

This article is based on an investigation of exercise participation by adolescent girls. It attempts to identify the influences and constraints which affect the physical activity levels of year 10 (14-15 year old) girls both in and out of school.

A combination of research methods has been used:

1. Quantitative data obtained from the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire developed by the Schools Health Education Unit. The results from 5789 year 10 girls questioned in 1988 identified areas for further investigation.

2. This was done using qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with a small group of year 10 girls. The two methods were integrated, such that the content of the interviews was developed from the findings in the quantitative data.

More appropriate

The investigation concludes that there is scope for developing a more appropriate approach to encouraging physical activity in adolescent girls, and proposes recommendations to facilitate this process.

The literature indicates that there is an increasing problem with lowered levels of exercise participation through secondary school in both boys and girls. This seems to be a particular problem with teenage girls, according to Armstrong (1).

In-school levels of activity are fairly similar for both boys and girls. It is out-of-school activity where the participation levels drop for girls and increase for boys.

One has to be cautious when interpreting these trends because different sports appeal to different sexes. A downward trend may be appropriate according to the activity, such as gymnastics for boys. Swimming, on the other hand, is likely to be equally popular with both sexes, but there is a steady decline

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Adolescent girls and exercise: too much of a struggle?

through secondary school.

A measure of these changes for girls between years 7 and 11 of secondary school can be examined in Fig. 1. Generally, they become more interested in fitness exercises, squash, aerobics and weight training, as well as pool (not shown). Boys, incidentally, become more interested in fitness exercises, weight training, motor cycling, shooting, pool and snooker.

Fig. 2 represents the proportions of year 10 boys and girls participating in all activities mentioned in the Health Related Behaviour Questionnaire. There are more boys participating in more sports overall, both in and out of school. Soccer, jogging, weight training, cricket, darts, pool, billiards and snooker are amongst the activities more popular with the boys. More girls are involved in dancing, horse-riding, walking and aerobics.

Being conscious of their weight seemed to be an influential factor in

deciding in which activity the girls participated. There are also trends within the data which show that if they have tried losing weight they are more likely to have been swimming, jogging, dancing and walking regularly (Table 1).

The semi-structured interviews were carried out in two secondary schools in Avon involving 16 14-year-old girls. This age group was chosen as Scraton has published evidence of a marked decline in girls' participation in exercise by the third year of secondary schooling (4). Areas for investigation were identified, and the interview schedules were developed using the findings of the quantitative analysis and evidence from the literature.

Boring

The traditional sports for the less active girls at school appear to have become boring. They have been doing them at school for too long. New sports were in general well received as a change from the familiar ones. Support was given for more involvement in boys' activities. A core of mixed sports is undertaken during year 7 in one school, and this seemed to be thoroughly enjoyed by them all.

Another factor in the

enjoyment of physical activities seemed to be the individual competence with the sport in question. The degree of tiredness felt during or after PE concerned some of the interviewees. It may be their lack of fitness, or perhaps inappropriate nutrition (for example, skipping meals or eating junk food) acts as a contributory factor.

The emphasis on looking good, perhaps as part of their internalised concept of health, becomes very apparent at this age. Becoming self-conscious about one's body, face and hairstyle seems to be a prohibitive factor in the amount of involvement in physical activities. This was described by some interviewees as something which evolved over the first few years of secondary school, and seemed to reach a peak at this age.

Fitness and image

In general, keeping fit did not seem to be the concept that was valued: it was more the link with body shape and weight that was important. When the girls were asked about their idea of fitness, the slim athletic image was always chosen.

For this age group, having the choice of activity seems to be important, and perhaps would help towards the feeling of wanting to be more independent and being treated as an adult. The importance of choice was reiterated by some of the interviewees. It seems that the girls need to have this choice of activity to accommodate their personal and changing relationships with boys at this time.

From the interviews, the overriding influence is boyfriends and groups of friends, and the most popular activity is going into town, looking in the shops, meeting friends at a fast-food bar and perhaps going to the cinema. Friends do take on a confidential role at this age, in that some girls felt that they could talk about everything with friends and boyfriends, but not with their parents.

