

# PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND ADOLESCENT GIRLS:

WORKFORCE TRAINING NEEDS  
ANALYSIS SUMMARY OCTOBER 2008



# Physical Activity and Adolescent Girls: Workforce Training Needs Analysis Summary

October 2008

## Background

This is a summary of a research study undertaken for NHS Health Scotland to examine the current and emerging needs of the workforce involved in promoting physical activity to adolescent girls.

Despite much effort to encourage higher levels of physical activity among school children and to sustain their involvement, a marked decline in participation across teenage years has been identified, particularly among girls.

Previous research has identified many reasons for this decline but it is promising that many of the variables associated with physical activity and adolescent girls are regarded as 'modifiable'. The rationale that much can be done to promote physical activity among this target group underpinned the research study, which identified the relevant physical activity workforce, and determined its training needs and development gaps.

## Aims of the research

**The overall aim of the research was to focus on and explore the training and development support needs of those promoting physical activity among adolescent girls<sup>1</sup>.**

The specific research objectives were:

- To review relevant current evidence;
- To identify the relevant physical activity workforce;
- To identify the key stakeholders who can influence and support the workforce in relation to physical activity and adolescent girls;
- To determine what relevant physical activity training and Continued Professional Development opportunities are available to the workforce and assess uptake of this;
- To establish levels of confidence and skills of those working with adolescent girls and identify barriers to applying learning and changing practice to accommodate the specific needs of adolescent girls;
- To identify areas for action.

## Method

The research method included desk-based research, personal contact with relevant stakeholders, focus groups with adolescent girls, telephone interviews with stakeholders, and a survey of the physical activity workforce.

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the research, 'physical activity' is used as a general term which includes PE, exercise, sport, play, dance and active travel, and 'adolescent girls' means girls aged 13 to 18 years.

The research was conducted in two main stages. Firstly, groundwork was undertaken to build a framework of relevant and potential workforce stakeholders, and to identify the issues and challenges they face in promoting physical activity to adolescent girls.

Secondly, current training and CPD opportunities available to the workforce and gaps in provision were identified, along with the barriers and facilitators to the take-up of opportunities, and associated issues relating to applying this learning within the context of physical activity and adolescent girls.

### Overarching themes and recommendations

The research approach generated a wide range of views and ideas from different perspectives on the barriers to participation in physical activity faced by adolescent girls. It also highlighted the future training and development needs of the current and potential physical activity workforce to help it to address these barriers and experiences.

From these, a number of overarching themes and associated recommendations emerged:

#### Theme 1: Consultation with adolescent girls

The topic of how to consult with adolescent girls emerged in the workforce survey as the highest-rated priority for future learning and development needs, with half of all respondents to the survey considering this need to be 'vital'.

This was consistent with the recommendation to emerge from the focus groups with adolescent girls that the workforce should learn more about participation from their perspective.

There was evidence from the workforce of mixed success of previous informal and formal consultation with adolescent girls regarding their physical activity preferences.

**Recommendation: There is a clear need for the workforce to develop skills in consulting effectively with adolescent girls on their physical activity preferences and requirements and this should be prioritised as a central part of the learning and development of the workforce.**

#### Theme 2: Tackling 'internalised' barriers to participation

Although much previous literature refers to complex, internalised barriers, including self-consciousness and poor perception of skill, which curtail adolescent girls' participation in physical activity, it appears that many simple steps could address some of these.

Practical ideas emerged from this research, such as letting girls choose activities to suit their abilities; providing them in advance with more information on what a physical activity session will involve; and relaxing stringent school gym-kit requirements.

**Recommendation: Simple, practical changes in the delivery of physical activity and the 'rules of participation' should be considered in more detail with a view to establishing ways to tackle both modifiable and internalised barriers to girls' participation.**

### Theme 3: Mainstreaming of girls' physical activity participation

The research identified some concerns over the sustainability of newly-introduced modern activities. For example, in some schools, these appeared to have been 'parachuted' in as short-term 'add-ons' in terms of funding and staffing, without any longer-lasting supporting structures. It is suggested that their value could be maximised if they are introduced within the overall context of a physical activity ethos. In this way, the physical environment, staff and pupil expectations, curricula and policies of the organisation all support the new activities, in effect, giving them roots from which to develop.

