

## Sport Participation in Girls' Schools

### Executive summary

- Sport participation in the UK lags well behind other countries and is particularly poor for girls, rooted in stereotypes from as young as 6 months.
- There is a significant decline around puberty age and girls report many barriers to entry – including menstruation and sporting injuries such as ACL tears. Females are significantly more likely to experience an ACL tear and recovery lags behind that of males.
- Girls in girls' schools have higher levels of sport participation on average. Girls in girls' schools participate in 25% more curriculum PE than the national data.
- Girls in girls' schools follow a similar trend nationally by age but not to the same extent. Between KS4 and KS5 there is 65% drop off in the time spent playing sport nationally. For girls' schools this drop off is 25%.

### Literature review

Last month, the World Health Organization (WHO, 2024) revealed that British children are among the least active in the world, with only 11% of girls and 16% of boys in England meeting the recommended 60 minutes of daily physical activity at age 15. A survey by Sport England (2023) further highlights this disparity, showing that boys (51%) are more likely to be active than girls (44%), with girls in London being nearly 10% less active than boys. Interestingly, girls surpass boys in sports participation by Year 9, but there is a significant decline for both genders by Year 10, with girls' participation dropping even more sharply, leaving them behind boys by Year 10 (Denovan & Dagnall, 2023).

Sport participation in the UK lags well behind other countries and is particularly poor for girls due to harmful stereotypes. Gender disparities in physical activity start as early as six months, according to a report from the Women and Equalities Committee (2024). Experts highlighted that girls move significantly less than boys from a young age, constrained by unhelpful stereotypes about "suitable" play. This "gender play gap" creates a disadvantage for girls, leading to a noticeable gap in fundamental skills by the time children reach primary school.

There is a significant decline around puberty age and girls report many barriers to entry – such as menstruation and sporting injuries like ACL tears. Females are significantly more likely to experience an ACL tear and on top of that, recovery lags behind males. According to research, an ACL tear is one acute injury that female athletes are two to eight times more likely to experience than male athletes (MacMillan, 2020) and that recovery is less successful for women (Jildeh, et al., 2021). The incidence of anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) tear peaks in the adolescent and early adult age groups. The Youth Sports Trust (YST, 2023) released its annual report into PE and sport provision in schools in England in May 2023. As expected, there were several findings that related to girls in particular. The authors concluded that:

- The gender play gap between girls' and boys' activity levels has returned with 45% of girls achieving 60 minutes of activity a day compared to 50% of boys.
- Girls are more likely to report barriers to participation than boys, with lack of confidence and having periods being the top two barriers.
- Girls are likely to feel influenced by negative gender stereotypes, with 71% of girls agreeing that gender stereotypes hold them back at school.

Recent research exploring the impact of periods on girls conducted by Swansea University found that teachers felt the menstrual cycle affected participation in PE, confidence, school attendance, attitudes and behaviour. Childwise (2023) released their annual Monitor Report with further findings for girls in sport. Specifically, they found that:

- Boys continue to spend more time playing sport at school than girls, with the hours decreasing for both genders year on year. Overall, boys spend 1.6 hours playing sport (down from 2 last year) compared to 1.3 hours for girls (down from 1.5 last year).
- Boys continue to be more likely than girls to play sport outside of school, with 78% of boys and 74% of girls participating (down from 82% and 77%, respectively, last year). Boys also spend longer playing sports outside of school, though the gap is narrowing. Boys play for an average of 2.4 hours a week, compared to 1.9 hours for girls (down from 2.6 and unchanged at 1.9, respectively, last year).

There is a strong association between sports participation in schools and physical activity inside and outside of school (Denovan & Dagnall, 2023). Additionally, attending independent schools has been associated with lower BMI and systolic blood pressure at age 46, likely due to greater physical activity (Deng et al., 2024).

## Methodology

The Girls' Schools Association (GSA) has a dedicated committee focused on girls in sport that meets regularly to discuss and debate key issues such as sports kit, menstruation, and other barriers to participation. Annually, GSA's committee brings together sporting experts and over 500 girls in their Girls Go Gold event (GSA, 2023) so that these issues can be debated with the very people it affects – girls in schools.

GSA conducted a short survey between March and May 2024 assessing girls' participation levels in sports. Key questions include: Are we providing enough leadership opportunities for girls? What are the barriers preventing their participation? Separate surveys were conducted for junior and senior schools and data was collected in year groups. The initial poll received responses from 63 of the 125 GSA senior schools and 40 of the 98 GSA junior schools. Collectively, these schools educate over 35,000 students. The respondents represented all GSA regions and varied in size, making the samples representative of all GSA schools.