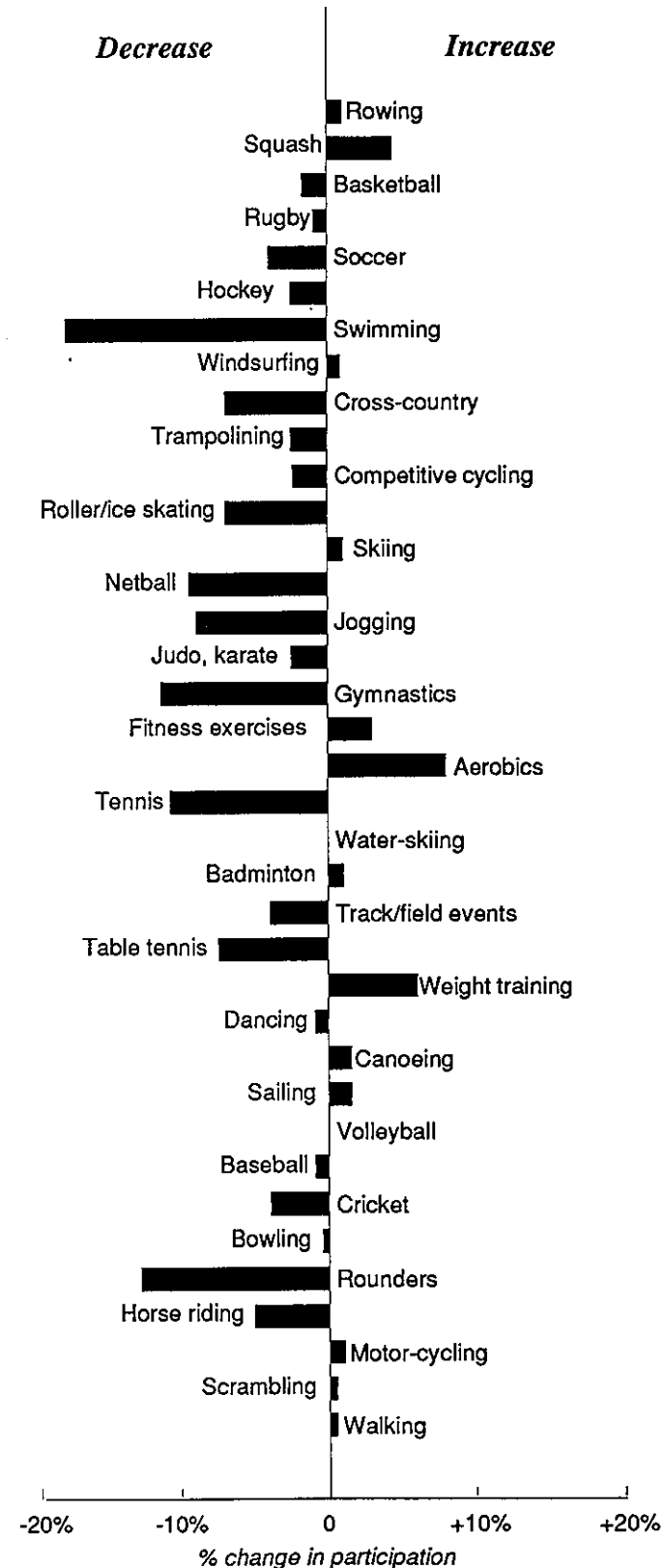


Fig. 1. Percentage changes in the number of girls participating in physical activities outside school from years 7 to 11. (1988 data, 16,453 pupils.)

Have you ever tried to lose weight?	Activities out of school during the past year (at least once a week)			
	Swimming	Jogging	Dancing	Walking
NO	23.9%	15.0%	23.7%	57.7%
YES	28.6%	18.2%	28.1%	62.6%

Table 1. A comparison between the 5789 year 10 girls in the 1988 sample who had or had not tried to lose weight.

Not welcome

Physical activities did not feature at all in the 'leisure' pursuits engaged in with friends of either sex. The interviewees seemed to interpret this area as 'social' pursuits, which do not appear to incorporate any sports.

Femininity is not something valued overtly in terms of fashion, but it is very important to these girls to look attractive in terms of hairstyle, make-up and earrings. Hence, to have any of these disturbed by participation in PE was not welcome. Present-day fashions are such that they disguise the female figure, with boys' baggy shirts, jeans, and heavy black shoes being almost uniform leisure clothing. Special clothes, such as dresses, appear only to be worn for special occasions.

The purchase of magazines featured heavily in the interviews, with all the girls buying at least one magazine each week. A preliminary content analysis showed no direct reference to any form of physical activity other than sex. However, the issues of diet and sports-orientated fashions are common in this type of publication.

Fox (2) suggested that adolescents could be categorised in terms of psychological orientation to physical activity. These were the 'approachers' (those who perceive some kind of reward in sport), the 'avoiders' (who see sport as a negative experience), and the 'neutrals' (those who have no strong feelings about sport). From the findings of this study, a further category seems to exist which would include those girls who view certain sports as enjoyable but do not take the initiative to seek out playing opportunities in leisure time. They can be seen as 'reactive' rather than proactive when it comes to participating in exercise. A combination model is proposed which would incorporate this category into both the grouping above (2) and the approach by Lees (3) to develop a school map. An exercise map has been developed using the findings from this study (Fig. 3).

