An activist approach to physical education for adolescent girls
David Kirk (University of Strathclyde & University of Queensland), Cara Lamb (University of Strathclyde), Shirley Gray (University of Edinburgh), Kimberly L Oliver (New Mexico State University)

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Introduction: ‘The problem’
Why are adolescent girls more likely than boys to disengage from school physical education, and to be less physically active as they become older (Oakley et al., 2017; Biddle et al., 2005)?

First identified as ‘a problem’ in the early 1990s (Scraton, 1992; Vertinsky, 1992), this situation has persisted despite many attempts throughout this 25 years period to find solutions (Kirk & Oliver, 2014). Disengagement from school physical education has detrimental but avoidable consequences, particularly for girls growing up in areas of multiple deprivation in Scotland. There is widespread consensus among physical educators in the UK and internationally that one reason for physical education’s place in the school curriculum is to facilitate and promote lifelong physical activity as a component of health and wellbeing (eg. Haerens et al., 2011; Perlman, 2015; Puhse & Gerber, 2005). Indeed, physical education offers the potential above other forms of interventions to promote physically active lives among the entire population (eg. Pate et al, 2006) since it is (in the UK at least) a required school subject up to the age of 16 and free at the point of delivery.

Evidence increasingly available shows that current and past forms of physical education have failed and are continuing to fail to achieve the goal of lifelong physical activity for significant proportions of young people, particularly those living in multiple-deprivation and, of those, particularly girls (Scottish Health Survey, 2016; Townsend et al., 2015). Even though the importance of physical activity is widely recognised in Public Health policies, physical education, paradoxically, is marginalised or ignored (eg. Scottish Executive, 2003). The lack of serious attention to school physical education in health policy is problematic. For example, we estimate¹ that physical education teachers’ salaries in Scotland alone cost taxpayers in excess of £80 million per year each year, a considerable investment for which there is arguably scant evidence of return. Moreover, where public health inspired interventions to improve girls’ participation in physical activity have been implemented, increasingly with comprehensive designs that include the whole school, community and families, little attention has been paid to pedagogy (the interacting and interdependent elements of curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment) (see eg. Camacho-Minano et al., 2011), teacher professional learning (Thorburn et al., 2011), and to the challenging task of creating genuine educational change in and through schools (Priestley, 2010).

¹ There are currently 3,600 specialist physical education teachers registered with the General Teaching Council of Scotland. We estimate that approximately 3,000 teach in schools. The average salary for an unpromoted teachers is £26,813 (https://www.adzuna.co.uk/jobs/salaries/scotland/physical-education-teacher). When we consider promoted posts such as Heads of Department, £80m is a conservative estimate of the recurrent annual salary bill.
Underpinning research - School physical education, physically active lives and girls

In a wide-ranging review of evidence, Bailey et al. (2009) recognised physical education has the potential to make an important contribution to all young people valuing and enjoying physically active lives. For example, Pate et al., (2006) and McKenzie et al., (2006) consider school physical education to be a key site for improving young people’s health-related knowledge and opportunities to experience Moderate to Vigorous Physical Activity (MVPA). Additionally, Morgan et al. (2013) argue that school programmes and qualified physical education teachers are essential for the development of proficiency in fundamental motor skills in children.

Young people’s perceptions of motor skill competence and motivation play a key part in their development of actual motor skill proficiency (Bardid et al., 2016), particularly for girls (Fairclough et al. 2012). Despite the potential to make these important contributions, Bailey et al. (2009) cautioned, “many of the educational benefits claimed for PESS (Physical Education and School Sport) are highly dependent on contextual and pedagogic variables, which leads us to question any simple equations of participation and beneficial outcomes for young people.” (Bailey et al., 2009, p.1)

As Vertinsky (1992) noted and many feminist authors have since confirmed (e.g. Stride & Flintoff, 2018; Flintoff & Scraton, 2006), individualistic explanations for girls’ disengagement from physical education has been an impediment to progress, and bear little scrutiny. There are many complex issues at work in shaping girls’ engagements. Recognising this complexity while taking practical action is the challenge that needs to be met (Oliver & Kirk, 2015). The situation of girls in physical education has been the topic of recent and timely research in Scotland, and confirms much of what is known about the situation of girls in other parts of the world, suggesting that these are issue of global relevance (Enright & O’Sullivan, 2010; Larsson et al., 2009; Oliver et al., 2009; Garrett, 2004). As elsewhere, various initiatives have been trialled in Scotland, such as ‘Girls on the Move’ and ‘Fit for Girls’. These initiatives have reported some successes. For example, in the latter case, Thorburn & Gray (2010) noted the initial positive influence of the inclusion of a wider range of non-competitive and non-traditional activities. Providing some choice of activity was well-received by girls (Mitchell, Gray & Inchley, 2015). In the case of the former, Taylor et al. (2013) reported some positive though mainly mixed results in terms of maintaining MVPA over and beyond the six months intervention. Consistent with international research (e.g. Kirk & Oliver, 2014 for a review), Niven et al. (2014) found a range of environmental factors identified by girls such as clothing, changing rooms, and the presence of boys as barriers to participation in physical education. Moreover, ‘sporty’ and ‘non-sporty’ identities among girls seem to remain current in Scottish schools, and act as a serious barrier to the inclusion and active engagement of all girls (Mitchell et al., 2015).

Towards a solution - An activist intervention in school physical education for adolescent girls

Inattention to pedagogy, teacher professional learning, and educational change has been a major oversight within health policy that our research seeks to remedy. We do so through the development of new school-based forms of physical education that take an ‘activist approach’ (Oliver & Kirk, 2015), specifically designed to optimise adolescent girls’ interest, enjoyment and motivation to lead a physically active life. The challenge is not, simply, to get girls more physically active in physical education lessons in terms of increasing moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA), though this is important (McKenzie & Lounsbery, 2009). It is also to facilitate girls learning to value and enjoy the physically active life, which involves them in a long-term and
sustained commitment to being physically active (Siedentop, 1996; Haerens et al., 2011; Oliver & Kirk, 2015).

The activist pedagogical model builds on over 20 years of activist work with girls and their teachers by Oliver (eg. Oliver & Lalik, 2004; Oliver et al., 2009) and, more recently, Enright & O’Sullivan (2010) and Fisette & Walton (2011). Bringing this work together, Oliver & Kirk (2015) outlined a prototype ‘pedagogical model’, which is a ‘design specification’ for developing school-based programmes, and which has three components. The first component is the main idea, which is that girls will learn to value and enjoy a physically active life. The second component is comprised of the four critical elements of the model:

- **student-centredness** (e.g. authorising student voice and disrupting teacher-student power relations)
- **pedagogies of embodiment** (e.g. the creation of safe, non-judgemental and trusting movement environments)
- **inquiry-based learning centred in action** (e.g. investigating ways to create spaces for students and teachers that improve learning opportunities for girls), and
- **listening to respond over time** (e.g. adults consistently and continuously responding to student voice).

The third component is learning aspirations, which are for girls to name barriers to their physical activity enjoyment and participation and to work with their teachers to critique, negotiate and if possible transform the barriers within their control in order to increase their opportunities, interest and motivation to be physically active.

**Results from a Pilot Study in Four Glasgow Schools – Kirk, Lamb, Oliver**

We tested the prototype model with five teachers in four secondary schools in Glasgow over a school year, from September 2015 to June 2016, and conducted a follow-up study in three of the schools in 2016-18 (C Lamb PhD, results yet to be published). Each of the teachers had at least 10 years of experience teaching physical education, and three held promoted posts as heads of their respective departments or Faculties. All of the teachers apart from Cara (who was also a member of the research team) chose their own pseudonyms, which are Jess, Kate, Laura and Liana. Three of the schools had between a third and a half of their pupils living in the most multiply deprived postcodes in Scotland as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, while one school had over 80% of its children living in deciles 1-40 postcodes. Two were denominational Catholic schools, one a girls-only school, and the other two were non-denominational and co-educational. The girls-only school had a multi-ethnic population and a high proportion of Muslim girls even though it was of Catholic denomination. The intervention classes varied in size, from 12 to 25 pupils, and were girls-only. Each teacher worked with one of their timetabled classes, which meant that one of the schools that had two teachers working there (Cara and another) had two different classes using the Activist intervention.

