

LIFE IN LOCKDOWN

The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Teenage Girls' Lives and Physical Activity



THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON TEENAGE GIRLS' LIVES AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on everyone's lives, but little research has focused on how teenage girls have been affected, especially in relation to sport and physical activity.

The teenage years are a critical life stage for girls and their formative experiences of the pandemic will likely shape their attitudes and behaviours for years to come. The pandemic restrictions have deeply affected their lives: school closures, exam uncertainty, increased time online, the inability to see friends and family, and to do the things they enjoy and find meaning in such as playing sport, have resulted in anxiety and stress for many. However, the pandemic has also opened their eyes to what's really important to them and how sport and physical activity can, and do, play a pivotal role in helping them to be healthier and happier teens.

In 2019 we released Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls, our foundational research into the lives of teenage girls in the UK. Two years on, this report offers insight into two key areas:

1. GIRLS' LIVES AND VALUES IN THE PANDEMIC:

We consider how life has changed for teenage girls and how the pandemic has influenced what really matters to them through exploration of five anchors (values).

2. ENGAGEMENT WITH EXERCISE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY - KEY LEARNINGS:

We look at changes in participation and attitudes for girls on our spectrum of engagement¹ and key learnings for sport and exercise providers to consider now, in the 'new normal', and into the future.

Aims & Methodology

Women in Sport wanted to understand the impact of the pandemic on teenage girls and their relationship with sport and physical activity. We worked with 18 girls aged 13-16 and followed their lives using an ethnographic approach over a two-month period. We also carried out a representative survey with 1518 girls² to contextualise the scale of our in-depth understanding from the qualitative findings.

PARTICIPANTS

18 girls aged 13-16
 Defined by activity levels before the pandemic:
 - 12 less active
 - 6 active
 Located across England
 Diverse ethnic backgrounds
 Low-mid socioeconomic groups

METHODS

- 6 friendship triad interviews online
- 5 weekly online tasks
- 7-day online community
- Representative survey (1518 girls aged 12-18)

PANDEMIC TIMELINE


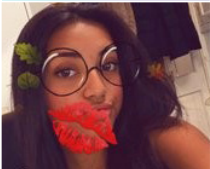



- OCTOBER 2020**
 Restrictions on gatherings, social distancing, face masks required
 Schools open
- OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2020**
 Tasks 1-2: 3-tier localised restrictions
 Tasks 3-5: Second national lockdown begins
 Schools open
- NOVEMBER 2020**
 Second national lockdown ongoing
 Schools open
- FEBRUARY 2021**
 Third national lockdown
 Schools closed

¹ Within this report we refer to girls by their activity levels prior to the pandemic. For ease, disengaged/gradually disengaged girls are referred to as 'less active' and those who were regularly engaged in sport and exercise (including team sports) are referred to as 'active'.

² Nationally representative survey of 1518 girls aged 12-18, conducted by Savanta in February 2021. All statistics presented in this report are from this sample, unless otherwise specified.

GIRLS' LIVES AND VALUES IN THE PANDEMIC

In our Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls research we uncovered five important anchors that reflect what girls really value in their lives.³ This section considers how the pandemic has impacted these anchors and girls' attitudes and behaviours.

<p>1. Support Network</p>  <p>A sense of place in the world</p>	<p>2. Socially Connected</p>  <p>Validation</p>	<p>3. Independence & New Experiences</p>  <p>Making formative memories</p>	<p>4. Moments of Pride</p>  <p>Fuelling self-worth</p>	<p>5. Keeping on top of it all</p>  <p>Time well spent (re-prioritisation)</p>	<p>Each anchor in their lives builds the foundation of who they will become</p>
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Support Network

Girls value having a strong support network, and trusted relationships with others provide a sense of place and identity within the wider world. We know the two key relationships girls value most are their friends and family, and mum in particular.

Girls miss socialising and having fun with friends, and some friendships have been fractured by the pandemic.

During adolescence, friends are important to girls' development as they strive to become more independent from family and discover their identities with peers. The restrictions, particularly school closures, have severely limited the time and physical contact girls can have with their friends. In our survey, 7 out of 10 girls said they missed spending time with friends more than anything else during lockdown. Socialising with friends is an activity full of meaning for girls that contributes to their wellbeing; without this, girls are gradually losing their sense of identity and place in the world.