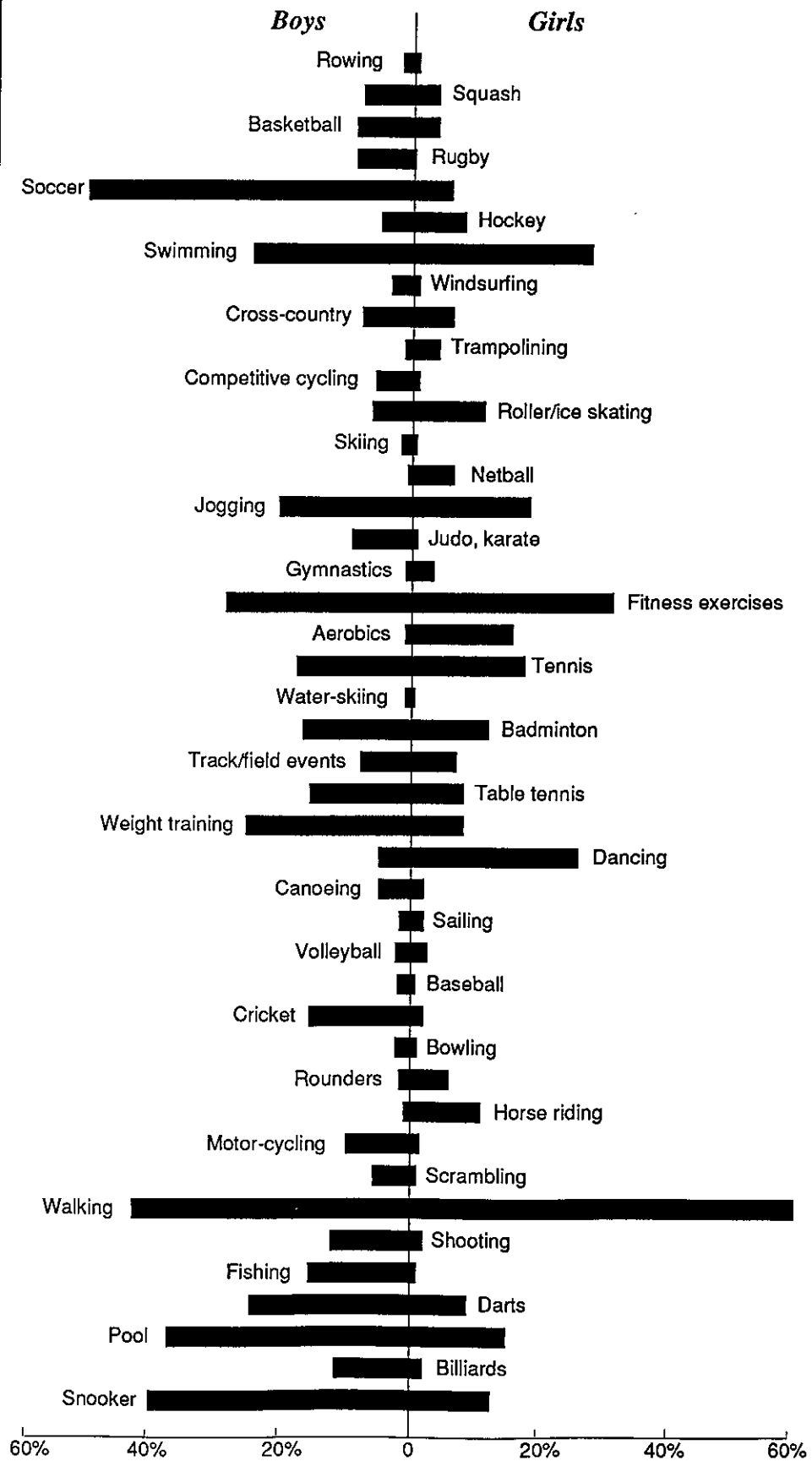


Fig. 2. Percentage participation in physical activities outside school in year 10. (1988 data, 11,734 pupils.)

An 'exercise map'

By examining the map, one can see that there are three categories of girls where activity participation could possibly be increased if it was encouraged in combination with social and environmental provision. Social relationships are extremely important to 14-year-old girls — if not instinctively, then as a result of peer pressure. Unless physical activity provision is co-ordinated with their social needs, then progress in terms of increasing participation levels is likely to be limited.

Another of the categories described in the exercise map above includes those girls who do not make or take any opportunities to participate in sport, even though they say they enjoy it. These girls could possibly be persuaded to participate by default if social and environmental factors were used as an incentive. By trying to combine sport and leisure facilities appropriate to this age group, it is possible that encouragement to participate would occur naturally.