**Research design**

The study took the form of a 10 month-long intervention that had two phases. The first phase ran from September to December 2015 and was concerned with Building the Foundation (BfF) for an activist approach. The second phase ran from January to
June 2016 and involved the co-construction of a thematic unit of work in physical education.

The five teacher-participants attended three one-day workshops led by Kim, in September 2015, January 2016 and May 2016. The workshops were both training sessions for the teachers in using an activist approach and also, in the January and May workshops, opportunities for data generation. In January and May 2016, Kim and Cara also conducted focus group interviews with girls involved in the research study classes, two from each school, involving approximately six to eight girls in each group. Teachers chose the participants to represent a range of interests and competence in physical education. The focus group interviews were carried out in the schools, which allowed the researchers to become familiar with the physical sites for the activist intervention.

In addition, the teachers had an opportunity to contribute examples of what they were doing with their classes with each other through a closed social networking site as well as discuss issues and seek advice from all involved in the project. Some teachers, though not all, took this opportunity to share what they were doing and ask questions about how to deal with particular issues. Cara visited the schools around the half-way point of BiF and twice during the second phase between February and May, carrying out short interviews with each teacher in December 2015 and made notes of lessons she observed. Kim taught two sample lessons from BiF in the schools in September 2015. The January 2016 workshop involved collaboration between Kim and the teachers to develop a thematic unit the teachers would adapt, further develop and implement in phase two of the project.

Findings – Published work and conference presentation


Abstract

This paper explores the possibilities of using a pedagogical model for working with adolescent girls in physical education as a means of balancing the challenge of external prescription from outside the school with teacher and pupil agency. We report data from a study involving four schools in Glasgow. We note that the national curriculum for Scotland, Curriculum for Excellence, is a broad and bold type that provides teachers with ‘spaces for manoeuvre’ in order to shape local curricula that best meet the needs and interests of girls. This is particularly the case in physical education, which in the Basic General Education phase for 12-15 years olds there is no well-established assessment regime. We identify four spaces for manoeuvre for teachers and pupils within an activist model: new forms of communication based on authorising pupil voice; offering choices and opening up learning possibilities; the co-construction of a safe class environment; and opportunities to rethink traditional structures based on the multi-activity curriculum form. We conclude that an activist pedagogical model provided teachers and pupils with spaces to explore alternative practices to traditional forms of physical education.

**Abstract**

This paper reports on the responses from adolescent girls to the use of an activist approach (Oliver and Kirk, 2015) by their teachers over the course of one school year during their core physical education lessons. The study took place in four secondary schools in different areas of Glasgow city. Approximately 110 girls aged 13-14 participated in this study as part of their regular physical education classes. The themes arising from the data were: 1) through variety and choice the girls were opened up to a wider range of possibilities in physical education; 2) relationships between peers (pupil-pupil) and teachers-pupils were central to the girls’ engagement. We conclude that through the use of an activist approach, and in contrast to their experience of traditional, multi-activity physical education, girls responded positively to variety and choice as they co-constructed their physical education programme with their teachers, and the development of better relationships with their teacher and among themselves created a supportive learning environment.


**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper was to explore the experiences of school-based teacher professional learning (TPL) of five teachers in four schools in the city of Glasgow, Scotland, who were learning to use an activist approach to working with adolescent girls in physical education. This paper is part of a year-long pilot study that sought to scale up the use of a pedagogical model for working with girls based on an approach outlined by Oliver and Kirk (2015). In the next section of the paper we provide a brief outline of the key features of this approach, its overarching theme, critical elements and learning aspirations. We then describe the nature of study, the teachers, the sites and the methods we used. Finally, in the findings and discussion section, we present four dimensions of the teachers’ experiences of learning to use an activist approach, ranging from learning what works and what doesn’t, learning about people, learning from others, and learning about themselves. We argue that school-based TPL is a contextualised and multi-dimensional process that is deeply personal and challenging, not least because the activist approach required the teachers to push against the status quo of traditional forms of physical education into which they had already been successfully socialised and in which they had developed expertise and confidence.


*Four teachers from the Glasgow Pilot talk about their experiences of working on the project.*
**Other relevant publications**


**References**

Available on request
Executive summary

1. There is a bi-directional relationship between poor body image and lack of engagement in sport, meaning the two may be mutually reinforcing over time.

2. Weight bias is highly prevalent in our society and is a major barrier to young women, including those who are overweight, engaging in exercise.

3. Some young women can develop an unhealthy relationship with exercise, which can be related to an underlying eating disorder.

Submission

Body image in young women

4. Body image refers to all aspects of how we think, feel and act towards our physical bodies. Body dissatisfaction refers to a mismatch between how we think our bodies look and how we think our bodies ‘should’ look according to some internalised standard or ideal.

5. In ‘western’ societies, such as Scotland, the body ideal for women portrayed in mass media is one of a ‘thin-ideal’, in which thinness (i.e., low body fat) is valued. In recent years, there has been a rise in a ‘fit-ideal’ for women, in which leanness is valued (i.e. low body fat and high muscle mass).

Body image and exercise/sport

6. It is well established that poor body image is associated with lower levels of exercise in young women. The same is true for engagement in sports, with female athletes tending to report more positive body image than non-athletes.

7. One explanation for these group differences is that young women with body image concerns may choose not to participate in exercise/sports. There is some evidence supporting this position. Girls are more likely to report being teased whilst participating in sports than their male peers. Feeling self-conscious during sport is one reason why girls say they drop out of sports and this can include concern around specific aspects of body image, such as concern over breasts.

8. It is also clear that participating in regular, moderate-intensive exercise is associated with improvements in body image over time. Poor body image and low engagement in exercise may therefore be mutually reinforcing; young women may choose not to engage in exercise due to poor body image and may therefore also lose out on the body image boosting effects of participating in exercise.

References

Weight bias and exercise/sport

9. Weight bias involves negative attitudes and assumptions about individuals who are overweight or obese, such as viewing these individuals as lazy, dirty, and lacking in willpower.7

10. Underpinning causes of body weight are complex. Weight bias perpetuates a view that body weight is under individual control and is highly malleable (e.g., by engaging in exercise). However, it is well established that factors outside of an individual’s control, including genetics, social and environmental factors (e.g., food policy, inequality in food environments, and green space) have a large role to play in obesity.8

11. Women who are overweight are less likely to participate in exercise/sport, despite the physical and psychological health benefits associated with doing so.9 Experiencing weight stigma (e.g., weight-based teasing, comments from strangers) is associated with avoidance of exercise in women,10 and this effect is particularly strong for overweight women who have high levels of internalised weight bias.11

12. Interventions aiming to promote engagement in exercise/sport can easily perpetuate weight stigma by portraying larger bodies in a negative manner and implying that the primary reason for engaging in exercise should be weight loss. Doing so may inadvertently increase barriers to exercise.

Excessive exercise and disordered eating

13. Whilst most young women who exercise do so in a positive way, for some young women a very strong drive for exercise can be a problem. Excessive exercise is a symptom of some eating disorders, especially anorexia nervosa. Young women who struggle with excessive exercise will exercise even if it interferes with other valued activities (like seeing friends and family), will feel very anxious/guilty when not able to exercise, and will persist in exercising even when injured or ill.12

14. Interventions aimed at increasing exercise and participation in sports therefore need to be aware that whilst some young women may struggle with engaging in physical activity, others will be vulnerable to excessive exercise.

Dr Helen Sharpe, 12th February 2019

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The remit of the evidence session is to explore the relationship **young women** have with **sport and physical activity**, with particular regard to issues that might **prevent** participation.

Adapted from: **Female participation in tennis**
Julie Gordon (GBR), Judy Murray (GBR) and Emma Doyle (AUS)

**Introduction**

*It is widely accepted that as girls reach puberty, participation in sport rapidly declines* (e.g. Nader, Bradley, Houts, McRitchie, & O’Brien, 2008). *Since physical activity and sports participation are essential to health and wellbeing, increasing female participation in physical activity is perceived as a national and international priority* (Davies, Burns, Jewell, & McBride, 2011; World Health Organisation, 2006).