**Recommendation: The importance of a mainstreaming approach to physical activity promotion should be emphasised and included as an integral part of the future training of the physical activity workforce.**

### Theme 4: Importance of explicit and implicit messages

Girls in the focus groups were very alert to messages given out about their participation in physical activity and gave examples of what they perceived to be negative messages, such as their school providing no core PE at S5 and S6 level; low priority given by their form teacher to passing on information about physical activity; PE teachers letting pupils skip PE if they had 'forgotten' their kit.

Girls identified positive messages as, for example, their PE teacher joining in and enjoying physical activities with them; their families and peers accepting physical activity as the norm for girls like them.

Girls queried why there was no equivalent of a careers advisor for the provision of physical activity.

They thought that a new role of 'physical activity information provider' would give out the message that physical activity is important, routine and acceptable.

**Recommendation: Members of the physical activity workforce should be encouraged in their future training to reflect on their own portrayal of girls' physical activity, and helped to identify ways in which they and the organisation they represent can put across positive messages.**

### Theme 5: Importance of role models

The importance of role models emerged strongly from the focus groups with girls, with a general preference for young, female, 'sporty looking' PE teachers.

Girls felt that male teachers sometimes gave them a raw deal in mixed-gender classes and felt that they could not build up the same rapport with male staff as they could with females.

**Recommendation: The importance of and nature of positive role models for adolescent girls should continue to be part of the training for members of the physical activity workforce, with schools in particular helped to consider how best to use their PE staff resources to maximise the positive influence they can exert in this respect.**

## Theme 6: Role of 'competition' in adolescent girls' physical activity

Despite common understandings and much previous literature pointing to girls generally not liking competition in physical activity, this was not borne out in focus groups even among the least sporty girls.

It is suggested that the narrow notion of 'competition' needs further investigation, with perhaps a more appropriate concept being 'focus and motivation for improvement' in physical activity. Competition seen in this light appears to have the potential to help to support and sustain more modern activities through the introduction of events such as physical activity displays, festivals and other focused challenges.

Having a 'project' feel about them these activities could help to promote the development of common goals and team spirit, with the potential to provide a satisfying end-result and sense of achievement which sustains girls' involvement over time.

**Recommendation: The potential for the introduction of both formal and more relaxed forms of physical activity development structures should be explored to support the sustainability of 'modern' PE activities which are becoming increasingly prevalent in Scottish secondary schools.**

## Theme 7: Importance of transitions and links

The evidence collected for this research revealed weak links between physical activity in primary and secondary schools, and between physical activity in secondary schools and the wider community.

The focus groups showed that girls do most of their physical activity outside school, informally with peers or by themselves.

It is suggested that schools can better support girls in these informal activities by equipping them with the skills to undertake physical activity at home or in the community without supervision.

Strengthened links between schools and the wider community could help to sustain the new activities which have been introduced in recent years.

**Recommendations: The physical activity workforce should be trained to ensure girls are equipped with the skills to organise their own physical activities outside their school environment, in informal settings and contexts.**

**Active Schools Co-ordinators and PE teachers should be encouraged to do more to strengthen the links between primary and secondary school provision and between schools and the wider community.**

## Theme 8: Need for more sophisticated research

Despite an abundance of previous research in this field, clear messages for policy development appear to be lacking.

There is some evidence of contradictions in findings and it is suggested that some dated conceptual frameworks need to be revisited and explored further.

Some increasingly important topics appear to be relatively under-researched, such as family and peer influence, media portrayal of girls' physical activity, gendered space and administration, the design of girl-friendly sports facilities, and so on.

**Recommendation:** Further thought should be given to more discerning approaches to research in this field, perhaps with the input of adolescent girls. The topics to emerge over recent years as potentially useful for further exploration should be investigated as a priority.

This research was conducted by Linda Nicholson of The Research Shop. The full report on which this summary was based can be found at: <https://www.healthscotland.com/physical-activity-research.aspx>



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