Suffering

The girls who perceive exercise and participation as negative experiences need further investigation to elicit the many reasons behind this approach. Interviewees in this category considered that the benefits of taking part did not warrant suffering the inconvenience, discomfort, or feelings of failure or embarrassment that accompany it.

The findings of this study indicate that some of these negative perceptions were clearly associated with the PE environment rather than the physical activity itself. Many girls

Which statement describes you best?	
I would like to put on weight	5.9%
I would like to lose weight	53.8%
I am happy with my weight	37.3%

Table 2. Attitudes recorded by 5789 year 10 girls in the 1988 sample.

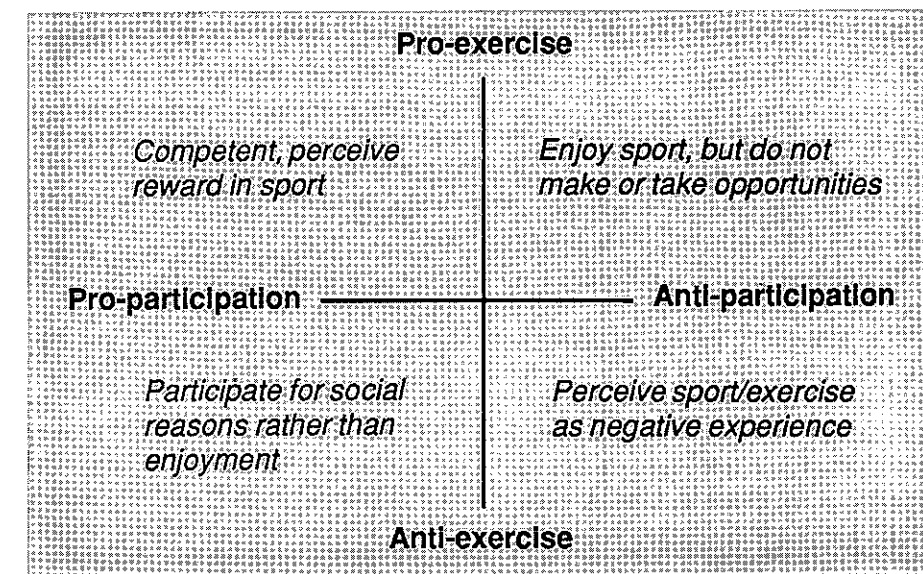


Fig. 3. An 'exercise map', indicating three categories where there is potential for encouraging activity participation.

were totally discouraged by rules and arrangements related to showers, changing, mirrors and PE kit. This underlines the importance of considering the total PE environment, not just the activity itself, when orientating our approach to the perception of the girls themselves.

The developing self and body awareness of adolescent girls, together with the image of school sports, are factors which do not encourage out-of-school and future involvement in physical activities.

Encouragement

These activities, where possible, need to be approached from a more individual angle — taking into account individual or group preference abilities and attitudes to a range of sports. If physical appearance is important to 14-year-old girls, then help should be given to preserve the elements they feel are important. These include

- Shower curtains
- More mirrors
- More time to change
- Reasonable sports clothing which is warm when necessary
- Some single-sex sports and other mixed sports

The majority of girls at this age are very aware of their body shape and size — most of them enjoy their food and do not want to diet — and if exercise were seen as enjoyable and also a proven method of improving body shape and size, opportunities might stand a chance of being created (Table 2).

General fitness is also a factor affecting the enjoyment of physical activities. Many girls found certain activities too tiring, too exhausting, wearing them out. Ways of achieving and preserving a level of fitness need to be investigated further, combining innovative health promotion strategies with provision of facilities. Future physical activity may then become much less of a struggle and may even encourage spontaneous attempts to establish the possible feeling of well-being created.

Guidance and ideas for leisure-time pursuits should be developed. Some incentives perhaps exist for mixed sports out of school also serving as a meeting-place. Developing a point made by Williams (5), activities should be related to community opportunities if they are to be relevant to the pupils in a specific school. Close liaison in the creation of leisure clubs, perhaps using the school fa-

cilities, need to be developed in a more realistic way for this age group. As suggested by the staff in one school, a sports forum would be one way of promoting and co-ordinating activity throughout a locality. A school where pupils are transported in from different areas needs to focus on a more individual basis in terms of awareness of all facilities in a pupil's home locality.

The possibility of using qualitative methodology as a follow-up to sections of quantitative data, perhaps from cohort studies or large databases, should be encouraged. It is a method of expanding and gaining more insight into the quantitative information collected. The two research methods are complementary, and both are important in their own right.

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