistently show that participation in sport decreases as people get older.

The School Sport Survey 2011 <sup>(1)</sup> and supporting qualitative research <sup>(2)</sup> shows that while pupils have a positive experience of Physical Education (PE) and sport in primary school, enjoyment levels fall in secondary school, and girls in particular are likely to participate less and say that they don't enjoy school sport.

The situation is not unique to Wales. Recent research undertaken in England for the Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation <sup>(3)</sup> showed very similar findings, and similar studies worldwide demonstrate the same patterns of sports participation <sup>(4, 5)</sup>.

Education structures and the school setting have a clear role to play in encouraging participation in sport. This paper builds on the 'Quality Education' evidence paper <sup>(6)</sup> and presents key findings from research that help us understand and start to address attitudes to sport within the school environment.

## KEY FACTS FROM THE SCHOOL SPORT SURVEY 2011

The average school provides **115 minutes** of PE a week for primary pupils and **98 minutes** for secondary pupils

Pupils are fairly positive about PE lessons, especially in primary school. **73% of primary pupils say they enjoy PE 'a lot' and only 4% say they don't enjoy it 'at all'**. Enjoyment does decrease in secondary school: **50% enjoy it 'a lot', 36% 'a little' and 14% 'not at all'**.

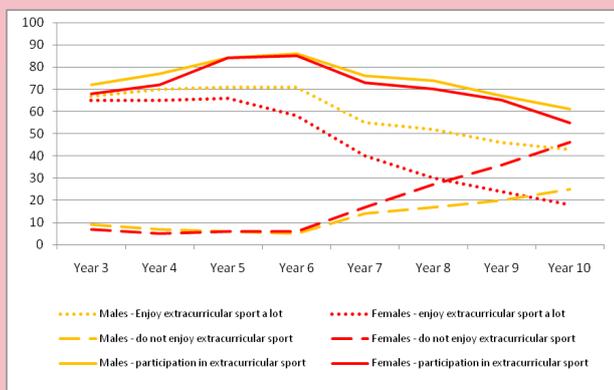
Pupils are less likely to enjoy extracurricular sport - i.e. sport done at school during lunchtimes or after school. **By year 10, 46% of girls and 25% of boys say they don't enjoy extracurricular sport 'at all'**

**84%** of secondary school staff report that more time is needed for curricular PE and **50%** agree more extracurricular provision is needed. The respective figures for primary staff are **44% and 46%**.

**71% of primary and 58% of secondary staff** agreed with the statement 'My school regards physical literacy to be as important as numeracy and literacy'.

## The current picture:

### Enjoyment and participation in extracurricular sport



Source: School Sport Survey 2011

Base: Pupils in years 3 to 10 (39,729)

Extracurricular sport = sport in school at lunchtime or after school

## Why do young people enjoy or dislike sport?

Sport Wales recently commissioned a qualitative research project with young people aged 14-21 to better understand their feelings about sport and what can be done to address the issues. Teachers and 5x60 <sup>(7)</sup> officers were also consulted. Ten focus groups took place across Wales plus eleven individual telephone interviews <sup>(2)</sup>. Two aspects of sport were commonly cited that had contrasting connotations depending on whether the individuals were sporty or non-sporty: **hard work**, and **competition**.

For those who considered themselves 'sporty', **hard work** was seen as a positive and linked to feeling of achievement and reward. For those who were non-sporty, this was a negative aspect and viewed as a chore.

Similarly, **competition** was seen by sporty people as an important and positive aspect of doing sport, and linked with achievement. Non-sporty people reported that they were less keen on competitive aspects of sport as it took the fun and social side of sport out of the experience. Competition can elicit negative behaviours in some individuals, which can put people off if they think that others are too aggressive and take things too seriously.

However, competition per se is not necessarily something that should be avoided, as competition offered at an appropriate level for the participant can be a motivational factor and can encourage sustained involvement in activities (2, 3, 8).

The sporty groups all used words like **“Fun, exciting and enjoyment”** to describe their perceptions of sport, whereas the non-sporty groups felt it was **“boring, dull and rubbish”**. The challenge will be to provide a school offer that extends its appeal to all pupils.

### **Sport and the school experience**

The School Sport Survey shows that the majority of primary school pupils have a positive experience of sport in school and this is reflected in participation rates. This message was reinforced in the focus group discussions, where participants in the groups recalled a strong onus on the fun and play aspects of sport. The primary school experience was perceived as being inclusive, regardless of ability.

Participants reported that their experience of PE and school sports clubs in secondary school had a strong influence on whether they continued taking part, with the early years at secondary school being a key point for some in terms of disengagement.

In many cases, the experiences that put young people off doing sport were the same regardless of gender. There were some specific issues reported by girls however. Non-sporty girls reported that sport was no longer fun due to the following reasons:

- having fewer sports available to them, so they became repetitive and boring;
- less of an emphasis on enjoyment and more on technical skills;
- competitiveness went against their preferences for enjoyment and sociability.