Research shows that girls tend to have smaller numbers of close friendships than boys, and that happiness levels with their friends has declined in recent years.⁴ Girls told us that the pandemic has strained their friendships, as they have struggled to maintain contact whilst not at school, and the lockdown rules have caused conflict between friends if they were not allowed out to see each other. Some girls have therefore lost their close friendships and this has caused them to feel sad and lonely. Indeed, 43% of girls surveyed chose 'lonely' when asked 'how do you feel today?'

70% OF GIRLS MISSED HANGING OUT WITH FRIENDS THE MOST DURING LOCKDOWN.

“I've been feeling distant from my friends recently and this has caused a lot of overthinking and general sadness as I don't want to drift away from them.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 16

“I miss going out to the park with my friends...I miss being able to go out socially besides school.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 13

³ Women in Sport (2019) Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls: Building Strong Foundations for their Futures

⁴ The Children's Society (2020) The Good Childhood Report

Girls are more grateful for family and place more value on spending time with loved ones, especially mum.

As time with friends has become more restricted, the time spent at home and with family has inevitably grown. In our survey, 58% of girls said they spent more time with family during the pandemic. Girls told us that lockdown brought their families closer together as they explored new and different ways to fill their time, from board games to movie nights, and from special dinners to family walks and cycles. Girls have enjoyed having more quality family time and forging deeper connections. The unpredictable nature of the pandemic has also showed girls how fragile life can be, and they have more appreciation for their families now, especially their mums.

Girls described mum as being their biggest source of support during the pandemic, taking care of their physical and emotional needs at home. But girls have also wanted to support their mums, recognising the significant pressure their mums are under with work, home schooling siblings, and worrying about sick or isolated grandparents. Mums have also been instrumental in encouraging girls to be more physically active: over half (55%) of the girls we surveyed said their mum supported them to get active during the pandemic, more than anyone else in their lives.

Socially Connected

This generation of teenage girls are digital natives who have grown up in a fast-moving technological world. Social media is central to their lives and provides important validation of who they are.

Girls are spending much more time online as they strive to stay connected to friends, family and the wider world.

The online world has taken up much more space in all our lives during the pandemic. The amount of time girls spend online has risen dramatically due to lockdown restrictions, school closures and the move to online learning.

In our survey, 88% of girls said they have spent more time on their phone/social media during the pandemic. Social media has played an important role in their lives, enabling them to stay connected with friends and wider family during extensive periods of isolation and loneliness. It also allowed them to make new friends, provided relaxation, entertainment and relief from boredom, and kept them updated with news and current events on Covid-19 and other issues. Social media also influenced many girls to engage with online exercise for the first time.

Despite these benefits, prolonged periods of time online have been associated with more sedentary behaviours and poorer mental health and wellbeing. Whilst girls are increasingly aware of these risks (and the toxicity of social media in particular), it has been difficult for them to limit their time online during the pandemic.

Social media was an integral part of their lives before the pandemic and is arguably even more so now, given the vital source of connection it offers. Nevertheless, we saw a sense of boredom and lethargy with the online world: 74% of girls we surveyed said they would prefer to see their friends face-to-face than on social media and in fact almost half now wanted to reduce the time they spend on social media



Who has supported you most to get active during the pandemic?

55% - MUM

31% - FRIENDS

“If I’ve learnt anything during the pandemic it’s that life’s way too short so I try to spend as much quality time with my mum as possible.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 15

Girls’ attitudes to social media during the pandemic:

55% SAID BEING ON SOCIAL MEDIA IS FUN AND RELIEVES BOREDOM.

But...

39% SAID SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA MAKES THEM FEEL ANXIOUS.

44% SAID THEY WOULD LIKE TO REDUCE THE TIME THEY SPEND ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

“The best form of social media for me this week is Facetime, I stay connected to my family and friends that I can’t see. The worst bit has been Instagram, the girls on there made me feel less confident in my body.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 16

Independence and New Experiences

The teenage years are a time of exploration and discovery, as girls become increasingly independent from parents and have more freedom to make their own choices and build formative memories.

Girls feel their lives are on hold during the pandemic, as rules and regulations stifle their independence and opportunities to have new and exciting experiences.

When the first national lockdown came into effect in early 2020 and schools closed for the first time, girls initially saw this as an opportunity to have a break from the stress of schoolwork and other aspects of life. But the novelty of lockdown soon faded as girls began to feel the full effects of the restrictions.

Girls miss important day-to-day freedoms such as going to friends' houses, school, shopping/cinema, playing sport and other extra-curricular activities. Opportunities to have any new and exciting experiences are limited, with holidays, music festivals, events and rites of passage such as school leaving balls cancelled. The precious memories girls were looking forward to creating have been lost and girls feel their lives are on hold.