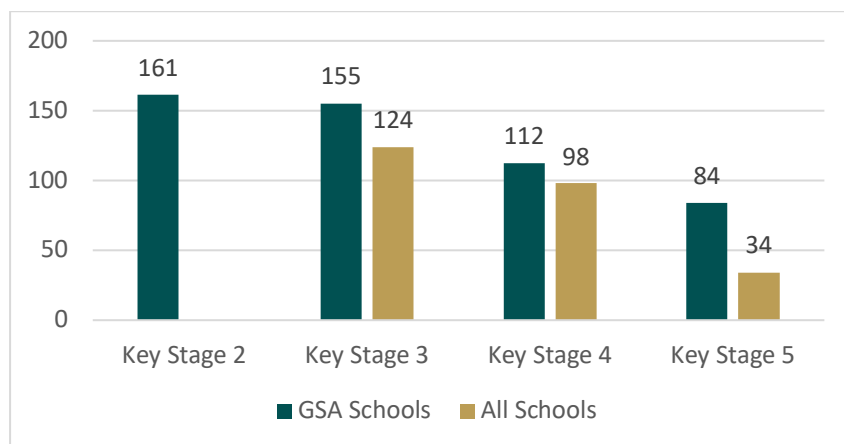
## Results

### Sport provision within curriculum

GSA pupils in KS2 receive 2.7 hours of PE and games lessons per week, which gradually falls to 1.4 hours by KS5. There is a significant decrease in lesson time during the transition between key stages. Specifically, there is a 31-minute drop between Years 9 and 10 and a 20-minute drop between Years 11 and 12. Compared to the national average highlighted by a YST (2018) survey of over 400 UK schools, girls in girls'

schools follow a similar trend by age but not to the same extent. Between KS4 and KS5 there is 65% drop off in the time spent playing sport nationally. For girls' schools this drop off is 25%. On average, GSA pupils receive 25% more minutes of PE and games lessons than the national average in KS4, 15% more in KS3, and 147% more in KS5.

**Figure 1: Minutes of PE and games lessons (as part of curriculum) per week girls at GSA school receive (by Key Stages)**

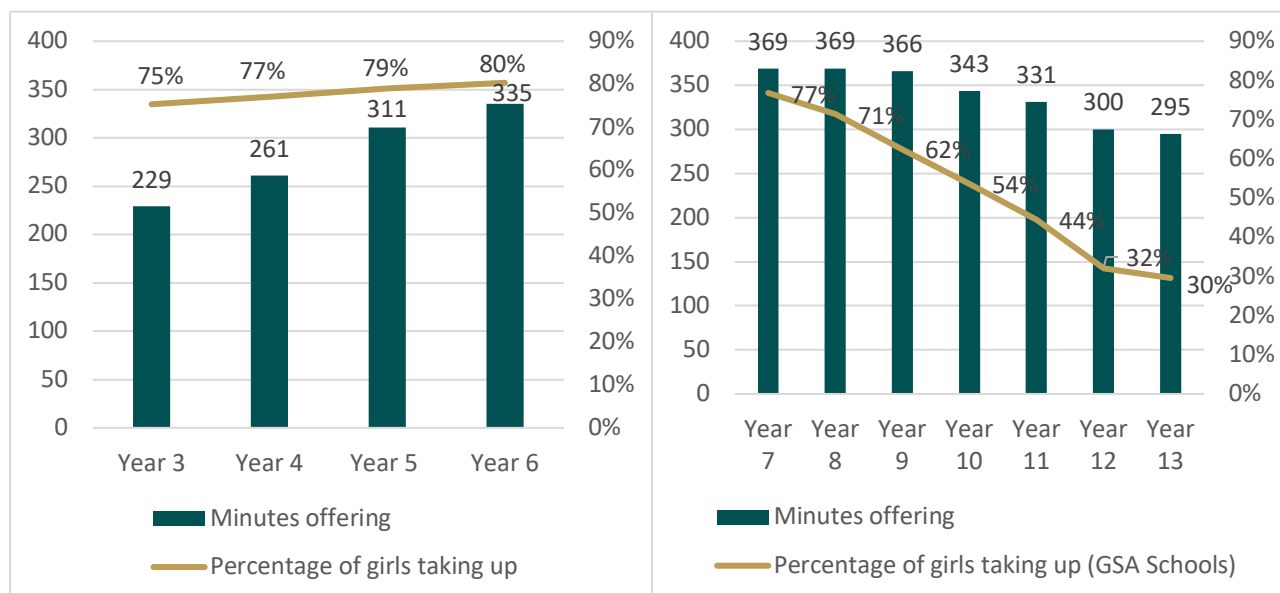


GSA %s have been weighted by pupil numbers and relate to girls in year 3-13. Data for "All Schools" is from Youth Sports Trust's PE provision in secondary schools 2018 report. Number of hours taught for PE/Sports in state secondary schools in 2017-18 and 2022-23 only recorded less than 2% difference. Therefore, we decided to use the statistic in 2018 as benchmark.