At secondary school, girls may not be able to continue with the football and rugby that they had played as mixed classes at primary school if there was no one to run a girls' club or class. Some reported they wanted to play less traditional sports because they were

more fun, but there wasn't always somewhere to do them. The non-sporty girls from the focus groups did note the opportunities provided through 5x60 for trying new things, and these were welcomed, although it was noted that there were sometimes limited opportunities to follow through the things they did enjoy due to lack of availability/accessibility.

### **The influence of PE teachers and PE lessons on young people**

Participants in the focus groups who had dropped out of sport or never really engaged said that the most influential factor on their decision had been their experience of PE. The issues that they described were:

- favouritism - they felt the teacher was only interested in those who were good at sport and did not encourage everyone to participate and enjoy. This was reflected in choosing teams for PE activities - either being in the 'good' team or the 'also-rans';
- feeling useless - if they weren't competent they felt 'better' classmates (and sometimes their teachers too) could make them feel useless and were not encouraged to do their best and find something they enjoyed;
- limited choice - few sports were available in the PE class so if the young person didn't enjoy the activity or excel then there wasn't an alternative (often driven by a lack of facilities or equipment);
- no fun - the PE class and teacher didn't focus on enjoying the sport or the physical exertion;
- tolerating excuses - PE teachers readily accepting 'excuse' notes so it was easy to get out of doing sport;
- inconsistency - some PE teachers were reported as bowing to pressure from young people to do classroom sessions in bad weather, so not instilling a positive attitude about sport and activity.

***“I either ended up in the team with the teacher's favourites, so I stuck out like a sore thumb because they were all so much better than me, or I was in the rubbish team and we never got anywhere. It was demoralising”***

*(Female pupil, non-sporty aged 14-16)*

In contrast, when the offer is right and young people had a good experience of PE teachers and classes, they said it had positively influenced their enjoyment of sport.

## Teachers' views and school culture

A long-standing concern around school sport has been the fact that there is a lack of time available within the school timetable for PE and sports activities. Teachers suggest that time is less of an issue in primary schools, but at secondary level, pupils in Key Stage 3 are allocated just under two hours a week and pupils at Key Stage 4 are allocated just over 70 minutes a week. Those schools with sixth form pupils provided them with around 35 minutes of PE a week.

There is scope within the existing PE curriculum to deliver a wide range of activities: health, fitness and well-being; competitive; creative and adventurous activities. However, this provision is also linked to staff capacity and expertise and is often led by the facilities that are available.

***“We have the four sections we have to cover on the curriculum to start with. The other things are the facilities and the staff expertise, that influence which activities we can offer”.*** (Secondary PE teacher, medium size school in the South Wales Valleys area)

***“It’s facilities-led really. We haven’t got good facilities at the school and we’ve only got an hour in some lessons so we can’t travel to off-site facilities either.”*** (Secondary PE teacher, large school in metropolitan Wales) (9)

The attitude of the head teacher and the extent to which the school leadership values sport can be a factor in whether good quality facilities and kit are available for PE, and whether PE teachers have the scope to shape the PE offer:

Also related to the culture of the school is the

***“I would love to take my class out to a local leisure centre to try new and different things, but there is no way I could get the Headteacher to sign off on it. If I can’t say how it is going to improve grades then there won’t be any money available”.*** (Secondary PE teacher)

willingness of staff to run or support after-school and lunchtime activities and clubs. Often there is no real incentive for teachers to do this and it is reliant on the good will of individuals. It is also reliant on those who have the relevant skills.

The School Sport Survey 2011 shows that the average school has one less staff member delivering extracurricular activity than in the 2008/09 academic year, which may well have an impact on the number

of pupils who are able to access provision, depending on the staff/pupil ratios for various activities.

***“We don’t have any outside help really. I’m not saying staff aren’t supportive but there’s nobody to run clubs outside of the department on the girls’ side. On the boys’ side, there is one other member of staff who helps with clubs and fixtures and things which is good.”*** (Secondary PE teacher)

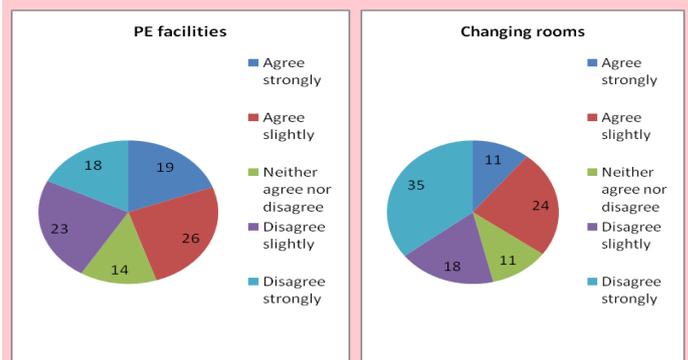
## Gender and attitudes to sport in school

The research shows that male and female pupils drop out from sport at the same milestones, but the drop out is more pronounced among females. Female pupils also tend to have more negative views about school sport compared with male pupils.