Girls felt that schoolwork and having to learn at home have impeded their sense of freedom, in addition to wider lockdown restrictions. Girls have had to adapt how they choose to spend their time within the confines of the rules and what they feel safe to do. In our survey, over 90% of girls said they have spent more time indoors/ in their home during the pandemic. Activities such as being on their phone or social media and going for walks help counter girls' wider loss of freedom, as well as providing much needed connection with friends and family.

Moments of Pride

Trying new things and succeeding gives girls moments of pride, providing emotional feedback that enhances their confidence and self-worth.

In many ways, lockdown has helped girls appreciate the smaller things in life and discover new things about themselves.

Despite the restrictions on their lives, girls have found ways to be productive and feel good about themselves. They have used the time in lockdown to learn new skills such as cooking, playing instruments, learning new languages and how to style hair, and have done things to support their families and wider community, such as helping to decorate their homes and baking cakes for their neighbours. Older girls have also taken pride in transitioning from school to college and making new friends. At times, girls found it hard to motivate themselves to do anything so these achievements, both big and small, have given them a much-needed boost of confidence during the pandemic.

“

Instead of seeing family and going out, I'm just trying to make the most of going to school and seeing my friends...having reason to go out every day and not be stuck inside.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 15

What girls missed most during the pandemic restrictions:

70% HANGING OUT WITH FRIENDS

55% GOING OUT TO PLACES (CINEMA, RESTAURANT, SHOPPING)

44% NORMAL SCHOOL LIFE

“

I am most missing playing football twice a week as I don't get to see my friends there as they don't go to my school.”

- ACTIVE, 13

“

One thing I am proud of is that I have learnt to cook and bake... I now eat healthier and better... before this wasn't a priority of mine.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 15

“

Before lockdown I would of never tried to go out and see new things but now I'm always finding new activities and places to do and see.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 15

Lockdown inspired less active girls to do more exercise and physical activity, which provided powerful moments of pride that some had not felt before.

With school closures and extensive periods at home, many less active girls began to feel bored, sluggish and, in their words, 'lazy'. This motivated them to start moving more. Activities such as walking to and from school, jogging, online fitness, and daily walks with friends and family started to become an important part of their day. Many of these girls relied on PE for fitness and struggled to do any other physical activity before the pandemic, but as they began to feel the positive benefits of being more active, they gained a powerful sense of accomplishment and pride.

In our survey, 68% of less active girls said that doing exercise and physical activity is now important for them to feel good about themselves, with 65% saying it is important for building their confidence.

Keeping on Top of it All

The teenage years are a time of competing demands and expectations, when girls have to set their own priorities and juggle what they 'must do' and what they 'want to do' with their time.

The pandemic has added another layer of complexity, demands and worry to girls' lives, and many are struggling with their mental health.

Teenage girls are living through an unprecedented time and have been on a roller coaster of emotions, which has added to an already difficult period of life - adolescence. They have faced huge disruption to their lives and routines, doing many more of the 'must do's' rather than what they 'want to do'.

Social activities that contribute to healthy development and wellbeing in adolescence, such as being with friends, going to school and playing sport, are limited, especially in periods of lockdown. The pressure of home learning and the uncertainty of whether exams will take place has caused significant stress and anxiety, with many feeling unsure about their futures.

This is in addition to the added pressure of adopting new habits and behaviours to keep themselves and others safe from Covid-19 and worrying about family and friends becoming ill. Taking all this into consideration, it is not surprising that over half of the girls (55%) surveyed said they are struggling to feel positive during the pandemic and many feel bored, isolated, anxious and despondent.



“From rarely exercising to going jogging every morning was really motivating and made me feel really good about myself and positive.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 16

“It [exercise] makes you feel like you've accomplished something and can really boost your confidence.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 15

When asked 'how do you feel today?':

74% - BORED

43% - LONELY

34% - ANXIOUS

“I just feel quite empty... every day feels like nothing at the moment.”

- ACTIVE, 13

“I haven't had the best week this week...I want to go back to being happy.”