*This evidence aims to provide a brief review of the literature exploring the psychological factors attributed to successful interventions addressing this issue, and to highlight two initiatives that are taking place now to attract, engage and retain more females in tennis. The article will conclude by suggesting that evaluation of these initiatives within the context of transformational leadership theory could offer valuable insights not just for tennis but for sport in general.*
Terms of reference

1. To explore socio-economic, protected characteristics, intersectionality

2. To look at provision in schools and how that influences attitude

3. To look at societal pressures and external influences

In general, there is very little evidence on effective interventions into increasing female participation in sport per se (Priest, Armstrong, Doyle, & Waters, 2008). However, there exists evidence on the effectiveness of interventions to increase physical activity in girls that can be drawn upon in terms of highlighting the key psychological factors that should underpin an intervention aimed at increasing girls’ participation in sport. A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of interventions to increase physical activity among adolescent girls (Biddle, Braithwaite, & Pearson, 2014) found that more effective interventions were:

- theory based,
- performed in schools,
- were girls only and
- used multi component strategies.

“Multicomponent” strategies were defined as those that incorporated, for example, school plus community plus family and incorporated an element of social support (Biddle et al., 2014; Inchley, Mitchell, & Currie, 2012).

The “This Girl Can” campaign which has been developed by Sport England and designed to increase female participation in sport and physical activity has recently been evaluated in a report called Go Where Women Are (Sport England, 2015). This
document provides specific insight into the effectiveness of various initiatives to engage women and girls in sport and physical activity. It recommends that interventions should consider the need to:

- inspire confidence;
- use appropriate role models;
- and ensure adequate provision of social support through celebrating achievement regularly with sincerity (Reading et al., 2014).

In summary, several key factors emerge from the literature around girls and physical activity. They would seem to suggest that an effective intervention should:

- inspire confidence
- utilise a multicomponent strategy
- provide a supportive environment
- provide opportunities that are hyper-local
- be underpinned by theory
- be single sex
- incorporate the use of appropriate role models

4. To find and share examples of good practice

Two tennis coaches leading the way with transformational programmes to increase female participation in tennis are Judy Murray and Emma Doyle.

1. She Rallies - Judy Murray - Scotland
She Rallies is a current LTA initiative created and spearheaded by Judy Murray. The vision of She Rallies is to attract and retain more females in tennis in the UK by inspiring, building and empowering a bigger and stronger workforce to create more opportunities for girls and women in tennis. She Rallies was launched in February 2017 with a first of its kind female only tennis coaches conference. Judy and the LTA gathered a group of experts ranging from coaches and psychologists to journalists, physiologists and Paralympic athletes to create an inspirational vision of the future of female tennis. These female speakers served a dual role of inspiring the all-female audience as well as serving as role models to the audience and delivering the challenge to get out there and get more girls playing tennis and more women delivering tennis. At the heart of the programme is a network of part - time Ambassadors that have been appointed to train up a workforce of female activators across the UK. These ambassadors have been supported by a comprehensive training programme enabling them to deliver the four strands of the programme:

- Lil Miss Hits (for 5 - 8 year olds)
- Teen Girls Starter Tennis
- Girls Fun Days
- Girls Recreational Competition

2. Girl Power Camps - Emma Doyle - Australia

Working alongside Judy at the launch of the She Rallies programme was Australian High-Performance Coach, Emma Doyle. Emma and Judy met via the Girl Power Camps that Emma has developed in Australia and is rolling out not only on home soil but also in the USA and various locations across Europe. Emma has worked with the LTA and Judy educating coaches on how to coach female athletes more effectively, drawing on her
years of experience of working with female tennis players and coaches and the lessons she has learned from delivering Girl Power Camps.

At the heart of the Girl Power Camps are the principles of Engage - Empower - Develop which correlate with the behaviours of caring, motivating, teaching life lessons, and trusting identified by Newland and colleagues (2015) in a study of what sport coaches did well with female athletes. These principles are used to underpin the different types of activities to create a transformational experience for the girls. The camps begin with vision boards and activities aimed at tapping into the individual world of the girls and showing them that they are cared for. The activities progress to incorporate drills around motivating the group and building confidence and these are developed in different directions to show that tennis and sport in general are worthwhile activities not just to improve health and fitness but also to learn valuable life lessons. The challenge level of the activities and drills are matched by an appropriate level of support.

Further reading

Due to the multiple factors to be taken into consideration, it is postulated that Transformational Leadership Theory (TFL) may provide an appropriate framework for the evaluation of interventions to increase female participation in tennis. Originating from the domain of organizational psychology and the work of Bernard Bass, it has been conceptualised as a kind of leadership through which followers are inspired and empowered to achieve more than they thought they could because of the behaviours of the leader (Bass, 1990). In the sport psychology literature, transformational leadership has been demonstrated to be effective across a variety of sports and contexts (e.g. Callow, Smith,
Furthermore, utilising TFL theory to evaluate effective participation strategies and inform future interventions could be particularly relevant to females in sport. In a recent study exploring the nature of TFL behaviour exhibited by coaches in sport with female athletes, four themes emerged from the interviews that were associated with the occurrence of TFL behaviours: caring, motivating, teaching life lessons, and trusting (Newland, Newton, Podlog, Legg & Tanner, 2015). The authors aligned these with the original key conceptualisations of Transformational Leadership theory: idealised influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualised consideration (Bass, 1985). Caring was associated with individualised consideration. The athletes felt valued by knowing that the coach cared for them and this manifested itself in behaviours such as showing an interest in them as a person as well as a player. “Motivating” was related to inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation where the athletes felt motivated by their coach having high expectations of them both mentally and physically while teaching life lessons was linked to the TFL conceptualisation of idealised influence. Trust, and specifically bi-directional trust, was also linked to idealised influence (Newland et. al, 2015).

To take steps towards refining what transformational leadership is in sport and particularly to try and advance its relevance in an applied context, the Vision, Support and Challenge Model (VSC) has been developed (Arthur & Lynn, 2016). Originally developed in a military context (Hardy, Arthur, Jones, Shariff, Munnoch, Isaacs & Allsopp, 2010) it was conceptualised in relation to sport by Arthur, Hardy and Woodman (2012).
The model proposes that great coaches achieve optimal athlete outcomes by providing an inspirational vision and the appropriate balance of support and challenge to achieve that vision (Arthur et al., 2012, Arthur & Lynn, 2016). The model makes a distinction between what the coach does and the effect on the athlete of these behaviours and therefore has the potential to explain the process of transformation that occurs between coach and athlete.

It is hypothesised that the VSC model, underpinned as it is by transformational leadership theory, could provide the theoretical basis for an evaluation tool to measure the effectiveness of interventions to increase participation in sport.

**CONCLUSION**

There is currently very little research being done on testing and evaluating coaching interventions in youth sport that are underpinned by theory and are interpersonal focused (Turnnidge & Côté, 2016). Furthermore, there is very little research on testing and evaluating research-informed coach development programmes (Allan, Vierimaa, Gainforth, & Côté, 2017). It is possible that research into TFL theory as a framework for a coach intervention/development programme to increase girls’ participation could hold exciting possibilities not just for tennis but for other sports also.
The Empowered Woman Project – Mandy

22nd February – Witness at Scottish Parliament

I founded and started running my online community The Empowered Woman Project in March 2018. I now have over 10 thousand followers across three social media platforms and receive huge engagement daily from young women living across Scotland. I believe this puts me in a good position to give evidence on this topic so thank you again for having me along.

Below, I haven included some of the responses which have come directly from followers of the project when asked about the issues we are addressing in parliament.

Kat’s story.

I’d like to see support from teachers for inclusive mixed or female only teams. Kat says, “I was once told by a teacher to join the boys’ basketball team when I asked for a girls’ team. As a shy girl who was often bullied for my weight, not one of the ‘popular’ kids and when the boys’ team was full of ‘popular’ lads, I was never going to ask! She thinks it would be beneficial to take on board the idea that physical activity is for the mind and body health and NOT as a punishment to run the cross country or to wear a PE skirt / kit that isn’t comfortable or empowering. She also thinks changing rooms shouldn’t be open plan as this leads to body image issues.

Kerry’s story.

I was in a mixed PE class at school throughout my childhood and into my teens. I stopped engaging at age 13 when I developed breasts. I got very busty very quickly and every time I had to run, the boys would stop and jeer. The female teachers did nothing. When we started on the trampoline, that was it for me. The jeering got worse, the sexual comments would carry on for the rest of the day and I even had boys from other classes approaching me and harassing me. They would all talk about my breasts and I would feel so ashamed and embarrassed. I used to hold my t-shirt away from my body when I ran but that didn’t stop them. It was then that I started to ‘forget’ my gym kit or beg my parents to write me notes to get out of PE class. It was torture and I dreaded it.