The move to secondary school represents a more extreme social change of habits for girls. The social and fun aspects are key motivating factors in pupils deciding whether to participate in an activity or not, and what the young people see as being socially acceptable within the school environment and the type of lifestyles that are adopted (8). Recently, Young Ambassadors told us about their experiences of trying to promote sport and their own experiences in school. As most boys will do sport and organise informal lunchtime sport, even those who are not so sporty will join in because their friends are doing it. The tendency is to join in with the majority, and for girls, the social norm is to pay attention to image, style, hair and make-up, and school facilities and logistics of fitting these things into a time-pressured school day do not tend to make this compatible with doing sport as well.

The quality of sports facilities and changing rooms can actively discourage young people from doing sport and the changing room issue was particularly important to girls (2, 3)

### % of Secondary PE teachers agreeing with the statement: “The facilities/changing rooms at my school are of high-quality”



Source: School Sport Survey 2011  
Base: Secondary Heads of PE (120)

It is possible that the level of resourcing for improving the PE and sport experience is related to the level of importance the school places on addressing these issues, and more generally, the prioritisation of providing appropriate funding nationally towards sport in schools. However, it can make a big difference.

***“When I first joined the school we had big problems with participation levels, and it was no wonder given the equipment that they had access to. We’ve invested over the past few years and it really has helped to turn participation rates round”***

***“We got new kit, and suddenly the kids wanted to play”.***

### Finding solutions

The above comments help illustrate the fact that school culture can be a major enabler or barrier to pupils’ continued enjoyment and participation in sport. Evidence shows (6) that if pupils don’t have a good experience of sport in school, then they are less likely to participate in community sport and it becomes an even harder task to get people to stay engaged or have the desire to return to sport when they have the opportunity.

In the recent qualitative work with young people, they were asked what and how we can address the issues they raised. Three simple ingredients or hooks would help young people stay involved in sport: **Provide variety, make it fun, and make it sociable**. The social aspects are particularly important to keep girls engaged, and simply building in time to talk and socialise within the design of the delivery of sport can make an activity far more appealing.

Discussions with teachers and 5x60 officers indicated that the business case for inclusive, fun school sports is not universally well-articulated or understood. Not all those who are in decision-making or influential roles appreciate the potential contributions PE and sport can make to a successful Estyn inspection and to the wider positive life of the school.

Schools that give PE and sport the same status as other subjects and help to ensure that their provision reflects the needs of pupils can have a positive influence on participation levels during school years and once pupils leave school. A school culture that takes account of the hooks above is likely to improve the participation and well-being of its pupils.

### Olympic legacy?

London 2012 has provided a golden opportunity to get more people involved in sport. The importance of schools and head teachers in making this happen in the longer term cannot be underestimated (10).

Inevitably, there is a need to increase the skills and capacity within the existing workforce to have an impact on what is currently offered, as well as looking to alternative opportunities such as pupils, young ambassadors and parents as leaders, in order to harness the opportunities arising from the Olympic legacy.

### Challenges

- School leadership that emphasise the benefits of PE and backs up its importance within the school by resourcing it appropriately should be encouraged. Research shows that this isn’t consistently happening and that a poor experience of school sport has an effect on community participation.
- Should PE lessons be streamed in the way other lessons are, to cater for different abilities appropriately? Young Ambassadors have suggested that this could help. Regardless of what is intended, feedback from young people shows they don’t feel sport at secondary school is inclusive or appropriately designed to cater for different pupils’ needs.
- Many of the issues described are not gender-specific, but the impact of these issues on female pupils is greater. A wealth of evidence demonstrates ways to improve participation among girls but the challenge is to action the messages highlighted consistently when planning for school sport, instead of seeing these as examples of good practice.

### Further reading and references

- 1) Sport Wales: School Sport Survey 2011
- 2) Brightpurpose (2012): Sports Participation Amongst 14-21 year olds: How do we encourage young people to stay involved in sport?
- 3) Women’s Sport and Fitness Foundation: Changing the Game for Girls
- 4) <http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/home/support-us/do-you-know-the-factors-influencing-girls-participation-in-sports>
- 5) [http://sirc.ca/sportcanada/54/additional\\_articles.cfm](http://sirc.ca/sportcanada/54/additional_articles.cfm)
- 6) Sport Wales 2012: Quality Education <http://www.sportwales.org.uk/community-sport/sporting-communities/community-strategy-evidence-base.aspx>
- 7) Sport Wales 5x60: A programme to help create the environment necessary for secondary pupils to take part in extra curricular sport and physical activity on a regular basis.
- 8) University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (2011): PhD Physical Activity, Extracurricular Sport and the ‘5x60’ Initiative: Leisure Lifestyles and Young People in Wales, 2007-2009
- 9) Beaufort Research (2010): Physical Education in Welsh Schools
- 10) Sport Wales (2012): London 2012 Shines Spotlight on the Future of Welsh Sport. Chair of Sport Wales, Laura McAllister <http://www.sportwales.org.uk/news--events/news--events/our-news/latest-news/london-2012-shines-spotlight-on-the-future-of-welsh-sport.aspx>