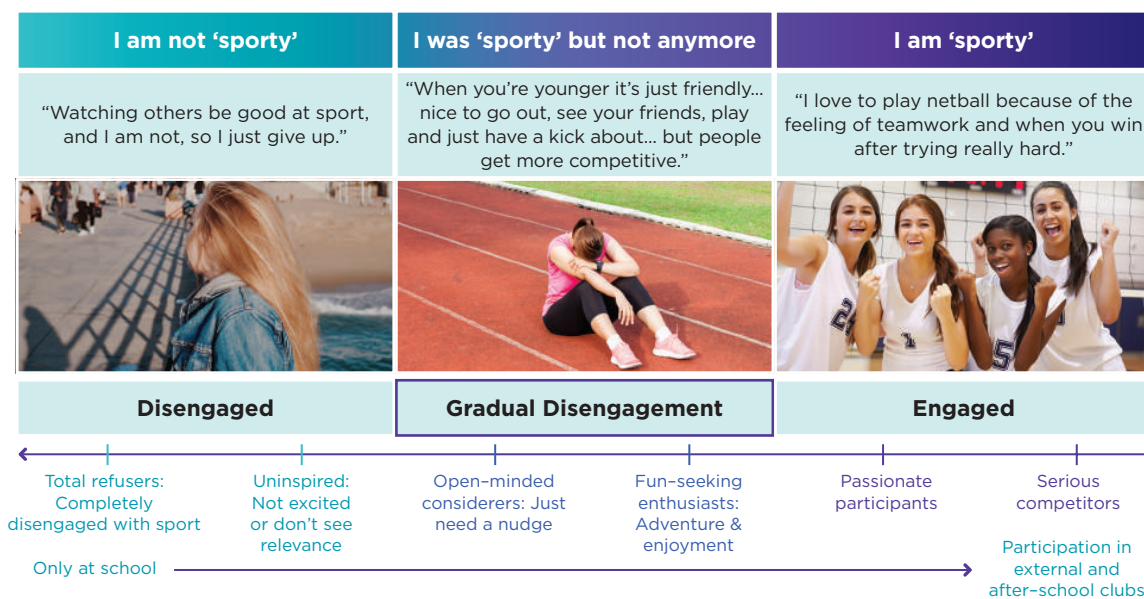
- LESS ACTIVE, 16

55% OF GIRLS SAID THEY ARE STRUGGLING TO FEEL POSITIVE DURING THE PANDEMIC.

ENGAGEMENT WITH EXERCISE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY – KEY LEARNINGS

We have seen some interesting changes in the way girls engaged with sport and physical activity over the past year. In this section, we look at some of the key learnings for girls on our spectrum of engagement.

A SPECTRUM OF ENGAGEMENT



Participation in physical activity

Most girls have been less active during the pandemic and have struggled to motivate themselves.

Data from Sport England's Active Lives Children and Young People Survey reported the number of teenage girls meeting recommended levels of activity increased by 6% during the first half of the pandemic and this was driven almost exclusively by girls aged 13-16. However, this only covers the period up until September 2020.

In our February 2021 survey, a large majority of girls (62%) said they were doing less physical activity during the pandemic than before, with only 19% reporting doing more, which is perhaps unsurprising given the amount of time girls are spending at home. Only 15% said it was easy to motivate themselves to be active, and even amongst girls who were active prior to the pandemic, 47% are struggling to motivate themselves in the absence of their usual sporting activities.

For some previously less active girls, the pandemic has sparked a real journey with physical activity. Around a quarter (26%) of girls who were less active prior to the pandemic said they are now doing more activity than before, and 22% feel they have become fitter.

62% OF GIRLS SAID THEY ARE DOING LESS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY NOW THAN BEFORE THE PANDEMIC.

“Told myself I was going to do a workout almost every day in lockdown... then I stopped because I wasn't motivated anymore.”

- ACTIVE, 13

As options for activity were limited with schools, sports clubs and leisure facilities closed, this led some girls to take part in more accessible activities such as online exercise and walking. With this in mind, we explore these two areas of activity for both active and less active girls prior to the pandemic, and their attitudes to exercise and physical activity.



Imagery uploaded by girls in our online community to illustrate their journey with sport and exercise during the pandemic.

Online exercise

Online exercise sparked interest amongst girls initially, but this soon faded as offers were not tailored and engaging enough to meet girls' needs.

Girls were initially drawn to online classes through social media and word of mouth from family and friends. In our survey, 46% of girls took part in some form of online exercise during the pandemic, but 63% said it was hard to keep motivated online, regardless of whether they were previously active or not. Engagement was not regular or sustained, and most girls dropped out within a few weeks, especially once restrictions eased.

Girls told us that online activities were too intense or serious, as well as too repetitive and generic. They also told us there weren't enough choices on offer. There was little opportunity for social interaction during the sessions and girls didn't find them fun or engaging. Some didn't feel a sense of progress and needed more feedback and encouragement from instructors to help keep them motivated.