Fiona’s story.

I always had bigger boobs so running was really embarrassing for me and it hurt so I would start running and then I’d get self-conscious about how I looked and would stop running.

Louise’s story.

Periods and being bullied due to not being fit / fast / good enough. I could swim for England and used to be super sporty but in High School, I was penalised so much by classmates because I had puppy fat or because I’d never done the sport before. Due to all of these factors, I slowly retracted from taking part in sports and now I’m a lard that does nothing, so it’s had a long-lasting effect on me. This does make me sad but the idea of being bullied for participating has had some seriously damaging effects. Being on holiday in summer was the first time I went swimming in 7 years purely because of the backlash I may face for not fitting the ‘sporty’ mould.
Frankie’s story.
There’s a bit of a lack of injury prevention and they focus less on fitness for young women. After major injury, it can be rather difficult to get back into the sport. ACL injuries in soccer are particularly common. Another barrier is that women’s sports are taken less seriously and therefore less support is provided in terms of funding, play time and encouragement to begin playing in the first place.

Danielle’s story.

1 – Confidence
I’m sure this will appear in the majority of your responses but there is a fundamental problem with confidence in the exercise industry. Not only is it apparent in the weights area of a gym but it is apparent everywhere; feeling scared to go for a run on your own in case you fall victim to crime, feeling too overweight to join a new class because you don’t fit the norms of the models in the exercise industry or even feeling uneducated on how to exercise with the contradictory messages out there from hardly-qualified PTs (aka social media influencers!!)

2 – Lack of awareness on activities
I recently moved back to my hometown and the first thing I did was join a gym. Yes, there were gym classes there, but I also wanted something more than just being stuck in the same studio constantly. About 4 months in I found a Zumba class and a year and 2 months in I found a netball team to join. I only found both due to word of mouth or knowing friends that went. I feel like there is no one ‘go-to’ place that advertises where women can exercise. We have ‘This Girl Can’ and ‘Move GB’ both which I follow on Social Media etc, but they don’t seem to do that much? If each region had a free listing page for classes, clubs etc. more women might participate.

3 – Time/Gender roles
This isn’t applicable to me but several the women I play netball with - or my sister who I go to Zumba with - their gender role plays a part in their exercise participation. They are mums and wives and are often expected to put the needs of others before their own. My sister’s husband (who is amazing and supportive!) plays football and for whatever reason that will always take priority over my sister coming to Zumba if there is a clash as someone needs to look after my niece. Same for my netball friends…women’s time is often invested more into the needs of others than themselves. I know you asked about ‘young’ women so just to clear it up, the women I’m referring to are all under 35 years.

Currently, I manage to squeeze my gym sessions in at 7am every day before work but I do worry that when me and my boyfriend decide to have children, my exercise regime will just go straight out the window for a number of years and I’m worried not only about the effect of that on my physical health but more importantly on my mental health.

4 – Price
I spend £75.00 exactly on exercise each month – that’s a £35 gym membership, then £5 a week on netball and £5 a week on Zumba. Add on travel costs, accessories and sportswear and you’re looking at about £100.00 a month. For women of my generation that is a LOT of money, especially in the current financial climate. If the government are worried about the cost of obesity to healthcare, then maybe they should try and get big corporations to lower their gym costs for under 35s to make sure people stay fit and healthy in their early 20s.
Jasmine’s story.

Depends on ages and what type of physical activities they consider taking part in. A common one is women with football. Also, the lack of young people and young ladies taking part in any types of activities has declined. Young people with low activity levels had fewer positive beliefs about the social values of physical activity. Some don’t do physical activity because of their ethnicity groups or culture reasons related to religions. However other young people will value the opportunities that physical activity can do which is maintaining their weight and toned figures.

Also young people not feeling competent enough to take part; negative reaction from peers over skill and choice of activities; feeling of inertia and conflicting interests; self-consciousness about bodies; parental constraints; sometimes relate to concerns about safety or cultural restrictions; time and facilities and dislike of highly structured activities or those organised by adults... many of these are problematic for young women and young people.

Shona’s story.

If it’s any help I’ll give a little of my perspective from school age, because I feel it’s so important and the younger girls can become more active the better... When I was a teenager, being forced to wear shorts as part of a “uniform” for school PE was a huge deterrent for me – I didn’t want to show my legs, so rather than being permitted to wear leggings or joggers as it wasn’t “school policy” I had to sit out of classes. I don’t know if schools nowadays allow leggings or the likes, but I’d say they should allow long sleeve tops & leggings etc instead of forcing girls who are still getting to know their bodies to wear a PE uniform that they’re uncomfortable in. Basically, I think it’s better for a teenage girl to participate in sport or activity in a pair of leggings rather than being forced to sit out for not wanting to wear shorts etc.

Naomi’s story.

I don’t know if this is part of the topic, but growing up, I was terrified of being made fun of for my weight and I knew that physical activity would maybe help me become healthier, but it also highlighted my insecurity. If I had to run a mile, I would be out of breath and people would comment on my lack of fitness.

When I got older, I became very aware of how my mindset was: work out to look better instead of work out to feel better. Once my mindset switched, I was able to feel comfortable participating in more physical activities because I was reminding myself that the body, I have is the one that’s gotten me this far, so there’s no reason to shame it. Instead I focused on how to make work outs fun and at the right pace for my body.
Girls and Young Women in Sport
Youth Scotland submission to Scottish Parliament and Young Women Lead Project
About Youth Scotland

Youth Scotland would like to thank the Scottish Parliament and Young Women’s Movement for the opportunity to contribute towards the Young Women Lead project. Youth Scotland is Scotland’s national charity supporting the delivery of community-based youth work. We believe that every young person has potential and high quality community-based youth work helps young people to realise their potential. We deliver a range of projects and services which support a network of nearly 1,300 youth groups running in diverse communities the length and breadth of Scotland. These groups work with over 61,000 young people aged 8 – 25 years old, with a roughly equal gender split (49% female / 51% male). Young people are supported by more than 8,000 passionate and committed youth workers, of whom over 5,000 are volunteers.

We deliver:

- High quality training and development programmes for youth workers
- Support to set-up youth groups
- Leadership programmes for young people
- National youth work projects for young people
- Nationally recognised accreditation for young people’s achievements through Hi5; Dynamic Youth; and Youth Achievement Awards (all individually levelled on Scotland’s Credit and Qualifications Framework accredited through the Scottish Qualifications Authority from levels 2 to 7)

Our relevant experience

The importance of physical activity to health is well established. Physically active people are less likely to suffer from a range of chronic conditions including: obesity, cardiovascular disease, cancer, osteoporosis and depression. Evidence now shows physical inactivity shortens life expectancy with an estimated to ‘2,500 Scots dying each year as a result, costing the NHS around £91m per year’ (Scottish Government, 2016).

However, 2016 Scottish Healthy Survey data shows too many young people are not meeting physical activity guidelines and there is a consistent gap between boys’ and girls’ activity levels. More worryingly, girls’ level of activity decreases with 81% of girls aged 5-7 meeting guidelines and only 49% by the age of 13-15. When activity in schools is excluded only 36% of girls are physically active in their community. Statistics also indicate that physical activity decreases further in areas of deprivation or in other disadvantaged groups.

Research investigating girls’ lower levels of physical activity participation has identified that many girls and young women dislike competitive sport and PE for various reasons including:
• Perceived lack of choice;
• Access to suitable facilities and equipment;
• Body image, sexuality and self-esteem issues;
• Fear about personal safety; and
• Cost

‘Girls on the Move’ (GOTM) was previously delivered across Scotland by Youth Scotland from 2005-2011 with funding from The Robertson Trust and NHS Health Scotland. It was developed to address some of the barriers to girls’ participation.

Stirling University evaluated GOTM and found the project successfully increased girls’ levels of physical activity, particularly those who were previously inactive while also developing girls’ leadership skills and experience to deliver physical activity to peers in their communities. During this time over 3,000 girls and young women participated in physical activity delivered in over 150 youth groups across Scotland with 62% of participants more active as a result. 89% of participants reported that they now enjoyed being physically active. 548 girls completed a leadership programme with 59% continuing to lead activities in their community after their course. Since 2011, Youth Scotland has continued to support girls’ physical activity participation on a smaller scale through other programmes and projects. We were also partners in the delivery of sportscotland’s Active Girls’ strategy.

