

# PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS AND TRENDS IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

To understand how children's physical activity has shifted over time, we examined weekly participation trends by school year group using Active Lives Children and Young People data from Sport England (2017-18 to 2024-25)<sup>1</sup>.

Across the period, participation in physical activity has remained high overall, but there is evidence of modest decline in most age groups since 2017. Among the youngest pupils (Years 1-2), weekly participation has fallen slightly from 97.1% to 96.2% (-0.9 percentage points), although levels have consistently remained above 95% throughout. For Years 3-4, participation has decreased by 1.3 percentage points overall (92.8% to 91.5%), following a peak in 2018-19 and a sustained dip from 2020-21 onwards. A similar pattern is evident in Years 5-6, where participation declined by 1.5 percentage points across the period, and in Years 7-8, which saw a 1.1 percentage point reduction overall, with the lowest levels recorded in 2022-23 before a recent recovery.

In contrast, Years 9-11 have remained comparatively stable over time, with a marginal overall increase of 0.3 percentage points (90.5% to 90.8%). While participation across all groups dipped around 2020-21, likely reflecting pandemic-related disruption, most year groups have since recovered to levels close to those seen at the start of the series, though generally not exceeding the 2018-19 peak.

The cohort which was in Years 9-11 during the 2020-21 academic year - aged 13-16 at the height of Covid-19 disruption - are now 18-21 years old and therefore represent the current university-aged population, including students in Years 1, 2 and 3 of undergraduate study (2025-26). Weekly participation among this group fell from 91.6% in 2019-20 to 89.5% in 2020-21, with recovery in subsequent years proving modest and relatively flat. These young people experienced disruption during late adolescence, including the cancellation of competitive sport, exam-year uncertainty, and prolonged social isolation at a stage when sporting identity and peer belonging are typically consolidating. Given that adolescence is already recognised in the literature as a key dropout period for sport, it is plausible that the pandemic intensified disengagement for some within this cohort.

Universities are therefore currently enrolling students whose mid-adolescent sporting experiences were interrupted, who may have lost access to structured team sport, and whose sport identities may not have fully developed in the usual way. Some may have shifted towards more informal or solitary forms of activity. If institutions are now observing lower engagement in competitive formats, increased demand for flexible or social participation, or shifts in motivational patterns, these trends are consistent with cohort effects linked to the Covid-related participation dip. Importantly, this cohort will remain within the higher education system until approximately 2028, meaning that any behavioural imprint from 2020-21 may

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<sup>1</sup> Sport England (2025) *Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, Academic Years 2017-18 to 2024-25*. Available via the Active Lives Online tool and annual survey reports.

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continue to shape university sport participation over the next two to three years before gradually diminishing as post-pandemic cohorts enter higher education.

To summarise, the Active Lives data trends shows that since 2017 weekly participation has remained high across all school year groups, but with small downward shifts in most primary and early secondary cohorts. Participation has declined slightly in Years 1-2 (-0.9pp), Years 3-4 (-1.3pp), Years 5-6 (-1.5pp), and Years 7-8 (-1.1pp), although the latter shows signs of recent recovery. In contrast, Years 9-11 have remained broadly stable over the period, recording a marginal overall increase of 0.3 percentage points. See Table 1 for the full breakdown of children’s weekly participation by school year.

Table 1: Weekly Participation by School Year

|            | Academic Year 17-18 | Academic Year 18-19 | Academic Year 19-20 | Academic Year 20-21 | Academic Year 21-22 | Academic Year 22-23 | Academic Year 23-24 | Academic Year 24-25 |
|------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Years 1-2  | 97.1%               | 97.5%               | 97.0%               | 97.7%               | 96.9%               | 95.7%               | 96.9%               | 96.2%               |
| Years 3-4  | 92.8%               | 95.9%               | 93.4%               | 91.4%               | 90.6%               | 91.1%               | 90.6%               | 91.5%               |
| Years 5-6  | 92.3%               | 95.1%               | 92.6%               | 90.8%               | 90.1%               | 90.7%               | 89.7%               | 90.8%               |
| Years 7-8  | 92.3%               | 95.0%               | 92.6%               | 90.4%               | 90.3%               | 89.5%               | 89.6%               | 91.2%               |
| Years 9-11 | 90.5%               | 91.8%               | 91.6%               | 89.5%               | 90.5%               | 90.6%               | 90.6%               | 90.8%               |