Given how important the online space is to girls' lives, sport and exercise providers are missing a key opportunity to create more fun, sociable and exciting offers for girls that could facilitate engagement both now and into the future.

For some girls, the home environment is not conducive to physical activity, and fear of judgement remains.

Online exercise can include pre-recorded or live sessions and therefore offers a degree of flexibility and accessibility for girls. Girls tended to find live sessions more motivating but fear of judgement was high, with 65% of girls surveyed saying that they don't like others watching them exercise on a webcam. Many girls don't feel confident exercising in front of strangers in a virtual space and worry about how they will be perceived. Some girls also felt embarrassed to exercise in front of family and did not have enough space at home to do so in private.

48% of girls surveyed said they don't like taking part in online activity in their homes and need the right environment to motivate them. Home is often seen as a relaxing and private space that they don't associate with exercise and is also filled with distractions that are often more appealing than exercise (phone, TV etc.).

Some of the online activities that teenage girls are drawn to promote short-term exercise for appearance gains, rather than long-term health and wellbeing.

“The fact I felt trapped inside all the time persuaded me to start getting out the house more and being more active as the constant isolation made me realise how much I took it for granted.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 15

What would encourage you to do more exercise online?

70% MORE FUN/EXCITEMENT

55% MORE CLASSES FOR GIRLS OF MY AGE/ LIKE ME

44% MAKE IT MORE SOCIABLE AND INTERACTIVE

“There's not many people online who do something different... they are all the same.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 13

65% OF GIRLS DON'T LIKE OTHERS WATCHING THEM EXERCISE ON A WEBCAM.

57% OF GIRLS DON'T HAVE ENOUGH SPACE TO TAKE PART PROPERLY.

“I don't really associate my room with exercise, it's hard to separate the two... when I'm in my room I'll drop out quickly as I'm in not in the right environment.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 13

Many online offers are promoted as ‘challenges’ or quick-fix solutions (e.g. ‘7-day challenge, ‘2-week workout’), particularly on social media and via influencers. Whilst these can spark initial motivation, they promote short-term engagement rather than long-term behaviour change, and girls can struggle to see and feel the benefits over time. These type of offers also focus heavily on appearance and unrealistic body ideals of how one should look (losing weight, toning up), rather than what the body can do and how exercise can make you feel. Girls are left feeling inadequate and with low self-esteem when they don’t achieve these impossible ideals.

Some previously active girls engaged with online sports sessions but they could not replicate what they love about taking part.

The closure of leisure facilities and organised sport hit active girls (and those that play team sports) particularly hard. These girls draw motivation and confidence from their ability, fitness and stamina, teammates and coaches, and not being able to do the activities they love has impacted this, with 45% of active girls saying they have lost confidence in their sporting ability during the pandemic.

Active girls engaged with online exercise classes in a bid to maintain their fitness, but whilst some sports clubs were able to adapt and move sports activities online, only 18% of active girls surveyed said they took part in sports sessions online. Girls valued this connection with peers but online sessions couldn’t replicate the fun, excitement, togetherness and teamwork, and many active girls have felt a sense of loss.

Outdoor exercise

Outdoor activities such as walking provide opportunities for freedom and connection with others and enhance girls’ mood and wellbeing.

Sport and outdoor exercise have been limited due to restrictions on gatherings and social distancing. In our survey, 60% of girls said they were doing less sport/exercise outdoors now, whilst 19% said they were doing more. As one of the few legitimate reasons for leaving home during lockdown, exercising outdoors became an important activity for girls to relieve boredom, isolation and loneliness.

Walking has been a popular activity for both active and less active girls, with 41% saying they have been going for more walks during the pandemic. Girls opted to walk more to and from school and used walks as an opportunity to get out of the house and spend time with friends and family outdoors, where they also felt safer in relation to the risk of catching Covid-19. Girls told us that being active outdoors helped improved their mood and gave them a greater sense of freedom and wellbeing.

Whilst girls appreciate being outdoors more during the pandemic, poor weather and fear of judgement remain strong barriers.

The cold and wet weather of the winter months was challenging for both active and less active girls. In our survey, 69% of girls felt it was more of a struggle to exercise in the winter and over a third (36%) said they didn’t have the right clothing to exercise outdoors. Advertising of outdoor sport and exercise tends to portray people having fun in the warmer months, and this reinforces the perception that winter is only for hard-core exercise fanatics. In the long-term, we need to change the narrative and reframe getting active in winter as an invigorating challenge that can connect girls with both the great outdoors and others.