**Learning about what works**

Learning from Girls on the Move has informed much of Youth Scotland’s work not only with girls but all young people. The following are examples of key learning on what works and what does not in relation to enabling girls and young women to take part in physical activity.

**Local community-based provision**

Key to the success of Girls on the Move and all of our work to target groups not engaged in physical activity has been supporting local community-based provision. Providing opportunities where young people are helps break down travel-associated barriers to taking part. Equally opportunities to take part outside of school-based provision has been found to make a big difference for some groups of young people.

For girls in particular, providing girls-only activities was one of the success factors of GOTM as this removed a number of barriers in relation to having boys taking part at the same time. This included issues around body-image, self-esteem and the sometimes dominating attitude of boys in sport and physical activity.

**Shared decision-making**
Adopting youth work approaches to tackle girls’ lack of involvement in sport and physical activity is a critical success factor. As is all too often the cases, girls are asked or expected to take part in a sport or sports that are offered to them, e.g. “We need to get more girls involved in football, rugby, etc.” Girls on the Move turned this on its head and asked girls what sports and activities they wanted to take part in and we provided small amounts of funding to enable youth groups to provide the equipment and spaces to deliver the activities the girls identified. As a result we funded many more projects delivering non-competitive activities which enabled participants to learn new skills alongside one another rather than against each other.

**Developing leadership skills**

The evaluation of Girls on the Move showed that youth leadership development has the power to make important contributions to the development of young people and youth development professionals should seek to provide meaningful leadership experiences for young people. Since the delivery of GOTM, we have embedded leadership development opportunities across all our projects as well as accrediting young people’s development. Youth Awards, such as Youth Scotland’s Dynamic Youth Award and Youth Achievement Awards provide a means to recognise and accredit young people’s achievements. These also demonstrate the range of skills and experience which young people develop while gaining leadership experience through sport, physical activity or other wider youth work activities.

**Developing role models and peer mentors**

For young people who have experienced disadvantages, having the opportunity to develop new skills and take part in experiences alongside and delivered by peers in their community is very empowering. In Girls on the Move, the leadership strand of the project was a powerful factor in increasing overall levels of physical activity participation. Exposing girls and young women to positive role models influenced activity behaviours and resulted in an increase in enthusiasm for and engagement in physical activity as well as an increase in those willing to take on leadership roles.

**Conclusion**

Much evidence shows there continues to be a range of barriers and inhibitors to girls and young women taking part in sport and physical activity. However, as our learning shows, there are a number of ways in which these barriers can be overcome and girls can be supported to participate and indeed, empowered through their participation in sport and physical activity. Youth Scotland welcomes the opportunity to participate in this project and the discussion on what more can be done to remove barriers to girls’ and young women’s participation in sport and physical activity.
Contact

For more information, please contact:

Mark McGeachie | Head of Partnerships & Sustainability
mark.mcgeachie@youthscotland.org.uk | 0131 554 2561

February 2019
Why Adolescent Girls Drop out of Sport and Physical Activity During School Years
Evidence supplied to Scottish Government Young Women’s Lead Committee by Danielle Gordon of The Chachi Power Project
14th Feb 2019

While I recognise there are many factors which could influence sports participation in adolescent girls of school age I have decided to focus my evidence on the factors related to body image as that is my specific area of interest.

This document is set up as follows:
1. Proof of young girls reducing sport activity
2. Reasons young girls should stay in sport
3. Body Image Factors which may be impacting Sports Participation
4. Suggestions to Tackle these factors
5. Interesting Links

1. Proof of young girls reducing sport activity

Literature highlights that physical activity (PA) participation drops with age (Knowles et al, 2011), and predominantly throughout the teenage years (Whitehead & Biddle, 2008; Casey et al, 2009; Evans, 2006). There is research to suggest that this decrease in PA through adolescence is particularly noticeable in girls (Coulter & Woods, 2011; Evans, 2006; Rich, 2004; Green, 2008).

Key ‘Always Puberty & Confidence Wave IV’ Study Findings
- By age 17, at the end of puberty, more than half of girls (51%) will have quit sports
- 7 out of 10 girls who quit sports during puberty felt they did not belong in sports
- Only 1/3 of girls feel that society encourages girls to play sports
- Three of the top benefits of staying in sports girls reported are increased confidence (62%), teamwork (64%) and leadership skills (54%)

Do You Know the Factors Influencing Girls’ Participation in Sports?
“By age 14, girls are dropping out of sports at two times the rate of boys”

Chachi Power Project Instagram Poll Results
Of 442 viewers, 73 voted yes, 25 voted no.
Did issue's relating to body image (body hair, puberty: period’s, breast size, lack of body confidence etc) play a part in you giving up (or reducing) playing sport at school? Thanks for answering, please & and if you want to tell me more then hit reply or dm me

---

Did a poll over on Twitter but the Twitter analytics are useless so thought I’d recreate here. Thanks for your help!

**VOTERS**

- jilkyoo
  - Jillian Charlotte • voted for yes
- sophiegarnet
  - SOPHIE • voted for no
- expectofelicitas
  - RJW • voted for yes
- charlottelizabethb
  -

Viewer lists aren't available after 24 hours.
Twitter Poll: 6 day poll, unknown viewers, 43 votes. 58% voted yes, 42% voted no

Did issue’s relating to body image (body hair, puberty: period’s, breast size, lack of body confidence etc) play a part in you giving up (or reducing) playing sport at school? Thanks for answering, please RT and if you want to tell me more then hit reply or dm me (dm’s are open)

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43 votes - 18 hours left

Girl Guides Attitude Survey 2016

25% of girls aged 7–10 have experienced someone saying mean things about their bodies

61% of girls aged 11–21 have experienced people criticising their bodies
39% of girls aged 7–10 have experienced people saying mean things to girls about their bodies at school

The fear that people will criticise their body stops girls from taking part in sport/exercise

Participation Figures:

11–16 years: 41%
17–21 years: 37%

2. Reasons young girls should stay in sport

There are a number of reasons in addition to well known physical health and mental health benefits for girls to continue in regular physical activity.

Alex Morgan, a member of the World Cup and Olympic champion U.S. women's soccer team and a spokesman for the #LikeAGirl campaign said: "Personally, playing sports helped me grow and build confidence while also learning the skills of teamwork, leadership and perseverance -- both on and off the field,"


- Sixty-one percent of female executives said sports contributed to their career success, according to a global study by Ernst & Young and espnW.
- Ninety-four percent of women in the C-suite played sports, 52% of them at the university level, the study found.
- Two out of three respondents in a previous survey done by EY and espnW said that a candidate’s background in sport would be a positive influence when making a hiring decision.
- Candidates with sport experience are thought to have a strong work ethic and to be determined team players. They have leadership skills that can’t be taught.


- “Girls active in sports during adolescence and young adulthood are 20% less likely to get breast cancer later in life.”

- High school female athletes have more positive body image than non-athletes

- More than three-quarters of working women feel that sports participation helps enhance their self-image

Simmons Fall 2015 NHCS Adult Study 12-Month (U.S. Consumer Data)
- In fact, a recent 2015 U.S. consumer data study, showed that women ages 18 to 24 are twice as likely to be confident if they play sports regularly, compared to those who do not play at all

### 3. Body Image Factors which may be Impacting Sports Participation

To make this evidence easy to digest I have outlined the body image factors below and, where possible, have given an insight into these factors, provided research or/and anonymous anecdotal evidence to support.

It’s very clear that all of the following points are related to worry around bullying/ retribution from peers and confidence levels relating to how the pupil is ‘viewed’ by her peers/ parents/ society.
1. Shame/ Embarrassment Around Periods, Puberty, Acne, Breast Growth, Body Hair (pubic, leg, underarm, facial): Embarrassment/ shame/ lack of understanding/ lack of knowledge of how to cope with these natural body changes as well as lack of awareness and understanding amongst parents/ teachers to promote provision of sports bras/ correct sportswear/ sanitary provision/ general understanding to provide comfort.