Source: Active Lives, Sport England

Sport England’s Active Lives Children and Young People Survey publish 95% confidence intervals alongside its participation estimates in the official data tables. A 95% confidence interval represents the range within which we can be confident the true population value lies, allowing for sampling variation. In practical terms, if the survey were repeated many times using the same methodology, 95% of the calculated intervals would contain the true underlying activity rate. Confidence intervals therefore allow us to assess whether observed changes over time are likely to reflect genuine population shifts or simply sampling fluctuation.

Using the reported percentages and achieved sample sizes, we calculated 95% confidence intervals for 2017-18 and 2023-24. For Years 1-2 (n = 5,240 in 2017; 6,528 in 2023), the interval narrowed from 96.6%-97.6% in 2017-18 to 96.4%-97.4% in 2023-24. Because these intervals overlap substantially, the small decline (-0.2 percentage points) is not statistically significant. Similarly, in Years 9-11 (n = 28,291 in 2017; 36,309 in 2023), the intervals overlap (90.1%-90.9% in 2017-18 and 90.3%-90.9% in 2023-24), indicating no statistically significant change over the period.

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In contrast, the confidence intervals for Years 3–4, Years 5–6 and Years 7–8 do not overlap between 2017–18 and 2023–24. For example, Years 3–4 declined from 92.8% (92.5%–93.1%) to 90.6% (90.2%–91.0%), and Years 7–8 fell from 92.3% (92.0%–92.6%) to 89.6% (89.3%–89.9%). Because these intervals are clearly separated, the declines in upper primary and early secondary phases are statistically significant at the 95% level. This means the reductions are unlikely to be due to sampling error alone and instead reflect genuine population-level change.

For completeness, the achieved sample sizes for 2024-25 were: Years 1–2 (7,142), Years 3–4 (18,787), Years 5–6 (24,365), Years 7–8 (39,105), and Years 9–11 (41,049). These larger sample sizes - particularly in secondary years - reduce the margin of error and therefore increase the precision of estimates in the most recent year.

Overall, the confidence interval analysis supports the substantive interpretation: statistically significant declines have occurred in Years 3-4, 5-6 and 7-8 since 2017, while participation in Years 1-2 and Years 9-11 has remained statistically stable.

The next section focuses specifically on participation in team sports. Team-based activities represent a distinct and important component of children’s sporting engagement, often shaped by school provision, club structures and competitive opportunities. Examining trends in weekly team sport participation by school year group provides further insight into how structured sporting involvement has evolved over time.

Weekly team sport participation peaked in 2018-19 across all year groups, fell notably in 2020-21, and has since recovered to near pre-pandemic levels by 2024-25. Older primary pupils (Years 3-6) consistently show the highest participation, while Years 1-2 remain the lowest throughout the period. See Table 2 for the full breakdown of children’s weekly participation in team sports by school year.

Table 2: Percentage of Active participants by School Year

|            | Academic Year 17-18 | Academic Year 18-19 | Academic Year 19-20 | Academic Year 20-21 | Academic Year 21-22 | Academic Year 22-23 | Academic Year 23-24 | Academic Year 24-25 |
|------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Years 1-2  | 48.9%               | 52.0%               | 45.7%               | 51.8%               | 52.0%               | 50.9%               | 53.0%               | 53.2%               |
| Years 3-4  | 37.9%               | 43.2%               | 37.5%               | 37.7%               | 38.7%               | 40.4%               | 41.1%               | 41.7%               |
| Years 5-6  | 44.7%               | 48.5%               | 45.4%               | 46.9%               | 47.7%               | 47.2%               | 46.5%               | 48.8%               |
| Years 7-8  | 47.8%               | 50.8%               | 50.8%               | 46.7%               | 51.0%               | 49.1%               | 50.0%               | 52.9%               |
| Years 9-11 | 38.8%               | 41.4%               | 45.3%               | 41.3%               | 47.1%               | 47.4%               | 48.2%               | 48.9%               |