### Sport provision outside of curriculum

The results show an upward then downward trend in both the number of co-curricular sports and physical activities GSA schools offer and the percentage of girls taking up these offers. The minutes offered peaked at 6.1 hours for Year 7, then decreased to 4.9 hours for Year 13. The percentage of take-up ranges from 80% for Year 6 to 32% for Year 13. On average, there is around a 10% drop-out rate from Year 8 to Year 12. Additionally, GSA girls are doing significantly more curricular time sports, so there is less need for co-curricular sports. Furthermore, work by Women in Sport (2022) found that 43% of girls aged 11-16 and 28% of girls aged 17-18 who considered themselves "sporty" at primary school no longer felt that way by their teenage years. Our data shows a similar trend. Compared with Year 6, the participation rate is 36% and 50% lower in Years 11 and 13, respectively.

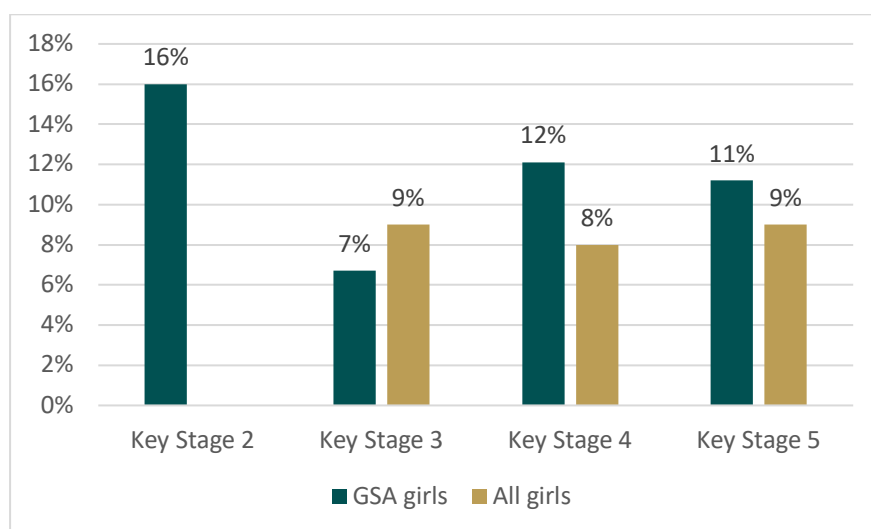
**Figure 2 and 3: Minutes of co-curricular sport and physical activities (fixtures included) GSA schools offered per week and % of girls taking up the offer (by year groups)**



### Girls as sport leaders

GSA girls are more likely to be leading sports and physical activities at school when compared with YST’s national data on girls, although this is not the case for KS3. In KS3, there are 2% fewer girls leading sports and physical activities than the national average. In the same YST report, it is also reported that 22% and 14% of KS4 and KS5 girls would like to lead sports in school.

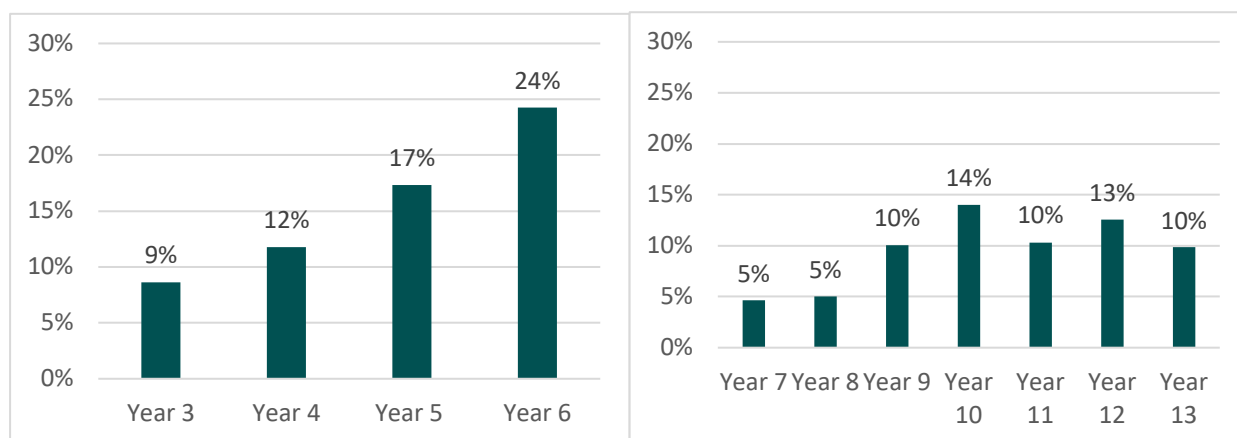
**Figure 4: % of girls lead sports and physical activities in GSA schools (for example: refereeing, coaching, or organising, etc.) (by Key Stages)**



GSA %s have been weighted by pupil numbers and relate to girls in year 3-13. Data for “All Schools” is from YST’s Girls Active National report in 2023.