Anecdotal Evidence: “I think especially around the puberty stage, we forget now just how many bodily changes we went through. From growing hair in places we didn’t have it before, to getting periods and boobs and hips and acne. I for one just remember associating PE with a certain vulnerability in getting undressed in a room full of other girls so hell-bent on beauty standards and preening. I was terrified that something else about my changing body would be pointed out or commented upon, that DREAD that maybe you period’s gone and leaked and you’ve no spare pads and hockey starts in 15 minutes. Or someone will think you’re dirty because you’re developing acne on your back. Kids can be cruel and i think i was put off sports for sure because of my body.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Sports bras- not telling parents your child might need them as part of their PE kit can impact their ability to take part. Most parents haven’t even thought about it! Its a real thing. I used to be a primary school teacher and had three pupils who needed some sort of support. I suggested it to the headteacher and she said no, even though it was clear one was in pain. So I said “supportive” clothes but the parents didn’t get it”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Sports bra - I had massive boobs as a teenager, but my mum hadn't had good experiences with sports bras despite being sporty herself, so I didn't own a proper one til uni. That didn't help.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “As a teenager I HATED sports. I'm pretty dark haired which meant I had noticeably hairy legs and my mum didn't want me to start shaving too soon. I was humiliated every time I put on shorts for PE. Strangely enough as an adult I've found running, ran an ultra marathon and it's transformed my life. I wish I could tell the teenage me that hairy legs don’t mean shit compared to the soul enhancing experience running through the hills”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Pretty sure I gave up swimming for the school at full puberty. I just remember being so conscious of being half naked and comparing and feeling exposed and judged...I remember one of the PE teachers saying it’s such a shame but I was just like 'no thanks...””

Anecdotal Evidence: “I stopped ballet classes at age 13 because I became too self conscious about my body hair. I also hated gym class because of the same issue. I think for me stopping sport and physical exercise at age 12/13 was a reaction to feeling self conscious and unsupported in this. I felt like I was crap at it anyway so what was the point?”
Anecdotal Evidence: “I can tell you: I was SUPER active as a kid. I used to watch exercise videos for fun. Really loved being active. I was on the cheerleading team, etc. From 12 to 13, my boobs grew from a B to DD (at least) cup. All activity stopped. I started smoking, drinking, was depressed, overate, gained weight. Ruined body image. Had body dysmorphia, still do. Had a breast reduction at 21”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Not sure if this counts but remember before I discovered waxing and noticing my wee spiders legs poking out my swimsuit at school and feeling disgusting and wondering what on earth everyone else did about this problem!”

Anecdotal Evidence: “The teacher didn’t have a moment to give me in terms of consideration or respect. It was easier to skive, forge a note or claim to have my period. The teacher would note ‘p’ beside your name if you used that excuse, and would not accept it again for 4 weeks. So irregular periods weren’t accommodated. You get the idea.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Body hair! My, now 12 year old, got body hair at an early age and I’m an effort to empower her I let my own leg hair grow and have sported/rocked it for 4 years now. My daughter however, knows she SHOULD be empowered but can’t get there thanks to societal pressure - I’m getting to my point I swear! - she’s caught in this hard place where she doesn’t want to remove the hair cos she does understand she shouldn’t have to but she doesn’t want to ‘educate’ her peers. PE at school often requires shorts and so she regularly feigns illness to get out of it.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “I didn’t want to do sports due to periods and it being uncomfortable and that I didn’t know how to manage the catastrophic bleeds. We really should tell all girls what ways they can manage it better - it was shit.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Period poverty was an issue, sometimes when money was short I had sanitary towels home made from old bathtowels: not ideal. Generally feeling uncomfortable within own body, unpredictable menstruation - heavy periods, lack of privacy, not really having a language for all the inappropriate behaviour which I was exposed to and no family support at home.”

2. Skimpy, uncomfortable sport uniforms or inappropriate kit

Anecdotal Evidence: “Our gym outfits. They were so tight and didn’t leave anything to the imagination which was my own personal Hell. I used fashion like a shield (we didn’t wear uniforms). I still haven’t worn shorts since then.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Those blue gym pants were the WORST. Having to wear a uniform at all for sports was very inhibiting I found. I mean, I was also put off sport in a school where if you weren’t good at it, it wasn’t worth trying. It wasn’t for fun, it was very competitive. And by trying to conform us with uncomfortable, impractical and unflattering uniforms did the opposite of encourage us to “let go” and feel/be free.”
Anecdotal Evidence: “I don’t know if this is what you mean but we had to wear shorts for sports in school and as I was constantly called thunder thighs I avoided it like the plague. Still to this day hate wearing shorts.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “As soon as I read that, I thought back to high school when I wanted to join the volleyball team but they forced the girls to wear spandex shorts and so I refused to play (in hindsight, stupid choice but in the moment, I was super uncomfortable and didn’t want to be seen in them). I grew up playing soccer and basketball and know many kids in general, but girls specially, who were teased or uncomfortable if the uniforms didn’t fit.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “At school we were made to wear gym knickers but boys were allowed to wear shorts it was only when I was 16 that they brought in cycling shorts.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “I definitely struggled with this- even before I KNEW it was about body image I remember we were too poor to afford much so the only joggies I had were men’s and they were a weird shape on me and it made me feel really uncomfortable”

Anecdotal Evidence: “My big beautiful hips appeared when I was 12 and with them came thighs that were in proportion. Because they grew so fast I also had stretch marks on my hips and thighs, so overall my preteen self wasn’t too happy with how she looked. In PE lessons all the girls HAD to wear gym knickers which are pretty much as they sound - knickers made of slightly thicker material that only just covered your actual knickers. We were not allowed to wear shorts like the boys or tracksuit bottoms and I ... absolutely dreaded having to stand in front of other girls with my legs completely out, never mind the boys across the playground who could see and the AWFUL inevitable moment when I had to run around with my jiggly thighs for all to see. So I hated PE and therefore hated sport. I’m 29 and it’s only recently that I started doing exercise again”

3. **Low body confidence, embarrassment about bodies being exacerbated by being forced to change in Communal Change Rooms/ Shower in Communal Showers**

The report, which has been collated by the Commons’ Health Select Committee, labels “fear of judgement” as a key factor when it comes to why women’s fitness levels are below par.  
https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmhealth/845/845.pdf

Anecdotal Evidence: “The threat of the showers prevented girls from working hard in exercise so they wouldn’t need to shower with others. Eventually leading to them stopping doing exercise at all because of this reason.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “In year 7 they made us go through the communal showers on a point of principle, but after that it was assumed that no-one would want to so not enough time to do it. I never understood why so many girls in my class freaked out about getting changed on communal changing rooms and communal showers. If you didn’t, you were called a lesbian (which was a Bad Thing). There were (tiny) towels provided. Alternative
was to carry a soggy towel all day. I left the house at 7.15am and typically home between 6 and 7.30pm.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “My worst was hockey and cross country. I just didn’t like it and I wasn’t good at it. The fact that I was overweight didn’t help and being shouted at to do one more lap didn’t help. It didn’t motivate me, it chipped away at my self esteem. I didn’t feel motivated, I felt like a failure if I’m honest. Also being made fun of in the communal changing rooms because of being overweight also didn’t help and I know we were young but there was no encouragement between the girls, just name calling and competitiveness. I honestly believe I never got over my experience from school in term of sport and why I still don’t have a good relationship with it now!”

Anecdotal Evidence: “From my own perspective, I felt my body wasn’t as good as the other girls in my class. Too tall, too big, not fast enough. I hated changing in front of everyone, hated being sweaty for the next class and hated the teachers.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “I also think changing rooms as a teen are just HARD I’ve always had weird lumpy skin on my legs and I remember being asked if I had goosebumps (not in a mean way) a lot and being uncomfortable about my giant boobs and body hair and everything! Tbh i think my absolute main thing was changing rooms- they SUCK! I used to go get changed in the toilets”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Omg the changing rooms were the worst!! So many people at different stages of puberty and being the furthest behind was so embarrassing. Best thing that ever happened to me was getting a knee injury and getting signed off PE for 6 weeks. If I could have skipped in with that note I would have!”

Anecdotal Evidence: “So much! I actually loved sport but was always hiding away as couldn’t run! I thought it was cause of my size which when I look back is ridiculous as was small! I hate that I missed out on things because of the shame! And think to be honest now probably plays a part in why I don’t do as much sport as I might have done. I guess really lacked perspective as a kid/teen about my size and shape. Can imagine others must be/have been the same.”