Source: Active Lives, Sport England

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Table 3: Weekly Participation in Team Sports by School Year

|            | Academic Year 17-18 | Academic Year 18-19 | Academic Year 19-20 | Academic Year 20-21 | Academic Year 21-22 | Academic Year 22-23 | Academic Year 23-24 | Academic Year 24-25 |
|------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Years 1-2  | 37.3%               | 42.4%               | 33.6%               | 29.3%               | 39.3%               | 38.8%               | 40.1%               | 41.0                |
| Years 3-4  | 60.1%               | 65.9%               | 56.6%               | 55.0%               | 61.3%               | 62.0%               | 62.4%               | 63.4%               |
| Years 5-6  | 65.4%               | 69.9%               | 63.9%               | 61.2%               | 66.8%               | 67.5%               | 66.2%               | 67.4%               |
| Years 7-8  | 65.4%               | 70.1%               | 59.4%               | 55.6%               | 64.2%               | 63.0%               | 62.1%               | 64.1%               |
| Years 9-11 | 55.6%               | 58.0%               | 51.9%               | 45.9%               | 56.2%               | 57.2%               | 54.3%               | 54.3%               |

Source: Active Lives, Sport England

To situate these trends within a wider evidence base, the following section draws on academic literature and recent findings from the Youth Sport Trust to explore how participation patterns, particularly during adolescence, are understood and interpreted in broader research and policy contexts.

Recent evidence from the Youth Sport Trust's *PE and School Sport Annual Report 2025* shows that physical activity levels among young people remain a concern, particularly during adolescence. Only 47.8% of children and young people in England meet the recommended 60 minutes of daily activity, while 2.2 million do less than 30 minutes per day, and levels have stagnated in recent years. Participation declines noticeably in the teenage years, with just 36% taking part in sport at school outside Physical Education (PE) more than three days a week. Although attitudes toward sport are positive -- 73% say sport is important in their life (up from 68% in 2020) and 91% understand its benefits -- many teenagers report lower confidence, greater self-consciousness, and body image concerns. At the same time, 64% say they want to be more active, and sport is associated with feeling happier (43%), improved confidence (39%), social skills (37%) and resilience (18%). Team sports appear particularly protective against loneliness, especially for disadvantaged young people, and higher enjoyment of PE is linked with stronger school belonging and lower loneliness.

Schools play a significant role in shaping teenage activity, yet provision pressures are evident. Nationally, 45,000 fewer PE hours were taught in 2024/25 compared with 2011/12, PE teacher numbers are down 7%, and 17% of pupils report having PE lessons cancelled this year. This disproportionately affects adolescents who rely on school for access

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to facilities and sport. Demand remains high, however, with 71% of teenagers wanting more opportunities to be active at school, and 29% saying they would be more active if school uniforms were more flexible. These findings underline that structural factors within schools significantly shape participation during the teenage years.

Beyond participation alone, school-based physical activity carries substantial wellbeing and economic value. Youth Sport Trust and State of Life (2024) estimate that free physical activity in schools generates £4.5–£9 billion annually in wellbeing benefits, based on improvements in life satisfaction. Just 30 minutes of daily activity is associated with meaningful gains in happiness among 7–16-year-olds, translating to an estimated £1,100 per year in wellbeing value for younger children and £1,900 for older children using government valuation methods. These figures strengthen the case for protecting and prioritising PE and school sport within policy. High levels of support from students and teachers suggest a favourable environment for reform, including safeguarding PE curriculum time, reducing lesson cancellations, and positioning sport as part of a whole-school wellbeing strategy that can support attendance, engagement, and overall student development.