“**[My confidence] has decreased because I am not as fast or as good as before lockdown.**”
- ACTIVE, 13

“**Online netball has been available...I don’t really enjoy it as it is a team sport and I’m not with a team...I am by myself.**”
- LESS ACTIVE, 16

41% OF GIRLS HAVE BEEN GOING FOR WALKS MORE DURING THE PANDEMIC.

“**You feel more awake and refreshed outside.**”
- LESS ACTIVE, 15

“**Walking has become a big part of my life recently... walking allows me to clear my head as well as it being a form of exercise to keep me fit.**”
- LESS ACTIVE, 16

69% OF GIRLS FELT IT WAS MORE OF A STRUGGLE TO EXERCISE IN THE WINTER.

“**When it’s colder you tend to feel more lazy and not as positive.**”
- LESS ACTIVE, 15

“**I feel that members of the public that walk past may be judging me if I’m doing it wrong or look silly.**”
- LESS ACTIVE, 16

MOVING FORWARD IN THE 'NEW NORMAL'

We need to acknowledge girls' concerns around being active in the 'new normal' and offer more encouragement and support in their return to sport and exercise.

As restrictions begin to ease over the coming months, as outlined in the government's ['roadmap'](#) out of lockdown, it is important to recognise that girls have concerns around returning to sport and exercise.

Half of the girls surveyed (51%) are concerned that they are losing their fitness and 45% worry that it will be hard to get back into the habit of sport and exercise after the pandemic. Some have lost confidence in their sporting ability (41%) and others are worried about being in large groups again (40%).

Both active and less active girls share these concerns. These could be significant barriers to re-engaging and girls may therefore need more encouragement and support than usual from sport and exercise providers, to feel comfortable and confident to return to activity.

We need to support girls to sustain new exercise habits and offer activities that meet their needs and keep them engaged.

Some girls have developed positive exercise habits during the pandemic, but as restrictions ease and life starts to return to normal, the distractions that used to fill their time will return, and sport and exercise will have to compete with these. We need to ensure these positive habits are not lost, especially for girls who were less active prior to the pandemic, and support girls to build upon these experiences so they continue to experience the joy and fulfilment of an active lifestyle.

The desire to do so is clearly evident, with 8 out of 10 girls saying they will definitely/probably put more effort into being fit and active when life returns to normal. Even amongst the less active girls, 68% have the same desire. To capitalise on this, sport and exercise providers need to ensure girls have access to opportunities that motivate and excite, and that meet their need for fun, enjoyment and physical connection that they have missed during the pandemic.

In our Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls research, we developed [8 Principles for Success](#) to support organisations to evaluate and develop their initiatives through a teenage girl's lens. These principles will help sport and exercise providers build strong, accessible programmes that will excite girls and sustain their engagement, which is especially valuable for those girls who are less engaged in sport and exercise.

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1  NO JUDGEMENT
Take pressure off performance and give freedom simply to play.</p> | <p>5  BUILD INTO EXISTING HABITS
Tap into existing behaviours in other spheres</p> |
| <p>2  INVOKE EXCITEMENT
Bring a sense of adventure and discovery.</p> | <p>6  GIVE GIRLS A VOICE & CHOICE
Allow girls choice and control to feel empowered.</p> |
| <p>3  CLEAR EMOTIONAL REWARD
Reframe achievement as 'moments of pride', not winning</p> | <p>7  CHAMPION WHAT'S IN IT FOR THEM
Make it much more than just about health.</p> |
| <p>4  OPEN EYES TO WHAT'S THERE
Redefine sport as more than school sport.</p> | <p>8  EXPAND IMAGE OF WHAT 'SPORTY' LOOKS LIKE
Create truly relatable role models which inspire.</p> |

For more information and resources, please visit our [Reframing Sport for Teenage Girls toolkit](#)

41% OF GIRLS HAVE LOST CONFIDENCE IN THEIR SPORTING ABILITY

40% OF GIRLS ARE WORRIED ABOUT BEING IN LARGE GROUPS AGAIN

52% OF GIRLS AGREE THAT KEEPING FIT AND DOING PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER

82% OF GIRLS WILL DEFINITELY/PROBABLY PUT MORE EFFORT INTO BEING FIT AND ACTIVE

“Improving our physical and mental health and taking advantage of all the fun we get with others is more important since the pandemic.”

- LESS ACTIVE, 15

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