From ‘An Investigation Into Factors Influencing Girls’ Participation In Physical Education and Physical Activity’ by Lynsey Walker. A Research Project Submitted to the Institute of Sport, Physical Education and Health Sciences, The University of Edinburgh, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Education in 2012

Research has identified body image and appearance to be influencing factors on girls’ participation. Evans (2006) emphasises the pressures young girls feel, having to evaluate others perceptions and judgements. Girls increased insecurities regarding their bodies appear to be prominent throughout adolescence, with growing attention being given to appearance. The open environment of PE can accentuate girls discomfort and self-doubt regarding their bodies. Performing new skills in unfamiliar surroundings can result in pupils feeling judged and scrutinised by their peers, which can lead to
avoidance of the subject. Whitehead and Biddle (2005) outline research to suggest although some people avoid PA due to self-presentational worries, for others “exercise may be prompted by self-presentational concerns such as the desire for a fit and lean physique (Whitehead and Biddle:248)”. It is therefore important that educators ensure the PE environment within school is secure, equal and encouraging for all girls to participate.

4. Peer Pressure, Bullying, Threat of Ruining Reputation

Anecdotal Evidence: “For me it was to fit in with the other girls, it was the done thing to hate sports and avoid PE. But that could have started because so many other girls had issues like you mention!”

Anecdotal Evidence: “It must be terrifying for girls now because everyone has smart phones and you can be recorded and ridiculed that way which is so much worse than when we were at school.”

5. Sexist gendered pressure on women to always be ‘small’, ‘feminine’, ‘cute’, ‘presentable’, ‘attractive’ (alternative was: masculine/ butch/ gay) not helped by lack of time to Shower/ Dress/ Beautify after Sporting Activities

In a national survey of 1,800 people sponsored by Always last year, 89% of girls 16 to 24 said there is pressure to conform to the way a girl is supposed to feel and act.

This pressure isn’t only from peers but is very much from parents/ family/ adults. A little girl to Nanette Burstein, who directed the #LikeAGirl video: “Oh, my mom didn't want me to play soccer ... It wasn't ladylike,'

From ‘An Investigation Into Factors Influencing Girls’ Participation In Physical Education and Physical Activity’ by Lynsey Walker:

“Traditionally, PE and sport have been linked to the idea of masculinity and have been reflected as predominantly male environments (Daniels, 2006; Rich, 2004; Valiga and Kumar, 2009). It is important to note that “gender is a dynamic and fluid category (Green, 2008:78)” in which all children will display masculine and feminine characteristics at different levels. International research highlights: “boys generally are more positive towards the subject than girls are, that boys like the teaching more than girls do, that boys are more physically active than girls are and that boys feel that they can show their ability more than girls feel (Larsson et al, 2009:3)”

Although progress has been made and these concepts have developed, the gender imbalance related to PE and PA still stands (Klomsten et al, 2005; Kirk, 2005). Through participating in PA children are provided with the opportunity to confirm or contest the stereotypical identities that are notable within sport. Research suggests that these stereotypes alone can impact on young females’ engagement in PE, as taking part may challenge and undermine girls’ feminine characteristics (Evans, 2006; Whitehead and
Biddle, 2008). Feminine behaviours are commonly proven through opposing to take part in PE, whereas masculinity can be demonstrated through displaying strength, competitiveness and determination in sport. Research gathered by Rich (2004:219) (which explores teachers’ opinions of females’ participation in PE) highlights that girls who enjoy sport are often categorised as “tomboys”. This negative labelling, along with heightened awareness of others’ judgements throughout adolescence is a reason to explain disengagement with the subject. Evans (2006) confirms this research, stating the feminine body can be seen as “inactive, passive and neat and therefore out of line with sports (Evans:551), again providing reason to explain girls’ resistance to PE. However, a study carried out by Whitehead and Biddle (2008) noted there were girls prepared to challenge these stereotypes, regardless of peer perceptions and felt it possible to be both feminine and active. International research by Hay and Macdonald (2010) confirmed these findings, providing evidence through interviews to suggest girls feel they can avoid negative labelling and judgements by enjoying both team games and aesthetic activities.

And in the article: How to keep girls in the game after puberty by CNN: “Another girl, a shot-put competitor, said she has been told that "You have to be girly. You have to like certain things."

Anecdotal Evidence: “I quit the football team in primary 7. I was the only girl and I was good. My mum made me get an awful haircut. Short and boyish and I was already a B cup. The boys used to tease me on the pitch, asking me if I was a boy or a girl. It distracted me in my game and I quit.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Not sure if this is relevant but we had sets in school PE, top middle and bottom. I was in the middle and never thought anything of it until someone once said to me ‘wow you’re the only big girl who’s not in the bottom set you must be good at the skills work!’ After this I was always so self conscious that I was the big girl in this set and used to beg to go in the bottom set to ‘fit in’ was so sad as I loved doing sport before but seemed to go off it after this”

Anecdotal Evidence: “When I was at school I loved joining in with sport...until they let us pick which class we "actually wanted" to do. It was presumed (wrongly) that the girls wanted to do dance and the boys wanted to play football (this was in third year). I did not see it the same way and elected to play football as I had been doing since primary school. I was allowed but it wasn’t without some resistance from certain teachers. They wanted to discourage me as they thought I’d get hurt ✔️ Weren’t saying that when I had a clash with the biggest boy on the pitch...guess who was left standing ✔️ I don’t know if there is this bias anymore but I’d hope there isn’t this gender biased discouragement present anymore. I was in high school 2004 ish to 2010 ish.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Also nobody wanted to shower and get their hair wet, because they couldn’t do it at school, so nobody wanted to get sweaty ergo few people tried.”
Anecdotal Evidence: “Sweatiness was the off-putting factor for me. Imagine being sweaty after sport?!? No one showered and you had like 5mins to get to maths class or whatever afterwards... only option not to be sweaty was not to work very hard.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “There’s still a large part of society that expects women and girls to look and be perfect and playing sports and being tough doesn’t fall into that category.”

6. Diet Culture/ Celebrity Culture and Social Media has impacted our idea of why we should ‘exercise’. Exercise is not seen as being good for your physical and mental health as it should be. Exercise is now mainly focussed on helping you alter the look/ shape of your body with a specific focus on weight loss (perpetuated by fatphobia/ diet culture) and increased muscle building (previously mainly targeted at men but now targeted at all genders and fuelled by capitalism via advertising and media). This has also turned exercise into a punishment for having a ‘bad/ incorrect’ body.

This ideology seems to have been transmitted by various media and then perpetuated and policed by peers (and teachers) in a school settings or via social media.

As a simple example:
Here is a screen grab on two different dates: 7th and 11th February 2019 on the ‘Fitness’ tab of the discover page on my Instagram account.

Please also remember that my account is Body Positive focussed. This would perhaps normally imply that the algorithm would show me content which would include weight neutral inclusive bodies and mental health focussed exercise and fitness posts as those are the types of accounts I already follow. Yet this is clearly not the case.

This is an excellent example of ‘fitness’ being solely focussed on how to achieve a body which falls within ‘idealised western beauty standards’: thin/ weight loss, toned, appropriately curvy, sexualised, white. If I am being shown these images with the curated feed I have, I wouldn’t be surprised if this message is even more amplified for the average young girl.
ecdotal Evidence: “If you have poor body image or have perhaps given up on your body then this may mean that you feel there is no point in doing exercise. Your body is a lost cause.”

7. The threat/ experience of sexualisation by male pupils and teachers


Anecdotal Evidence: “Boobs. I went from A cup to E cup over a summer and my already slim interest in sport completely disappeared. They made it uncomfortable and all comments and giggling etc from classmates and even some teachers made me stop participating altogether”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Some teachers had no boundaries around their role - one tried to get me to come home with him when his wife was away. Took me until I was in my thirties before I came back to exercise which I now love and make time for in my life. Now I see my niece age 13 loving exercise and I am so happy to see that. Glad that times have changed...I hope!!”
Anecdotal Evidence: “Perhaps as other women are saying on FB primary school was ok but secondary school was awful and for me that was a lot to do with male teachers. I'm 49 so I'm talking early 1981 - 1984. I was tall with large breasts (both facts still true). I was self conscious. I was a young carer (not a recognised role in those days). I experienced inappropriate touching - do you really need to stand right behind my touching my ass to get my tennis serve better, having to dance with male teacher do demo scottish country dancing in front of whole class, one male teacher making the girls do press ups while he stood over us staring down our tops.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “Yes!!! I would never ever ever do swimming in high school because I was so embarrassed about having to wear swimwear in front of boys in my year”

Anecdotal Evidence: “I went to a girls’ school, no stigma about what we wore or what activities we did. I wish we’d had more timetabled sport. We'd have learned our bodies were good for something else.”