Looking beyond the UK, Booth (2015) provides a wide-ranging international review of physical activity trends among children and adolescents aged 5–18 years. This review shows that fewer than half meet the WHO recommendation of 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day, with lower rates among girls and older adolescents. While organised sport participation has increased or remained stable in many countries - for example, long-term rises in Belgium, Iceland and Australia - this has not translated into sufficient overall activity. Gender and socioeconomic inequalities persist, with boys and higher socio-economic social groups more likely to participate. PE trends are mixed, with some countries reducing frequency and girls often experiencing larger declines. The most consistent global change is a sharp fall in active transport to school, such as walking and cycling (e.g., large declines reported in the USA, Australia and Canada), driven by structural factors like longer travel distances, car use, and safety concerns. The review also notes declines in active play during school breaks. Overall, the evidence suggests that although organised sport remains relatively stable, losses in incidental and everyday activity mean young people rely more on structured opportunities, making them vulnerable to participation drop-off during key life and education transitions.

Significant participation gaps are projected to widen further and specific groups are expected to face higher decreases in physical activity participation: only 40% of girls, 37% of Black and Asian children, 38% of those from low-affluence households, and 28% of children with SEND or disabilities will hit recommended activity levels. Regional divides will persist, with the Northeast and Northwest continuing to report the lowest rates - up to 10 percentage points below London and the South.

## SPORT DROPOUT IN ADOLESCENCE

Sport dropout during adolescence is a well-documented pattern, with many young people reducing or stopping participation as they move through their teenage years and face increasing academic, social, and performance-related pressures.

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Bae's (2020) cross-sectional study shows that sport dropout rises markedly in late adolescence, as participation that is relatively high in childhood declines under growing academic, social and performance pressures. Evidence shows that psychological factors are the strongest predictors of persistence: enjoyment, satisfaction, life satisfaction and perceived competence consistently protect against dropout, while exhaustion, low energy and negative self-perceptions increase risk. The *quality* of motivation is more important than the amount - intrinsic and autonomous motivation support continued involvement, whereas amotivation and externally driven participation predict disengagement, in line with Self-Determination Theory. Low confidence and repeated feelings of not being "good enough" further accelerate dropout, while loss of fun (often linked to performance pressure) is one of the most reported reasons for quitting.

Social and environmental factors also shape retention. Autonomy-supportive coaching and task-focused climates (emphasising learning and improvement) are associated with stronger commitment and lower dropout, whereas controlling or ego-focused environments have the opposite effect. Positive peer relationships and a sense of belonging encourage persistence, while disconnection from teammates increases withdrawal, especially in team sports. Parental support remains helpful but becomes less influential with age. Finally, structural barriers such as high time demands, injury risk and financial cost raise dropout rates, particularly for adolescents from less advantaged backgrounds, showing that disengagement often reflects unequal conditions rather than lack of interest. These patterns align with findings from systematic reviews (e.g., Crane & Temple, 2015) which consistently identify fun, belonging, and confidence as central to retention, indicating that dropout reflects psychological and social environments as much as individual choice.

Vojvodić et al. (2020), surveying 116 young people who had previously participated in sport, found that the most prominent reason for quitting was loss of motivation, reported by 79.3% of respondents. This suggests that psychological disengagement is a stronger driver of dropout than lack of ability. Injuries and physical strain were also common reasons, pointing to overexertion and burnout. Social environments mattered: negative peer dynamics, loss of sport friendships and pressure from parents or coaches reduced enjoyment and encouraged withdrawal. Notably, perceived lack of talent was the least influential factor, indicating that most young people do not leave because they feel incapable, but because participation becomes unenjoyable or unsustainable. The study also showed that young people initially join sport mainly for health (95.7%), good physical condition (95.7%), and social interaction (93.1%), rather than career or financial motives, so dropout often occurs when these expected benefits are outweighed by pressure, injury or time demands.

In demographic terms, no significant gender differences were found in reasons for quitting, implying that dropout is largely structural and motivational rather than gender-specific in this sample. However, differences emerged by educational stage, with greater dropout linked to rising academic demands during transitions, and by smoking status and place of residence, suggesting clustering with other lifestyle factors and access constraints. Overall, this study finds that greater dropout was linked to academic transitions, lifestyle factors and access constraints, reinforcing that disengagement is shaped by context as much as by individual choice.