The results show a rapidly increasing trend in sports leadership among KS2 girls in GSA schools. At most, one in four Year 6 girls lead sports. However, once they enter senior school, only 5% of Year 7 pupils choose to be sports leaders. The percentage rises in Year 10 and 12 but drops off in the subsequent year groups, coinciding with GCSE and A-Level exam years.

**Figure 5 and 6: % of girls lead sports and physical activities in GSA school (for example: refereeing, coaching, or organising, etc.) (by year groups)**

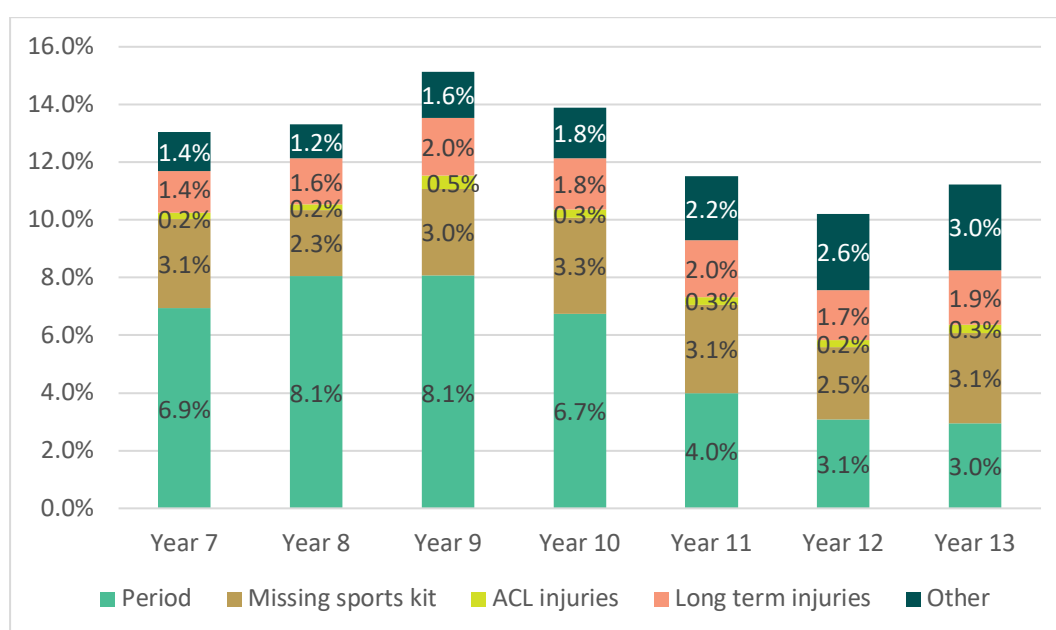


## Barriers to sport participation for girls

Secondary school girls said that having their period was the biggest barrier to physical activity at school, according to a YST (2023) report. The Women and Equalities Committee (2024) report also highlights that anxieties related to PE sports kits and periods are substantial barriers to girls' participation. Additionally, we would also like to find out if injuries could be another factor.

For junior girls, around 3-6% of pupils were unable to fully participate in lessons in January. Biggest barrier is missing sports kit with an increasing trend. It is followed by other reasons, long term injuries and ACL injuries (which is negligible).

**Figure 7 and 8: % of GSA girls could not fully participate in PE and games lessons due to the following barriers in January 2024 (by year groups)**



Senior school age girls in girls' schools also report barriers to participation, but again not to the same extent as shown nationally. On average, more than 10% of girls are unable to fully participate in lessons across all senior year groups, with Year 9 having the highest number at 15.1%. The number one barrier to participating in lessons is periods, followed by missing sports kit, other reasons include long-term injuries and ACL injuries. Women In Sport (2022) reported that seven in ten girls avoid being active when on their period. For girls' schools, its less than 50%. Missing sports kit and long-term injuries affect around 3% and 2% of girls in girls' schools on average, respectively.

If you have any questions relating to the findings in this paper, please send them to [research@gsa.uk.com](mailto:research@gsa.uk.com)

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