8. Parents passing their own current negative body confidence issues to their children along with their memories of body confidence issues during PE when they were at school

Anecdotal Evidence: "so many people have a lot to say about body image and swimming in particular. It is one of the big reasons lots of children aren’t learning to swim as their Mums are too ashamed to go in a swimsuit in the pool.”

Anecdotal Evidence: “I used to do anything to get out of games at school because of communal showers and changing rooms - as an only child who inherited some ideas about what bodies should look like, from a mum who was always dieting, I hated it.”

4. SUGGESTIONS TO TACKLE THESE FACTORS

The following has come from my own understanding of the issues based on the evidence collected incl. various research, submitted visuals, anecdotal evidence as well as conclusions/results from the following evidence:


Evidence 2 (E2): Adolescent girls' perceptions of physical activity: A focus group study Whitehead & Biddle, 2008
Evidence 3 (E3): I spoke with Kieron McComb of St. Joseph’s Catholic and Anglican High School in Wrexham and since implementing certain practices at their school they have increased female participation in PE at GCSE level from 25% to 44%.

Evidence 4 (E4): Visuals from Mary Erskine’s School, Edinburgh

- **Ban Fat talk amongst students/ teachers**
- **Educate parents on being positive about their own and their child’s body**
  "While counterintuitive, compliments, especially the ones related to physical appearance like ‘you’re so cute; you’re adorable,’ were perceived as limiting and oppressive, making girls feel that the expectations on them were focused on their appearance and not on their abilities or what was inside."
- **Educate the parents on the importance of being positive about their own and their daughters participation in sport and encouraging parents to play sports with their daughters outside school**
  
  E1: Parents and Guardians were found to be the most influential group to impact on girls’ participation in PE and PA.
  
  E2: Recommendations to increase participation include encouraging parental support
  
  E3: Another suggestion and one we have undertaken, but can do more, is parental engagement. Again sharing the reasons PE and PA is important via a school gazette or twitter post. We have run events such as 5k fun run where parents and kids can run together. Small things like that can change parents attitudes which in turn will change pupils attitudes.

  "The best way to keep girls playing is to encourage them and let them know that they belong and have reasons to play that extend far beyond physical fitness," Alex Morgan, a member of the World Cup and Olympic champion U.S. women’s soccer team

- **Discussion with parents about proper school attire/ uniform requirements/ supportive clothing requirements for pupils. Perhaps providing monetary help to those who can't afford.**
- **Provide peer support**
  
  E2: Introducing peer mentoring schemes involving girls who enjoy and regularly participate in physical activity

- **Treat body hate/ body shaming as you would treat other forms of hate speech. Make it understood that it is not acceptable in school (and elsewhere)**

- **Encourage intuitive eating (anti-diet approach) in school and amongst the parents**

- **Encouraging an empowering/ anti-bullying culture amongst pupils of all genders and within gendered groups**

- **Imagery of positive campaigns/ role models/ sporting personalities/ messaging around the school to counteract expectations placed on girls**
  
  E4: Mary Erskine’s, Edinburgh, promote inclusivity in sports by using visuals of the ‘This Girl Can’ Campaign and Transgender policy posters in visible spaces in the school.
Discussion around positive diverse sporting role models in schools, perhaps even inviting sports people into the school/ school visits to sports institutions

Role Models: “Role models are crucial, experts say, because the more young girls see women playing sports and hearing about the benefits they receive from sports -- on and off the field -- the more they can see that sports can be good for them, too.”

“If young girls can see equal amounts of role models as boys see male role models in sport. Sending the message that sport is not just for men.”

The Strathclyde Sirens is a good example of a team that agree with role models and offer this option: http://sirensnetball.com/about-sirens/

- Provide individual changing rooms/ showers
- Remove the need to adhere to a specific uniform for sport or provide various options
- Single sex sporting activities
- Camraderie/ friendship groups encouraged to not be split up
  E1: This study provided evidence to suggest girls’ enjoy working in single sex, level differentiated classes with their friends.
  E2: providing activities for adolescent girls that are fun, informal in nature and involve participation with friends.
- Free period products easily available in all toilets and period positive workshops carried out with all students at various points throughout the school journey to re-solidify the knowledge.
- Ask the students for regular feedback about what the school is doing to tackle the issue/ involve them in the decision making process to do with PA participation
E1: It was also noted that increased pupil planning and choice within the curriculum would in turn increase engagement and motivation in PE.
E1: By providing increased pupil choice on the curriculum, and ensuring a secure, enjoyable and fair environment girls’ will be encouraged to participate in Physical Education and physical activity.
E3: Engaging with pupil voice: Setting out our expectations and more importantly explaining why we want things done that way and then asking pupils how we as a department could help them as pupils reach our expectations.

- **Provide a wide range of sporting activities to suit all interests including individualised options which can be done in groups vs only team sports (aerobics (individualised) vs. netball (team)). Make these choices available as extra-curricular rather than embedded in the curriculum**

E1: Results from this study found no preference with regards to the type of activity on offer, with badminton, hockey and dance receiving equal “first choice” votes
E1: In terms of Extra-Curricular, it was confirmed that offering a wide extra-curricular programme will in turn heighten pupil involvement.
E3: Changes in activities: Dance and gymnastics given more time, lifestyle activities promoted e.g. fitness, running club etc. Girls only extra curricular activities.

- **Education around and zero tolerance for sexism, gender and gay stereotyping to prevent activity in sport being seen as ‘unladylike/ gay/ butch’**

- **Praise should be positive and focussed on the ‘effort’ put in and personal improvement at the chosen sport rather than the level achieved/ team you were accepted for.**

E1: Girls’ engagement increases with positive feedback from teachers, and retrospectively decreases when a negative environment with negative feedback is evident
E3: Change in approach: Moving from performance based success criteria to a mastery based one. Less ‘ruling with an iron fist’ to absolute positivity in everything we did, within lessons, in the corridors, how pupils are greeted etc.
E1: Attention paid to sustained enjoyment throughout the activity

- **Confidence building/ resilience workshops outside PE**

- **More female staff/ Heads of PE departments being female**

E3: Change in personnel: New head of department and new female member of staff

- **Inclusivity no matter the situation/ circumstance**

E3: Sticking to standards consistently: Brought in a no excuse rule so even if pupils are ill or injured they get changed and take part in modified activities. This had a big backlash initially but we stuck to it and reiterated why we put this in place. Slowly attitudes have changed as more pupils are willing to ‘give things a go’.

5. **INTERESTING LINKS**

Girls Become Self Conscious And Stop Playing Sport As Young As Seven, Report Finds
[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/03/26/girls-stop-sport-age-seven-self-conscious_n_6945570.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/03/26/girls-stop-sport-age-seven-self-conscious_n_6945570.html)

This Girl Can
Women Are Running On Treadmills In Sheds Because They 'Fear Being Judged', Government Report Reveals
https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/03/25/women-not-working-out-fear-of-being-judged_n_6938448.html

Dove Sport
https://mic.com/articles/34125/60-of-girls-have-quit-a-sport-because-of-their-looks#.P2qczAxGv

Sarah Pavan Volleyballer
http://sarahpavan.com/body-image-girls-sports/

Choosing sport is not easy for women in a society obsessed with body image

How to keep girls in the game after puberty

Do You Know the Factors Influencing Girls' Participation in Sports?

Half of Girls Quit Sports By the End of Puberty*: New Always® #LikeAGirl Video Examines Cause – together with Olympic gold medalist Alex Morgan - Encourages Girls Everywhere to Keep Playing #LikeAGirl

How to teach girls to be confident #LikeAGirl

GTG FEATURED IN EY WOMEN ATHLETES & ESPNW STUDY
https://wearegameplan.com/blog/gtg-featured-in-ey-women-athletes-espnw-study/

Adolescent girls' perceptions of physical activity: A focus group study. Whitehead & Biddle, 2008
https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1356336X08090708

Be Real Campaign: Image Based Bullying: In Your Face Research

Attitudes to Diet and Health in Scotland 2015 Report
Reflections on Body Image, All Party Parliamentary Group on Body Image
https://www.edf.org.uk/parliamentary-report-on-reflections-on-body-image/