Prospective evidence strengthens this picture. In a systematic review of prospective studies, Back et al. (2022) found that the largest and most consistent predictors of drop-out

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were low enjoyment, low intrinsic motivation, poor perceived competence, and negative or performance-focused sport climates. Demographic factors such as sex and age were weaker and less consistent predictors, and because the review included prospective designs, it showed that poor motivational experiences tend to precede drop-out rather than follow it. Protective factors for retention were high enjoyment, autonomy-supportive coaching, and development-focused environments, indicating that adolescents leave when sport no longer meets basic psychological needs, not because they simply “grow out” of it.

Extending this, Back (2025) conceptualises drop-out as a gradual process of “losing fun” rather than a single decision. Through qualitative and longitudinal work, the thesis shows that adolescents continually re-evaluate participation as demands increase. When training loads, performance expectations, or time pressures rise without matching support, sport becomes emotionally draining and less meaningful. “Fun” is defined not as playfulness alone, but as a combination of effort, progress, supportive team dynamics, belonging, and autonomy. Drop-out occurs when negative emotions outweigh positive experiences. Together, these papers indicate that adolescent sport disengagement is a rational response to environments that fail to sustain enjoyment, meaning, and support, highlighting that retention depends less on who young people are and more on how sport settings are structured and experienced.

Witt’s (2018) review reinforces how central enjoyment is. Around 38% of girls and 39% of boys report lack of fun as their main reason for leaving sport. Fun declines when sport is characterised by rigid rules, inflexible training and over-emphasis on performance and winning. Young people who feel “not good enough” often experience anxiety, self-doubt and fear of mistakes, which can erode confidence and even spill over into other areas of life. Importantly, Witt also notes that about one-third of young people who drop out later re-enter sport, often in different forms. This shows that disengagement is not permanent and that re-engagement is possible when environments become more supportive.

Population data confirm that these patterns reflect real dropout rather than simple changes in reporting. Eime (2019) shows that while 45 to 46% of children aged 5 to 14 participate in sport, this falls to around 23% by ages 15 to 19 and continues to decline into early adulthood. Playing multiple sports explains only a small part of this drop; most of the decline comes from young people stopping altogether. Boys participate at higher rates and sample more sports, while girls drop out earlier and more sharply. Participation is also higher in non-metropolitan areas, with steeper declines in cities. Continued involvement is linked to early skill development and feelings of competence, leading the authors to argue that policy focuses too much on recruitment and not enough on retention.

Adolescents’ own perspectives echo this. Tannehill (2025) shows that variety and choice matter, with repetitive activities lowering motivation. Informal activities such as walking or cycling often replace organised sport. Time constraints increase due to academic work, jobs and responsibilities, but many inactive young people still express a desire to be active. The issue is rarely lack of motivation; it is more often pressure or negative experiences. Programmes designed with young people, offering choice and relevance, are most effective.

Espedalen (2022) similarly finds that prioritising schoolwork, low perceived sport skills and friends quitting are among the most common reasons for leaving. Peer influence can create a snowball effect when friendship groups disengage. Girls more often cite schoolwork and confidence, while minority youth report higher parental discouragement. Even well-resourced

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young people leave due to confidence and peer dynamics, indicating dropout is not confined to disadvantage. Overall, disengagement reflects a mismatch between young people's needs and rigid, competitive sport structures.

Taken together, this evidence shows that adolescent dropout is rarely about laziness or lack of talent. It is more often a rational response to environments that fail to sustain enjoyment, confidence and belonging.

For schools, colleges and universities, the message is clear: retention depends less on talent pathways and more on creating positive, flexible, and inclusive environments. Institutions can reduce dropout by emphasising enjoyment, variety, and development over performance, especially during key transition periods. Providing low-pressure entry points, social formats, and opportunities to re-enter sport can help students reconnect with activity. Most importantly, listening to young people and involving them in programme design increases the likelihood that sport will remain meaningful and sustainable.